CRITICAL MEME READER II

INC READER #16

MEMETIC TACTICALITY

EDITED BY CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND LAURENCE SCHERZ

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Previously published INC Readers

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

GEERT LOVINK

Critical meme research is confronted with a challenge. While there's an overproduction of global case studies that map the once unknowable and invisible, a theory shortage is looming. The little amount of speculative theory generated in this current decade tends to focus on Hegelian totality, preferring grand vistas over hermeneutic details. INC already noticed this in 2021, during the production of the first *Critical Meme Reader*. This second *Critical Meme Reader* attempts, once again, to overcome the theory deficiency, all the while sensing that even more work needs to be done. Global meme production is at an all-time high; there's an unprecedented demand for cynical relief, a rush to get that split-second sense of freedom. The normless and rootless user swarms enjoy their nihilist me-moments. Memes, fulfilling their task to satisfy the cultural needs of the frustrated multitudes, have become a permanent hype. The meme genre is a symbol of cultural stagnation that is simply refusing to fade away. While memes are claimed to create an ironic distance from the boring every day, we also register cases in which memes have a direct political impact in terms of anticipation, preparation, and organization. Think of the January 6, 2021 storming of the American Capitol, the topic of *Meme Wars, a* brand-new publication investigating just that.

We still do not have the right visual literacy skills to understand the image and its workings. We've all learned how to interpret 'content', but the images themselves are crying out to be heard. The highbrow-lowbrow debates come and go, and have been going on for at least seven decades. The apparent lack of visual theory was noted before, for instance in the field of comics studies. So then, are memes the next sign of the 'impoverishment' of public culture? And if not, shouldn't we spend more time and resources on studying the memefication of everything? Is there a danger looming that theory is withdrawing from the present scene? Can we please, once and for all, overcome the distrust of popular amusements? There is little to expect from a media studies discipline that is stuck in the data mud. While Zizek is being associated with Hollywood, could Gen Z public intellectuals, able to analyse the deep affect layers of memes, please stand up?

Children of the deconstruction are having fun with memes. But let us also take some steps forward and start developing a non-academic interdisciplinary futurology. The challenge ahead will be to design audio-3D meme formats for the not equally distributed 'para real' future that is already inhabited by some. Current meme culture is a collective celebration of 'format nostalgia', longing for the Web2 days of JPEG-image boards and sparse connectivity. But how will this sentiment of the online billions play out inside game worlds and metaverse environments? Forget 4chan and Reddit. Can TikTok-videos be given an ironic turn? Let's hear more about the audio memes. This is a quest for shadow design. How can cultures of

ambivalence, reflection and wit thrive in an environment dominated by planetary mental control, devastating geopolitics, identity apartheid, and other enclosures?

A thriving public internet would benefit from a sophisticated, a-moral understanding of the informal, dark side of mainstream channels. What's at stake here is the prediction of the mood of the masses, which can be measured so much more precisely than in the days of questionaries and polls. Right now, powerful institutions and corporations are preventing a meaningful encounter between intellectual engagement with memes and meme producers, leaving the vibe check to social media marketers. We need to overcome this: critical theory should glow up, yassify itself, and direct channels to both users and producers of memes. Critical reflections need to design direct feedback loops into the techno-social imaginary.

INTRODUCTION: MEMETIC TACTICALITY

CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND LAURENCE SCHERZ

'It's much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of meme-culture.' — Åke Gafvelin

'We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor.' — bell hooks

'Leftist memes be like: [a 3000-word essay crammed in one image].' — Unknown

'Memes are often representative of ourselves, our fears and our way of relating to society.' — clusterduck

'And as Picasso famously related, "art is an instrument of attack against the enemy. The strange thing about social media is that we are also our own enemy."' — Marc Tuters

'Critical design can never be truly popular, and that is the fundamental problem. Objects that are critical of industry's agenda are unlikely to be funded by industry.' — Anthony Dunne

'Thinking is not nostalgic.' — Geert Lovink

'If you wanted to see the future you could not go to conventional sources of information.' — Peter Schwartz

'If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it.' — Audre Lorde

'It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism.' — Angela Y. Davis

'There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.' — Gilles Deleuze

'What matters is not to know the world but to change it.' — Frantz Fanon

When memes started to play a substantial role for Ukraine as a warfare technique, mainstream media seemed to wake up and grasp the political power these viral images hold. Pro-Ukraine memes in which Ukrainian soldiers are depicted as heroes, Russian soldiers and Putin are ridiculed, and the West was criticized for not helping Ukraine enough flooded Telegram, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Other types of memes addressed the hypocritical and often downright racist refugee policies of European countries (looking at you, the Netherlands), the imperialist role NATO might have in all of this, and the dangers of Russophobia. Journalists seemed to struggle endlessly with the

following questions: Is war something people should *not* be able to make fun of through memes? Or is it, in fact, ethically justified once we realize that humor serves as a coping mechanism? (If you ask us, and you do: some memes are too grim or cruel, yet others brighten truly horrific realities or hold invaluable political power.) We 'meme experts' were suddenly asked for media appearances non-stop: to talk about how memes are influencing war, but also to discuss the political impact of memes in local elections, how they are employed by political parties and activists alike, and whether or not they have replaced the traditional newspaper cartoon. Multiple meme researchers around the world have stressed the political power of memes for years now, whilst struggling to receive substantial amounts of funding for this exact field, one considered by many as still 'too niche'. Now, finally, the general public seems to have caught on as well. While this is a favorable development, we must address the equally troubling fact that, oftentimes, something *deeply* horrific needs to happen before enough people realize you were not rambling or ranting blindly after all. And we certainly weren't. We were slamming on doors that needed to be opened, right away. However, let it be crystal clear: in this light, we do not enjoy being right.

The first *Critical Meme Reader*, published in 2021, showed us how meme studies have a rich history in globally addressing the political power these viral images hold—one of the field's most discussed topics being, of course, the great meme wars of 2016. In our first reader, *Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, Andy King effortlessly explained how the alt-right used memes as a warfare tool, in which the innocent Pepe the Frog was claimed as its symbol and the storming of the Capitol as its climax.[1] The internet subcultures that once thrived in relative obscurity, as Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Frienberg stipulate in their brand new book *Meme Wars*, had been drastically overlooked until that dramatic day, January 6th 2021.[2] King illustrated how 'the alt-right [...] have molded their image into that of an underdog—a convenient ploy to justify aggressive tactics such as spamming pro-choice Facebook groups with images of aborted fetuses, raiding subreddits and shitposting cringe compilations of angry feminist and liberals appearing to "cancel free speech". Their outreach was far and wide—no corner of the internet was spared.'[3]

This image still haunts us today: the ghost of an alt-right underdog, begging for scraps as if hurt by society. And who, we might ask rhetorically, are being portrayed as radical, 'too woke', a *danger* to democracy? Progressive leftist people that dare to speak up against oppression. Marginalized people literally begging their governments to honor their basic human rights.

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1   Andy King, "Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 217-235.
2   Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 4.
3   King, "Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare," 218.

What Donovan, Dreyfuss and Frienberg teach us with their beautiful reconstruction of the untold story of online battles uprooting democracy in America, is that the political power of memes, their sheer potential to mobilize, is incomparable to anything we've seen before. In fact, the left should 'learn to meme', as Mike Watson puts it[4] and—dare we say it—take lessons from the alt-right's tactics.

However, what was shown in our first *Critical Meme Reader* is that the left already *is* memeing successfully: Anahita Neghabat demonstrated how memes can function as a strategic tool for political counter-narratives and as an alternative for problematic mainstream media,[5] Saeeda Saeed told us about her meme art, which helps critique the oppressive regime of Saudi Araba,[6] Sarp Özer wrote about how Erdogan is vulnerable to memetic humor,[7] and Caspar Chan elaborated on Pepe being reclaimed and given new meaning in Hong Kong protests.[8]

Nonetheless, memetic logics are moving beyond images into tactical actors and processes embedded in society as well, as Anirban Baishya illustrated in the first reader[9]. Baishya showed us how the Blue Whale Challenge, an online game in which kids receive mysterious assignments every day, ending with having to commit suicide as the last challenge, caused mass hysteria throughout the country. Even though there never was any actual proof of this game existing, both government and worried citizens created and organized multiple infographics, YouTube-tutorials and mass protests. Baishya defined this process as *memetic terror*:

Memetic terror is an affective, networked fear of breaching. It replicates itself through exposure to repeated information, reverberating throughout digital infrastructures, as it interacts with personal devices, policy, and regulation, as well as users' bodies.[10]

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4   Mike Watson, *Can the Left Learn to Meme? Adorno, Video Gaming and Stranger things* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2019), 1-112.
5   Anahita Neghabat, "Ibiza Austrian Memes: Reflections on Reclaiming Political Discourse through Memes," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 130-142.
6   Saeeda Saeed, "Dear Mr.BoneSaw your face smells like a chicken shawarma: A Clapback to Saudi Arabia's Electronic Army," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 143-153.
7   Sarp Özer, "Your Feed is a Battleground: A Field Report on Memetic Warfare in Turkey," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 236-247.
8   Caspar Chan, "Pepe the Frog Is Love and Peace: His Second Life in Hong Kong," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 289-306.
9   Anirban Baishya, "It Lurks in the Deep: Memetic Terror and the Blue Whale Challenge in India," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 248-260.
10   Baishya, "It Lurks in the Deep: Memetic Terror and the Blue Whale Challenge in India," 249.

What we also, maybe even mostly, have taken from our first meme reader, is how memes can be deployed as tactical devices: not just as a way to channel voices, but as weapons, ammunition, roadblocks that lead to a better world. This is what we focus on in this second *Critical Meme Reader*—the tactics of memes. Their (political) power has moved beyond virtual images; the distinction between the virtual and 'real life' no longer applies, or perhaps was never really there. If memes play a substantial role in the Ukrainian war and are used as a tool by the alt-right to mobilize people to storm the Capitol, can they also be used by the left to spark a revolution, as memetic warfare which is far more immediate and accessible than real-life demonstrations?[11] What kind of labor would that require? And what if the same logics behind memetic terror were used for spreading *progressive* ideas for a possible future? To imagine, if you will, a hopeful future?

Fig. 1: Where?

Meme Activism and Warfare Tactics

Memes are definitely not our masters' tools: they are ours alone, and they will break down any house they feel like; currently they're already being used as ammunition for political ends all around the globe. Whether it's the Chinese government using cuteness to distribute its

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11   King, "Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare," 234.

power during the COVID-19 crisis, as Jamie Wong illustrates (**page 76**), or playful memetic affordances on TikTok that are being used for Palestinian resistance, as Tom Divon explains (**page 88**). Whether it's memes being used to mobilize political violence, as Bhumika Bhattacharyya shows us (**page 106**), or as tools during the Presidential Elections in 2018 in Brazil, according to Isabel Lögfren (**page 52**), it's clear that memes are immensely powerful. Memes are critiquing surveillance capitalism, memes can make theory more accessible (or are even theory in themselves, according to Jordi Viader Guerrero (**page 260**), memes uphold a mirror, showing the politics of the everyday, as Mariana Manousopoulou (**page 298**) sees it. They can take us by the hand, guide us through the politics of Russia's complex history, pop up in critical videogames, influence gun violence and immigration policies, balsam our souls when used as coping mechanisms for traumatized minority groups; they can be even an effective tool for decolonization, for liberation of indigenous people. The list of political memetic tactics currently employed throughout continents goes on: memes are everywhere, residing on each digital doorstep; breathing, growing, taking on new powers. They are specific to each culture, each context, adaptable as can be. The list goes on.

Meme Design and Labor

One such power is how to design the perfect political meme, a secret shared with us by Chloë Arkenbout in her interviews with nine Dutch leftist meme makers (**page 20**), whose memes also end up on the street as stickers, invading the public space with fierce ideological weaponry. It's these same ideological weapons that are also used in the context of critiquing the art industry, with all its shortcomings, ranging from precarious work environments to a total lack of social safety (Dutchies, remember Julian Andeweg?). Both Manique Hendricks and Marijn Bril point out that memes have become a new form of institutional critique (**page 191** and **page 178**). Hendricks states that memes are the perfect tool for a new generation of artists, curators, researchers, writers, and students to question institutional systems and power relations. Even though memes might *look* less dangerous than a critical review in an art magazine, according to her 'they provide humor, a certain catharsis, and a possible ground for self-identification or affirmation for the viewer: you are being made fun of, but at the same time you're also *in* on the joke.' For the art world, memes are a perfect medium for playful self-mockery, while at the same time being a tool for serious critique. An artwork in itself, then.

However, the production of critical memes has a dark side to it as well: it is no coincidence that Anahita Neghabat stopped making memes—she was simply too emotionally drained from being 'mansplained' all the time (**page 149**). How does, indeed, a meme maker remain positive enough to keep on fighting the good fight? How does not only the meme, but also its maker keep their power intact?

Speculative Memes and Imaginaries

Memes are a powerful tool to question power, to critique and to create. Yet how do we get from this point to actually mobilizing the revolution our world desperately needs? When are we going to storm *our* Capitol, the Capitol that is capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy? How do we use memes to create a world built on values such as intersectional equality, solidarity, empathy, compassion, care? A world, in fact, built on love? Apologies if we sound a tad bit emotional here. But time is running out—climate disaster is a grim reality and it won't be long before a new pandemic hits. Or, who knows, aliens might even come and invade our planet?

Fig. 2: Hey.

The true political power of memes lies in their potential to be used as a proactive design practice, to build imaginaries for a better world. By thinking through alternative stories of possible futures, memes can become a way of talking in-depth about the implications of those potential outcomes of our society.[12] As the iconic futuring-expert Peter Schwartz perhaps would have concluded, if he were to apply his method to memes: memes can

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12   Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991), xiv.

bring mankind's unspoken assumptions about the future to the surface.[13] This is something Jasmine Erkan and Emma Damiani demonstrate with their (not so) fictional preview of our future (**page 207**). Memes can be powerful vehicles in challenging our 'mental models' about the world, and can potentially lift our 'blinders', those that limit our creativity and resourcefulness.[14] They allow us to anticipate difficult times, and to make us see opportunities which otherwise would have remained invisible to us.[15]

It might be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. However, lucky for us, it's also easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of meme culture.[16] So, let's try and imagine a world *after* capitalism, shall we? The best speculative designs do more than communicate; they suggest possible interactions and behaviors, according to Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, authors of *Speculative Everything*.[17] They state that the left has relied too heavily on reason, ignoring the possibility of fantasy.[18] And, yes, activists do burn out quickly, ending up as nihilist shadows of their once hopeful, combative selves. But let's not despair. How about we start seeing memes for what they truly are? A boundless source of inspiration, a starting point for the radical change so desperately needed in the world. Our reality may be grim, but our future doesn't have to be. Let us, for the love of memes, make it playful, euphoric, abundant. Let us dance upon the graves of nihilist media and worship our new gods: the memes.

Savriël Dillingh states that true hope can only be forward-facing (**page 314**): 'That is, it looks towards something that is undoubtedly good and beautiful, but necessarily something we cannot yet understand. We know it's there, but we simply do not yet have the conceptual language to express it.' Luckily, we have memes, seeing as, according to Dillingh, they allow progressives to *mass produce hope*. And it makes sense, because if memes can have a positive impact on our mental health (**page 140**), as Laurence Scherz illustrates, their healing power might be capable of so much more—perhaps even a healing, or *saving* of the world? To quote Dillingh once more: 'Now doesn't that just make you hope?'

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13   Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain*, xv.
14   Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain*, xv.
15   Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain*, xv.
16   Åke Gafvelin, "On the Prospect of Overcoming Meme-Culture, or, The Last Meme in History," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 185.
17   Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), 139.
18   Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, 159.

Fig. 3: Sorry not sorry.

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MEMETIC AMMUNITION

POLITICAL MEME TOOLKIT: LEFTIST DUTCH MEME MAKERS SHARE THEIR TRADE SECRETS

CHLOË ARKENBOUT

The alt-right and their political warfare techniques have been discussed elaborately for years now, by multiple talented meme scholars. However relevant that may be, I for one think it's important to zoom in on the tactics progressive *leftist* meme makers are using. In fact, the left supposedly not being able to meme has been an outdated statement for a while. Memes have great political potential for those who believe in solidarity, intersectionality, empathy, compassion, care, and revolution, and they have this for three main reasons:

1. Memes offer counter-narrative techniques

Anahita Neghabat explains in her article that was published in the first *Critical Meme Reader* that mainstream media regularly produce hegemonic, sexist, racist, classist or otherwise marginalizing and violent views. They often uncritically reproduce problematic arguments, generalizations, and vocabulary in an effort to report 'neutrally'. Therefore, memes are the perfect tool to intervene in public discourse. According to her, memes are simple enough to reach a broad audience, yet at the same time sufficiently sophisticated to stimulate critical thinking. Neghabat continues by stating that memes serve a special function for marginalized communities, because memes are characterized by their do-it-yourself-aesthetic—anyone can produce a meme with basic editing skills and internet access. Memes must therefore be understood as a tool for rejecting the logic of exclusive, elitist, top-down knowledge production commonly performed by hegemonic, established media and political institutions.

2. Memes plant dialectical seeds for change

Leftist memes have the potential to plant what I like to call 'dialectical seeds for change' as a culture war tactic, to slowly change dominant views and norms. In their essay 'Rude Awakening: Memes as Dialectical Images',[1] Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters illustrate, using Walter Benjamin, how memes can be seen as dialectical images. According to them, memes can be seen as cultural negotiations that take place in the flow of everyday language, where meaning is not authoritatively established. Tutors and Lovink compare Benjamin's

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1   Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters, "Rude Awakening: Memes as Dialectical Images," *Non Copyriot*, April 2, 2018. https://non.copyriot.com/rude-awakening-memes-as-dialectical-images/.

metaphors on awakening, transformation, and the hope for insight with memetic processes happening right now. They state that even though memes are inherently ironic, they can also purport belief. The left is excellent at making memes that show the alternative voice within dominant oppressive discourses, in both a subtle and dialectical way. These are memes that make those who see them go 'I never thought of it like that', thus planting a seed for a change of ideology, or an awakening.

3. Memes express solidarity and stimulate unity

Neghabat states that the humor in memes made by and for the left is an intrinsic part of a collective empowerment strategy, one that builds resilience through a process of self-affirmation. She writes how humor is a deeply subjective and intimate experience; therefore, finding something funny *together* creates a sense of intimacy, of community—sharing one's discomfort and dealing with negative experiences offers emotional relief and support. Sharing a meme that makes you want to laugh *and* cry with a fellow lefty is a feeling many of us probably recognize. However, memes do not only offer solidarity: they also unify. The left may be fragmented and critical of each other, but memes function as an active tool for unifying different communities as well.

How, then, is the perfect leftist meme constructed and distributed? I spoke to nine leftist Dutch meme makers, all of whom operate on a different spectrum of the left (from radical communism to more libertarian-leaning ideologies) and have different numbers of Instagram followers (from 400 followers to a whopping 140,000). What are their strategies and tricks? What makes a truly good leftist meme?

Elements of a Successful Political Meme

There are multiple elements that make a political meme a *great* political meme. @kakelversememes (minty fresh memes), one of the biggest leftist meme accounts in the Netherlands, explains that a good meme must be relevant and also contain something recognizable. If the meme is funny as well that's just a nice bonus because, according to them, for social commentary a meme does not necessarily need a punchline. They also explain that a meme should not have too much text—something that seems hard for leftist meme creators. @linksinhetnieuws (left in the news), a meme creator who posts memes but also a lot of other types of content such as news articles, infographics, and polls, agrees on this. @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen (free Saaf for everyone), a political researcher who is only one of two meme creators I interviewed that *doesn't* meme anonymously, underlines the importance of commenting on current events. @commie____central, a communist meme maker, adds how memes that are controversial and evoke emotions usually work well. He furthermore explains that memes that hold multiple symbols—referring to different (pop culture) images, news events, specific ideologies and other memes—are the most sophisticated.

Fig. 1: Meme by @kakelversememes. 'We regret that our travelers are experiencing problems because of the strike. — So, you're going to ensure a better collective labor agreement to make sure the trains run again?'

This connects to what @progressieve.plaatjes (progressive images), a collective of meme creators who are radical in ideology but try to steer clear of heated debates between communists and anarchists, have to say about navigating the tension between creating niche memes and memes that are recognizable for a wider audience. @linksinhetnieuws and @linkslibertaireplaatjes (leftist libertarian images), a collective from Belgium, both state that it's important to drastically simplify political and ideological issues, to make sure as many people can understand them, while @progressieve.plaatjes also state that when they post a meme that's too generic—widely understood by a large audience—they lose niche followers as well. However, they also lose followers when the memes they share are too specific.

What all meme creators have in common is that they have the capacity to think visually. Both @kakelversememes and @delinksestudent (the leftist student) explain that when they read something they want to comment on in the media, they usually instantly know what meme template would be most suitable to visualize their critique. Most meme creators use international memes and translate them into a national context from time to time or employ already existing popular formats, or just create their own. @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen explains how, in his view, there are two kinds of memes: the classic image macro (text over image) format usually made with popular pre-existing formats, and the 'homemade' formats that are more experimental in nature.

In this, he sees how the former is usually straightforward in its punchline, with an attempt to evoke emotions, whereas the latter is oftentimes more satirical, trying to show the absurdity of the situation it's commenting on. Or, as @progressieve.plaatjes explain: some memes are recognizable and try to connect people with each other, while others are so absurd they only make the people who get it laugh.

Fig. 2: Meme by @progressieve.plaatjes. Mark Rutte (Dutch prime minister): 'People who cannot afford groceries anymore —The interests of big capital'.

So, a great political meme is relevant and reacts to current events, is recognizable, should not have too much text, has different layers of symbolism, evokes emotion, is controversial, and holds a balance between being interesting for an in-crowd and being accessible to a bigger audience. Humor, in all of this, is just a bonus.

Tools for Meme Production

Everyone with a decent internet connection can make a meme. The question then remains, how exactly? What tools do leftist memers use? Most meme makers use meme generators (such as Memetic or Imgflip) or photo editing tools (such as Canva, InDesign, or even Paint) on their smartphone or laptop—or a combination of all of these.

Fig. 3: Meme by @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen. Willem Alexander (king of the Netherlands) while reading the king's speech of 2022: 'First of all, fuck you all lol'.

@memesvdmassa (memes of the masses), the first-ever leftist meme account in the Netherlands which is run by multiple people and connected to other accounts such as @roodememes (red memes), state that they use a meme generator for the quick and dirty memes that comment on recent events—speed being more important than aesthetics—and use Photoshop when they have more time. Some meme making apps have limitations, such as watermarks or a limited number of templates. One solution, @delinksestudent explains, is to become a paid subscriber, which allows meme makers to access new templates earlier than other admins, giving them the opportunity 'to be the first'. Another option is to use @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen's tactic: according to him, memes outside of the common templates require more original thought and creativity. 'Ironically, I'm most proud of my memes that get the least likes', he explains. 'I know that the recognizable memes score better because everyone recognizes that shit, but I like to be a bit avant-garde.'

Memes that are made with templates are often the quick, recognizable ones that comment on recent events, whereas memes that are made in photo editing tools are more aesthetically pleasing, original and experimental. It all depends on what a meme maker wants to achieve, and how much time they have to invest.

Fig. 4: Meme by @commie____central. 'Us in 2023, looking back on how all we ever wanted was humane shelter for refugees and that people were able to feed their kids'.

Social Media Platform Tactics and Limits

After a meme is produced, meme makers share their creations in the hopes that their memes will reach as many people as possible, or, even better: that they'll go *viral*. How do these meme makers navigate their content on social media, and what are the limits of trying to question power within this age of platform capitalism?

Most meme makers use Instagram to spread their memes. Generally, all memers I've spoken to agree on the fact that Instagram is so suitable for memes because it's a visual platform, where it's easy to interact with other users. @gratis_saaf_voor_ iedereen adds how it's also easier to control that interaction: 'I delete and block a lot of Nazis that comment on my memes, because I want to create a safe space for leftist people.' Facebook is passé, some find Twitter too toxic or too difficult to gain followers with, and some are considering TikTok, as Instagram probably awaits the same fate as Facebook—even though it would be more difficult to remain anonymous there. Curiously, none of the meme makers I talked to are active on alternative, open-source platforms, besides a few Telegram groups; they seem to be fighting capitalism from within the system.

Fig. 5: Meme by @linkslibertaireplaatjes. 'Right-wing dipshits: Respect our norms and values. Me: Okay great, can you then also show some basic level of politeness towards minorities? Right-wing dipshits: Aaaaaah woke!'

Some memers see memeing as a personal tool to deal with the daily horrors of late-stage capitalism, such as @commie___central and @linksinhetnieuws, who post multiple posts and stories a day. @commie___central explains that some people find it annoying when people post all the time, but for others, this consistency is very important indeed. Other accounts, such as @progressieve.plaatjes, see how many hate comments and messages some accounts receive and try not to see memeing as a mission with structured content planning, but rather as a form of tension release. @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen does not post something every day, or even every week—he shares memes when he has something to say. At times, he is too tired and simply does not feel like it, because the world we live in is too grim: 'Sometimes our reality is so extreme that I find it very difficult to even apply satire to it. When people lose their right to abortion, or when a baby gets hit by a cop during a peaceful protest, is it even ethical to meme about that? And if so, how do you do that in a tasteful, respectful way?'

Whereas all memers have a different frequency of posting memes on their Instagram accounts, all of them interact and engage with each other, some even collaborate together, whether they know each other in real life or not. This automatically increases their memes' reach. As ideologies and strategies differ, some of them are comrades, some are frenemies and some of them just strongly disagree with each other. Most of them comment on and share each other's memes, whether it's because they agree with the message or to publicly criticize each other. Another tactic to make a meme go viral is to engage with the enemy:

@delinksestudent, for example, frequently tags right-wing extremist politicians or the official account of the police, in order to get a response from them to trigger the algorithm. 'I enjoy it when people disagree with my meme. It means I've accomplished to reach people outside of my own bubble, those that only tell me I'm right anyway.'

Working with Instagram's algorithm is something @delinksestudent does more often. He has a professional account that lets him see the statistics of the memes he shares—such as the fact that 55% of his followers are men and 45% women (even though it's worth noting here that this percentage might look different if Instagram would have the option of tracking users outside of the gender binary). 'The memes I make that are a bit ruder often work well with younger guys' he continues, and 'the memes that are content-focused attract older men. Memes about political persons are liked most by women. I try to keep a balance in these types of content.' @politieke_jongeren (political youngsters), an account with over 140k followers that does not create memes but shares other makers' content, claims that for organic growth it's important to focus on the content, and not on 'marketing tricks'. He has never done a paid partnership because he wants to remain authentic and independent, but for the right organization, he would perhaps consider it. @progressieve.plaatjes and @memesvdmassa, however, would never contemplate a partnership, as they deliberately chose not to engage in growth hacking or sponsored content. They wish to focus on the content, and want to protect their mental health by not obsessing over analytics.

Fig. 6: Meme by @memesvdmassa. 'Ignoring a transphobic campaign poster—Demolishing a transphobic campaign poster and leaving the scraps—Demolishing a transphobic campaign poster and dutifully throwing it away in a trash can afterwards—"Vandalizing" a transphobic campaign poster with pro trans-stickers'.

Operating on Instagram, a platform that is focused on profit, naturally has its shortcomings. Openly questioning power structures on a capitalist platform that benefits from its own oppressive systems often results in forms of censorship, with accounts being shadowbanned or banned full stop. @commie____central, who once started out as @commie_central with one underscore, serves as an iconic example: he currently has an account with no less than four underscores—each new underscore stands for a new account he had to create after being banned. @kakelversememes explains that they are extremely aware of this: 'Sometimes memes are categorized as hate speech; other times troll armies report our posts. The only way to prevent this is by posting content that is a little less radical, and to be extremely careful of how you word certain things. However, this is very difficult because the line between what is allowed and what isn't is thin, constantly changing, differing as well per topic and per account. If you're a politician, you're allowed different things than if you're a meme page.' On top of that, @kakelversememes found out that when in 2021 the National Coordinator of Terrorist Prevention and Safety of the Netherlands started following political campaign leaders, prominent religious figures, and activists with anonymous accounts,[2] they were on this list. 'That was truly next level.'

Tactical Impact

That leftist meme makers are being taken seriously by those who are in power is clear. So then, what is the actual tactical political impact of leftist political memes? Both @linksinhetnieuws and @politieke_jongeren mention that the only way they can *really* measure their influence is through the feedback of some of their followers. The actual change, however—the conversations their followers have while having a drink, after seeing their memes—is something they'll never fully be able to grasp. Do these creators notice any impact of their work, and how do they actively strive for social change?

@kakelversememes explains that they don't know whether their memes make an impact on policy, but what they do know is how one of their memes is hanging on the wall of the BIJ1 (most radical leftist Dutch party) office: 'That I made Sylvana Simons [BIJ1 party leader and first-ever Black female party leader in the Dutch parliament] laugh definitely puts a smile on my face.' @commie____central tells me that he's not sure of his actual impact either, but that it has been less than he would prefer, however still more than he expected. He explains that multiple followers have told him that they started voting differently because of his memes, alongside followers becoming more active in local protests and joining political organizations. Also @linksinhetnieuws' followers tell him that, because of him, they've realized D66 (a self-proclaimed centrist leftist party) is not as left-wing as they portray themselves, thus starting to vote for other parties which are further along in the leftist spectrum.

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2   NOS Nieuws, "NCTV volgde in het geheim burgers op sociale media met nepaccounts," *NOS Nieuws*, April 10, 2021, https://nos.nl/artikel/2376104-nctv-volgde-in-het-geheim-burgers-op-sociale-media-met-nepaccounts.
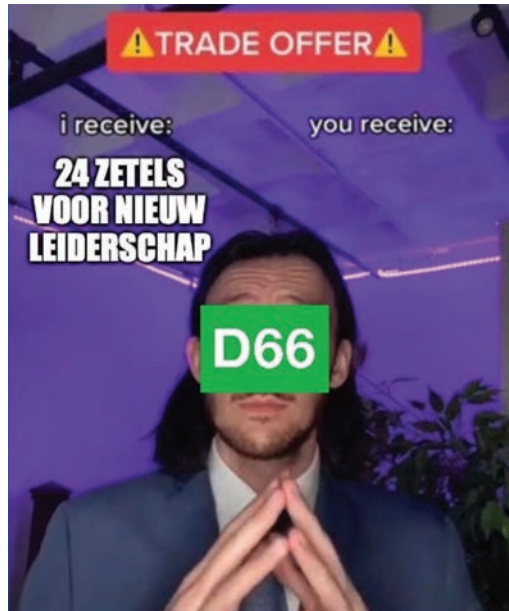
Fig. 7: Meme by @linksinhetnieuws. 'D66 Trade Offer. I receive: 24 seats for new leadership. You receive: [empty space].'

This is exactly what @memesvdmassa want to achieve: to radicalize people into becoming more leftist—preferably communist. For them, it's important that memes connect people to actual organizations, protests, and events: 'After making memes for six months, we wanted to do more. To transfer memes to the real world. So, we founded a web shop called @derodelap (the red cloth) where we sell merchandise (such as protest flags, buttons, pins, posters), political stickers that literally put memes into the streets, and books. Memes are a great way to activate leftist people who want to know more about a certain ideology.' Consequently, @linksinhetnieuws' followers told him that, in fact, they've joined unions or signed petitions because of his content. It is therefore also his hope that memes can be a gateway to political action, a tool to instigate people into doing their own critical research.

This is @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen's strategy as well: 'A meme alone is not enough; you need something activating next to it. A meme is a decoy for the in-depth content I produce as a political researcher. Whenever I post a meme before sharing a podcast I recorded, for example, that podcast gets listened to a lot more.' This is also how @linkslibertaireplaatjes use memes— as a marketing technique to get more attention for the political activities they organize. 'Memes travel across different places, outside of our own filter bubble, so this impacts our reach greatly, giving us the opportunity to spread our ideas more broadly.'

Fig. 8: Meme by @delinksestudent. 'Thanks for not explaining the entire Marxist theory to my dad when he said D66 is a left-wing party, that required self-discipline.'

@progressieve.plaatjes explain how they've noticed that online political content is beneficial to spreading ideas. According to them, memes have positively influenced the normalization of radical leftist ideology: 'We're noticing a clear shift, where memes have contributed to an environment where it's more accepted to be an active anti-capitalist. Maybe it's not as accepted to call yourself a communist yet, but it's definitely more normalized to say stuff like "fuck capitalism" now. Of course, we should not stop with the influence of ideology, we also need to mobilize people and get them off their phones, and on the streets.'

And so, it remains difficult to measure political memes and their direct influence: it's safe to say one meme will not spark an entire revolution. However, together with other influences such as more traditional forms of critical media, as well as conversations with friends, family, lovers, teachers, fellow students, or colleagues, memes can contribute to a change in ideology, one that can result in critical thinking—and ultimately, in political *action*.

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(Almost) all of the identities of the meme makers I interviewed are known to me. In order to preserve their privacy and safety (most of them receive death threats because of their ideologies), these identities are not disclosed here. A special thanks to them, my meme muses (in order the interviews were conducted): @linksinhetnieuws, @kakelversememes, @progressieve.plaatjes, @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen, @commie____central, @linkslibertaireplaatjes, @delinksestudent, @memesvdmassa, and @politieke_jongeren.

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BENEVOLENT EDGELORDS: SPECTERS OF BENJAMIN AND MEMETIC AMBIGUITY

PIERRE D'ALANCAISEZ

The Taliban in Disneyland

By the time this text is published, the USA's military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August of 2021 will be a fading entry in the catalogue of geopolitical and humanitarian disasters. Whatever formal inquiries may be ongoing, they are sure to pay attention to the corruption of the fleeing Afghan government, the naivete of the US Army command, and the human rights aftermath. They are far less likely to consider the aesthetics of regime change and the role of the iconic image in marking the transition. This is not because the end of *Operation Freedom's Sentinel* failed to produce the customary images of troops and military equipment juxtaposed with bewildered civilian faces, but because the most remarkable images were produced by the Taliban.

The Taliban's entry into Kabul was not accompanied by the sound of gunfire or footage of armed struggle. Instead, we saw the Taliban command in an impromptu photo-op in the presidential palace.[1] In the city, the fighters explored an amusement park, filming themselves on a children's merry-go-round and riding around in bumper cars.[2] Later, they marveled at the facilities of a gym.[3] Some ate ice-cream (Fig. 1).[4] More LARP (Live Action Role Play) than war.By the time the news cameras turned to the harrowing scenes of crowds gathered at Kabul airport, the Taliban image-makers had gained the first-mover advantage. So much so that the Western public consciousness registered the dramatic scenes as though they came from disaster movies in which the US Air Force was the antagonist.[5] Back in the Taliban-controlled city, no statues were toppled, no blood was (visibly) shed, and no buildings were destroyed.

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1   Al Jazeera, "Photos: Taliban Takes Control of Afghan Presidential Palace," News, *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/8/15/in-pictures-taliban-fighters-enter-afghan-presidential-palace.

2   The Telegraph, "Taliban Fighters Play on Dodgem Cars at Amusement Park in Kabul," *YouTube*, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdjEwqzveos.

3   Mulhak - ﻖﺤﻠﻣ [@Mulhak], "ﺮﺻﺎﻨﻋ #"ﻥﺎﺒﻟﺎﻄﻟﺍ" ﻥﻮﺳﺭﺎﻤﻳ ﺔﺿﺎﻳﺮﻟﺍ ﻲﻓ ﺔﻋﺎﻗ ﻢﻴﺟ ﺔﻋﺎﻗ ﻲﻓ ﻢﻴﺟ ﺭﻮﺼﻘﻟﺎﺑ ﺍﺮﺋﺎﺴﻳ ﻲﻓ #ﻞﺑﺎﻛ," Tweet, *Twitter*, August 16, 2021, https://twitter.com/Mulhak/status/1427320391471714306.

4   Abdulhaq Omeri, "#Taliban Eat Ice-Cream #Kabul #Afghanistan." Tweet, *Twitter*, August 17, 2021, https://twitter.com/AbdulhaqOmeri/status/1427715238464561154.

5   Shania Wilson, "Twitter Compares World War Z Plane Scene to Kabul Evacuation – Eerie Similarities Explained," *HITC*, August 16, 2021, https://www.hitc.com/en-gb/2021/08/16/twitter-compares-world-war-z-plane-scene-to-kabul-evacuation-eerie-similarities-explained/.

Fig. 1: The Taliban eating ice-cream in Kabul, August 2021. Twitter: @AbdulhaqOmeri.

Why did these frivolous images have such an impact on the Western world? Their novelty partially explains their power to outcompete traditional war reportage, but there is more to it: the Taliban fighters' wonder at the civilization they inherited, makes them eerily relatable. Even more relatable are the symbols of that civilization which the Americans tried to instill in Afghanistan. Fairground rides, ice-cream, and treadmills: Disneyland.

These images represent the retreat into a version of reality in which we, from thousands of miles away, no longer need to be troubled by the symbols of conflict, not even those hackneyed cyphers such as bombed-out ruins, crying mothers, or starving children that have become so easy to ignore on Western TV screens. The Taliban fighters' penchant for ice-cream bypasses the tormenting reality of war and offers proof that, as Jean Baudrillard proposed already in 1991, the war never took place at all.[6] Except this time, it's not because we have lost the ability to tell reality and fiction of war images apart, but because the fiction is so compelling that we prefer it to reality.

This is the stuff that memes are made of. If the Taliban wanted to lord their effortless entry into Kabul over the outgoing peacekeepers, they did so with the complicit aid of the very targets of their trolling. Ice-cream images quickly began circulating, whether they had anything to do with 2021 or not.[7]

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6 Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

7 Dilip Kumar Sripada, "Old Photo of an Afghan Citizen Falsely Shared as Recent Visuals of a Taliban Fighter Enjoying Ice Cream," *Factly*, August 26, 2021, https://factly.in/old-photo-of-an-afghan-citizen-falsely-shared-as-recent-visuals-of-a-taliban-fighter-enjoying-ice-cream/.

Fig. 2: Billboard in North Carolina showing Joe Biden eating ice-cream. Instagram: @donaldtrumpjr.

The Joe Biden ice-cream meme which shows the President licking gelato against a backdrop of the Kabul evacuation (Fig. 2) took flight not in Kandahar, but in North Carolina.[8] Even the restaging of the 1945 Iwo Jima flag photograph with Taliban colors (Fig. 3), supposedly produced to strike at the heart of American pride, appears not to have been deliberate.[9] For each of these images and their endless clones, it was the American and Western audiences that made it possible for the memes to gain any currency at all—on 4chan, Twitter, and the news. Compare the success of these aesthetic outputs with the Taliban's more 'traditional' efforts to mock the US with Pepe and Wojak memes,[10] and it becomes clear that the bumper cars and ice-cream images are in a league of their own.

8   Donald Trump Jr, "This Is Apparently a Billboard in Wilmington, North Carolina," *Instagram*, photo, August 18, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CSsufeWjSRP/.

9   Dan Evon, "Did Taliban Recreate Iwo Jima Photo?", *Snopes.com*, August 23, 2021, https://www. snopes.com/fact-check/taliban-iwo-jima/.

10   OpIndia staff, "Taliban Accounts Mock USA with Pepe the Frog and Other 'edgy' Memes," *OpIndia* (blog), August 31, 2021, https://www.opindia.com/2021/09/taliban-leader-accounts-mocks-usa-with-pepe-the-frog-and-other-edgy-4chan-memes/.

Fig. 3.1: 313 Bardi Battalion; Joe Rosenthal, 1945/AP.

Fig. 3.2: 313 Bardi Battalion; Joe Rosenthal, 1945/AP.

The IRL LARP

These events vindicate Jean Baudrillard's pronouncement that signs no longer need to refer to real events at all, and that their meaning is predetermined by the entropy of war that produces them. We are producing images of war without war itself, a situation that seems a given in the memesphere. The images also correspond with another one of Baudrillard's declarations that underlined Disneyland's crucial role to the American psyche: 'Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that is Disneyland'.[11] What happens when images of amusement parks and festive snacks become synonymous with war, when there is nowhere outside of Disneyland to go? If the Taliban have occupied Disneyland, will we ever again make images of anything other than war? Is Mickey Mouse one step away from *subbing* as a warlord?

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11   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12–14.

Perhaps all of this—the war, its end, the coup—has been an all-absorbing LARP that got out of hand. The way out of the Baudrillardian dead-end is to abolish the meme as a category that is synonymous with predetermined political outcomes, and to consider its aesthetics as separate from ideology. Perhaps the Taliban were just eating ice-cream and playing games, and we simply got duped. Perhaps, in Afghanistan, war is a form of theater we didn't notice was scripted.[12] Perhaps going to the gym is what 20-something males do between popping slot machines at the arcade. Is it any wonder that the first tweeted reply to the video of the Taliban at the presidential palace gym was the pitch-perfect 'dudes rock'?[13] Maybe this is what life and war look like anywhere, and the memefication of IRL war images is just a coping mechanism. But who is memeing whom? How many meme-makers can the Taliban demobilize, knowing full well that we, as recipients, would fill in the shortfall? And, if we recognize that the meme is often in the eye of the beholder, what kind of responsibility do we ourselves bear for its political outcomes? If the Taliban wasn't in charge of this meme operation, why did it end up serving their goals? There are, of course, plenty of precedents of deliberate memetic terrorism, but if this wasn't one, we have been waging meme war all wrong.

There may be multiple reasons for this, as well as for the politically unbalanced outcomes of meme politics. The violence of war is almost as present in the everyday meme as racism, misogyny, or various flavors of fascism. No wonder, then, that much of the critical attention that memes have received dwells on their supposedly inevitably right-leaning nature. The media scholar Bogna Konior, for example, follows the Baudrillardian thread to explain why many meme-producing communities have an apocalyptic, end-of-days ethos.[14] The theorist Tom Holert, meanwhile, proposes that digital algorithmic media are rigged to favor fascist messages, regardless of their truth values.[15] Such explanations are alluring in a post-Trump, post-truth era, yet they remain troubling considering that image and politics are the key variables in meme algebra.

The politics-aesthetics equation has been a site of contestation for artistic production and theory in recent decades, during which the cultural field has turned to politically and socially engaged practices. Such practices have had their keen theorists and critics such as Grant Kester and Gregory Scholette, and favorite philosophers like Jacques Rancière. For all political art's popularity within the cultural industries and its

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12   The journalist Sarah Chayes suggest that theater is a significant part of Afghan war culture. Sarah Chayes, "Afghanistan," *Thinking Allowed* (BBC Radio 4, 11 October 2011), https://www.bbc.co.uk/ programmes/m00108bj.

13   Andre Ramos, "@Mulhak Dudes Rock," Tweet, *Twitter*, 18 August 2021, https://twitter.com/ andybong/status/1427791427942092805.

14   Bogna M. Konior, "Apocalypse Memes for the Anthropocene God: Mediating Crisis and the Memetic Body Politic," in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2019), 45–76.

15   Tom Holert, "Transfixing the Fascist Episteme," in *Deserting from the Culture Wars*, ed. Maria Hlavajova and Sven Lütticken (Utrecht: MIT Press, 2020), 53–76.

claims of utility, however, meme aesthetics hardly get a passing glance in galleries and museums, perhaps because memes are assumed to be a priori incompatible with those institutions' liberal politics.[16] The outlandishness of such an attitude should be obvious on the face of it: it's not as if artists have ever shied away from appropriating aesthetic forms and turning them into expressions of their political desires. If Duchamp got his hands dirty on a urinal,[17] why wouldn't left-wing artists play with memes? To borrow a question from the theorist Mike Watson: can the left learn to meme?[18]

Benjamin's Dictate

Watson's recent book *The Memeing of Mark Fisher*[19] brings the analytical focus of meme theory squarely to the Frankfurt School. But in the art school, it is perhaps Walter Benjamin who bears the greatest responsibility for today's aesthetic paralysis. At the very end of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, Benjamin considers the role of art aesthetics in war:

> "Fiat ars—pereat mundus", says fascism, expecting from war […] the artistic gratification of a sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of l'art pour l'art. Humankind […] has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.[20]

This manifesto has long circulated in the artistic spheres in a paraphrased form: the right aestheticizes politics, so the left responds by politicizing aesthetics.[21] For anecdotal evidence to back up Benjamin's thesis, one need not look further than the

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16 Holert, for example, cites the 9th Berlin Biennale curated by the collective DIS, which featured plenty of what was then referred to as post-internet art as an example of the algorithmic right-turn. The political space between DIS and 4chan, however, is nearly as wide as that between Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump—Holert, T., "Transfixing the Fascist Episteme," 2020.

17 The irony here being that Duchamp possibly 'stole' the idea itself—Ariel Rodriguez, "How The Artwork That Started Conceptual Art Was Actually Stolen," March 27, 2018, *Cultura Colectiva,* https://culturacolectiva.com/art/duchamp-stolen-fountain/.

18 Mike Watson, *Can the Left Learn to Meme? Adorno, Video Gaming, and Stranger Things* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2019).

19 Mike Watson, *The Memeing of Mark Fisher: How the Frankfurt School Foresaw Capitalist Realism and What to Do about It* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2022).

20 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]," trans. Michael W. Jennings,]," *Grey Room* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 36.

21 This idea is so ingrained in art practice and criticism that it has its own Wikipedia entry: "Aestheticization of Politics," *Wikipedia*, 6 March 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aestheticization_of_politics&oldid=1075652154.

Nazis' desire to leave behind 'beautiful ruins'[22] on the one hand, and the liberal art institutions' claim of prioritizing social justice principles on the other. The implication of this wisdom received from Benjamin is profound: the right can pursue its politics knowing that it can adorn it with appropriate aesthetics, but the left can only make political claims over an aesthetics that precedes them. This is hardly an optimal condition for the left's practice of political art, unless one wanted such a practice to be entirely and inescapably led by politics, all the while remaining in denial of its aesthetic potential to drive meanings of its own. For the right political artist, this challenge is, however, absent: it is always possible to make adequate aesthetic representations of and for their politics.

Benjamin's dictate thus partly explains the often aesthetically dry nature of the left's political art initiatives.[23] The dictate also demands that the political takes on an increasingly enlarged role in the project of political art; Jean-Luc Godard's move from 'making political film' to 'making films politically', for example, signals the conviction that the circumstances of artistic production matter more than the art's reception.[24] And this drift is never-ending: the critic Keller Easterling observes that mere ideological declarations are not reliable indicators, because they are easily corruptible.[25] This means that, eventually, left art becomes entirely subjugated to the practice of politics, so much so that it need not sully itself with aesthetics anymore.

Beware of Art Bearing Political Gifts

Benjamin does not imply that the art practices of the right are aesthetically superior, but he does draw a veil over the political effectiveness of the right's aesthetics. The long-term result is that a growing plethora of symbols, subjects, and styles, from the Celtic cross to Pepe, are assumed to be aesthetically efficacious because of the politics that they support, rather than because they make for 'good' visuals. Consider, for example, the outrage over the 2020 exhibition *People of Colour* in an Auckland project space, which attracted accusations of hate speech because it displayed the flags of a variety of right-wing political organizations (including the Polish far right and the SS), alongside those of politically acceptable actors (New Zealand's *United Tribes* and, bizarrely, South Korea). On the wall, the exhibition looked like a grid of 3D meme chess brought

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22   Keiko Ishida, "Albert Speer's 'Theory of Ruin Value'," *Art Research Center* 1, Special Issue (2020): 35–43, https://www.arc.ritsumei.ac.jp/download/AR_SPECIALISSUE_vol.1_5_ISHIDA.pdf.

23   See, for example, Claire Bishop's critique of the lack of aesthetics in 'relational aesthetics'. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso Books, 2012).

24   See, for example, Jeremy Spencer, "Politics and Aesthetics within Godard's Cinema," in *Marxism and Film Activism: Screening Alternative Worlds*, ed. Ewa Mazierska and Lars Lyngsgaard Fjord Kristensen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 62.

25   Cited by Holert. Keller Easterling, "Activism in the Age of the Superbug," *Frieze*, 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/keller-easterling-where-activism-fails-and-how-we-can-reformat-it.

to life to invite scrutiny and consideration. Yet it received neither: the curators were accused of harboring fascist views and forced to apologize.[26] More recently, and in contested circumstances,[27] the exhibition *Political Art* at Warsaw's Ujazdowski Centre for Contemporary Art[28] was condemned and boycotted by the mainstream art world because it 'platform[ed] antisemitic, racist, and Islamophobic messages under the guise of freedom of expression.'[29] The presence of one or two taboo ideas was enough to spark a boycott—Max Uwe Jensen's remake of the 1945 *Raising a Flag over the Reichstag* (Fig. 4), which could have been taken straight from the Taliban Iwo Jima portfolio, condemned the show to the 'basket of deplorables'.[30]

Fig. 4: Uwe Max Jensen, Rainbow Warrior — We Fought for This, 2021

But whatever the curators' intentions in staging the provocations in the Auckland and Warsaw exhibitions were, their effect has been to reinforce the left-leaning art world's resolve to treat any aesthetics associated with the right wing, however tenuously, with suspicion and thus never to examine the aesthetic function of its images lest they cause

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26 Amal Samaha, "Swastikas off K Road: How the Worst Art Show in New Zealand Came to Be," *The Spinoff*, November 12, 2020, https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/12-11-2020/swastikas-off-k-road-how-the-worst-art-show-in-new-zealand-came-to-be.

27 Dorian Batycka, "Poland Just Replaced a Top Museum Director With a Drummer and Painter in a Move Critics Say Is Politically Motivated," *Artnet News*, December 3, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/poland-replaces-zacheta-director-2043595.

28 U-Jazdowski, "Political Art", *Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art*, 2021, https://u-jazdowski.pl/en/programme/exhibitions/sztuka-polityczna.

29 Dorian Batycka, "Crowds Gather to Protest Warsaw's Leading Contemporary Art Museum, Which Just Mounted an Anti-Cancel Culture 'Art Show'," *Artnet News*, August 27, 2021, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/ujazdowski-castle-exhibition-2003364.

30 Interestingly, even though Jensen has been a candidate of a right-wing political party, he appears to be as opposed to state support of the arts as he is to the existence of Islam in Denmark. "Uwe Max Jensen," in *Wikipedia, den frie encyklopædi*, 23 May 2022, https://da.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Uwe_Max_Jensen&oldid=11159354.

harm. How can the left learn to meme if it refuses to even *look* at the aesthetics of its political enemies, or to take on the ambiguity of rainbow flags and ice-cream?

Anything Can Be Fascist if You Want It to Be

In the imaginary illiberal museum, Benjamin's dictate is no longer a guarantee of success for the right-wing artist: aestheticizing politics does not turn artistic practice into an ideological weapon the way it may have done, in our idealized view of the past, for Leni Riefenstahl. The self-proclaimed right-wing artist, writer, and frog-Twitter inhabitant Gio Pennacchietti, for example, bemoans the fact that even for the right-leaning artist (for whom the political should be simply another task of the work of art), the political has overtaken the aestheticization of life.[31]

Some of the responsibility for this stalemate may be laid at Benjamin's feet, but it was Max Horkheimer who, in republishing his colleague's essay, substituted 'the totalitarian doctrine' for the original 'fascism' and 'the constructive forces of mankind' for 'communism', in an attempt to make the dictate appealing to American audiences.[32, 33] Given that Benjamin's essay has been an art school favorite on account of its conceptualization of the artwork's aura, it may be Horkheimer's mistranslation, rather than Benjamin's intent, that gave rise to the idea that left and right-leaning politics require radically different aesthetic approaches. The net effect is that the art world, when thinking about the relationship between aesthetics and politics, is drawn to making polarizing, Manichean distinctions between a narrow range of acceptable progressive politics and a whole gamut of questionable ideas that need to be denounced as fascist.

One may reasonably wonder why Benjamin's concern for the mass reproducibility of the image should still be relevant when as many images are produced every day as Benjamin could have imagined in his lifetime. Desmond Manderson is one of the scholars who suggest that Benjamin's observation is historically contingent, and that the disjunction between art and politics is specific to the 20th century of the Frankfurt School:

> Benjamin's essay on mass movements and modern art does not identify the birth of an alliance [between politics and art], so much as detect its resurgence under the altered conditions of twentieth century life. What distinguishes his analysis is the recognition that the constitution of mass publics and collective interests changes

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31   Thaddeus Russell, "Gio Pennacchietti," *Unregistered with Thaddeus Russell*, accessed 31 May 2022, https://sites.libsyn.com/407174/unregistered-213-gio-pennacchietti; Gio Pennacchietti, 'Right-Wing Art, An Impossibility?', Gio's Content Corner, 11 February 2022, https://gioscontentcorner. substack.com/p/right-wing-art-an-impossibility.
32   Thanks to Mike Watson for highlighting this.
33   Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss: The Lives of the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso Books, 2016), chap. 9.

both the forms this alliance takes and the functions it fulfills. At stake is none other than the implications of thinking of aesthetics as the handmaiden of politics.[34]

Following this, one returns to Horkheimer's predicament: is Benjamin's definition of fascism still meaningful, and is communism still a relevant counterpoint in the age of 4chan and TikTok? Benjamin's interest in fascism is rooted in the choices that societies of the 1930s made concerning class and property relations: 'The masses have a *right* to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them *expression* in keeping these relations unchanged.'[35] Fascism's aesthetics, therefore, provided a mere illusion of liberty while actually acting to constrain it.

This description is fitting for a range of contemporary right-wing movements, from the UK Independence Party to MAGA (Make America Great Again), but it can just as easily be applied to other aspects of contemporary property and aesthetic relations. Consider, to take a trivial example, the 'freedom' offered by the WeWork office, where spaces are designed to encourage workers' individual interests to surface in the form of aesthetic relations. 'Do what you love', the WeWork slogan goes: you too can spend your days in a 'creative' environment where your 'expression' will be encouraged—but only to be exploited. By Benjamin's standards, WeWork and all of 21st-century capitalism are steeped in fascism.

Much of contemporary art practice can be so categorized: the sheer volume of social art interventions aimed at giving voice to marginalized communities that fail to measurably empower their subjects should, by Benjamin's account, make today's art institutions blush. Take, for example, the participatory 'talking shop' produced by the engagement department of a contemporary art museum, in which communities not previously engaged with art are invited to express their ideas through aesthetic participation. Does such a project not serve to capture the symbolic capital of the masses in return for an unrealistic promise of a better future? Is the artist-facilitator here not the ultimate fascist?

That Benjamin's distinction between the left and right no longer fits its purpose should have been obvious to aesthetic practitioners, at least since the advent of neoliberalism, which places individual expression above all else. This expressive illusion of freedom, offered by WeWork and the museum, *may* have distinct political outcomes, but these are not determined by their aesthetic hallmarks any more than they are guaranteed by their statements of intent. Might it, therefore, be time to reject the notion that there is a distinct progressive aesthetics which is in conflict with a right-wing one? The first step out of this predicament is to embrace ambiguity.

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34   Desmond Manderson, "Here and Now: From 'Aestheticizing Politics' to 'Politicizing Art'," in *Sensing the Nation's Law: Historical Inquiries into the Aesthetics of Democratic Legitimacy*, ed. Stefan Huygebaert, Angela Condello, Sarah Marusek, and Mark Antaki (New York: Springer, 2018), 4.

35   Benjamin W., "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 35.

Aestheticizing Ambiguity

Mainstream progressivism and ambiguity do not mix, particularly when conservative factions are ready to embrace the latter.[36] For example, any account of the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan that left the effects of the meme campaign to chance would be rather difficult to swallow. Was the ice-cream selfie as likely to land in the pro-democracy camp as it was to deliver a critique of the retreating regime? If such aesthetics come with fifty-fifty odds of favoring either side of politics, then what determines the outcome? Could it be simply that the extreme political factions expend their energies on making memes opportunistically, while the progressive opposition retreats? Simpler still, is it not true that 'you've got to be in it to win it'? Given that images are produced at a ridiculous pace, with or without political intent, is it not the responsibility of the political artist to harness their aesthetic ambiguity and cultivate, or rather, *meme* them, so that the balance of probabilities is swayed in one direction or another?

Aesthetic ambiguity is at play in Monira Al Qadiri's video work *Behind the Sun*, which brings together the footage of the burning oil fields in Kuwait set alight by Iraqi troops retreating at the end of the first Gulf War with a soundtrack of nature-themed, religious Arabic poetry from contemporary TV programs.[37] The combination of this vintage lo-fi imagery, which Western audiences may remember as the beginnings of televised perma-war, with incomprehensible sounds that news bulletins have conditioned them to mistrust is bewildering. The images of fire and destruction are as iconic of the Gulf War as Albert Speer's 'beautiful ruins' were of World War II. Yet Al Qadiri's use of them says nothing of her politics, and does not align her with any school of extremism. A recent exhibition in Ottawa, for example, interpreted the video work as being 'of particular significance in Canada, where traditional territories have been expropriated by the settler-colonial state.'[38, 39] Without suggesting that Al Qadiri courts controversy with her juxtaposition of fire and religion, it is fair to observe that a very similar set of aesthetic choices could be employed, in another context, to inspire religious fervor or promote violent dissent.

Context matters, and even more so when one considers that comparable imagery twinned with meditative readings of Koranic poetry has accompanied ISIS 'battle porn'[40] and

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36   Pennacchietti, for example, suggest that ambiguity is the right-wing artist's way out of the Benjaminian stalemate. Russell, T., "Gio Pennacchietti.".

37   Monira Al Qadiri, *Behind the Sun*, 2013, video, sound, 10', 2013, https://www.moniraalqadiri.com/behind-the-sun/.

38   Digital Arts Resource Centre, "Monira Al Qadiri: Behind the Sun at DARC," *Digital Arts Resource Centre (Formerly SAW Video)* (blog), March 23, 2022, https://digitalartsresourcecentre.ca/monira-al-qadiri-behind-the-sun/.

39   Al Qadiri is Kuwaiti, was born in Senegal, educated in Japan, and lives in Berlin, but has no discernible connection to Canada.

40   Brendan I. Koerner, "Why ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War—And How to Fight Back," *Wired*, April 2016, https://www.wired.com/2016/03/isis-winning-social-media-war-heres-beat/.

several beheading videos.[41] What, then, separates an artist such as Al Qadiri from a 4chan meme poster experimenting with edgelord assemblages of images, music, and text? If it isn't aesthetics alone, does the validation of Al Qadiri's work by mainstream art institutions guarantee the 'propriety' of the artist's politics, thus limiting the work's possible applications beyond the sanitized confines of the curatorial text? The relationship between the work and its exhibition context becomes difficult to ascertain here because, in practice, the curatorial-critical machine works to remove the last remnants of ambiguity, thus undermining the very idea of aesthetic judgment.

The strength of *Behind the Sun* is precisely its ability to evade the Canadian exhibition's shoehorning of 'Indigenous Peoples' land rights'[42] into the interpretative apparatus, and to retain the slippery relationship between aesthetic markers and political alignment. The video is a powerful anti-war hymn, made even more potent by the possibility that it could just as easily be a battle cry. However, one would search in vain for an acknowledgement of this ambiguity in accounts of Al Qadiri's work, because acceptance within the art world comes at the cost of swearing allegiance to Benjamin's dictate. In return, the museum renders the artefact inaccessible to anyone who hasn't already subscribed to the liberal ideologies of the institution. As if to prove this point, Al Qadiri withdrew her permission to reproduce a still from her video on being presented with a draft of this text.

Platform Ambiguity

How can an artist choose to practice ambiguity in pursuit of political outcomes? The example of Al Qadiri's work suggests that this is possible within the art institution, but only within the narrow confines of pre-approved political and aesthetic codes. Ambiguity is more easily pursued outside of the museum, or at its edges. Recent years have brought multiple examples of exodus and exile from the museum in the manner of 'exit not escape', as advocated by theorist Suhail Malik.[43] Artists of the Millennial generation such as Daniel Keller or Brad Troemel, who came of age aesthetically and politically just as the gallery had its brief romance with post-internet art, have since found that to continue their work they had to take their allegiances into spaces still unpolluted by the art institution or market. The beneficiaries of this exit have been a plethora of quasi-independent outlets powered by Twitter, Patreon, and Discord, as well as artworld-adjacent structures like the political edutainment video art platform DIS, or experimental schools *Foreign Objekt* and *Exploding Appendix*.[44]

41   Jessica Auchter, *Global Corpse Politics: The Obscenity Taboo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chap. 3.
42   Digital Arts Resource Centre, "Monira Al Qadiri at DARC."
43   Suhail Malik, *Exit Not Escape, lecture, vol. 1, On The Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art,* Artists Space, New York, 2013, https://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/66325/suhail-malik-exit-not-escape-on-the-necessity-of-art-s-exit-from-contemporary-art.
44   "Dis," accessed 5 June 2022, https://dis.art/; "Foreign Objekt," accessed 5 June 2022, https://www.foreignobjekt.com; 'Exploding Appendix', accessed 5 June 2022, http://www.explodingappendix.com/diagnosis/.

The New York artist Joshua Citarella is one of the cultural producers whose work is as likely to be found in the gallery as it is on anonymous virtual forums. Until 2020, his practice followed the usual trajectory of group and solo exhibitions, artist-curating, residencies, and teaching. Since then, Citarella has taken his online presence far beyond the Instagram (32k) follow-for-follow customary of the art world, so much so that he now describes himself as a 'content producer' as well as an artist.[45] He runs a weekly Twitch stream (3.9k) with topics such as *Monday Night Memes* or *Ideology Iceberg*, the podcast *Memes as Politics*, and the collaborative publishing platform *Do Not Research*. He also hosts a community (1.5k) on Discord and Patreon, with whom he recently staged an IRL exhibition.[46] Citarella has self-published books that engage with meme-making, including a series of interviews with meme creators,[47] and notes on the relationship between the memesphere and online political factions of the post-left.[48]

Such varied activity is not unusual in the art world, but much of what Citarella does remains invisible to mainstream institutions. Parts are obscured by the Patreon paywall, parts are co-branded or collaborative, and others, we are led to believe, are performed covertly and without attribution. Where he is visible, Citarella takes on the role of a meme ethnographer, online influencer, community organizer, and lecturer. In the stream, he maintains the charisma of a benevolent edgelord or cult leader. Within his research documents, he relies on memes and graphs that do as much to explain his project as to disorient an outsider. In the press, he displays a commitment to shaping political activism in ways alien to the art world.

Citarella speaks of being too radical for the museum. There is a modicum of truth to this claim: the art world's interest in online communities does not reach deep, and the followers that he commands are captured by platforms who are unlikely to want to release them to the museum for free. But what makes Citarella an odder fit still is his aesthetics; Citarella's political alignment being difficult to pin down for the casual observer. His Instagram feed features Wojak as often as Bernie Sanders, and some of the hype surrounding his 'community' evokes crypto-libertarianism.[49] His key interest in the past few years has been 'Politigram', the nexus of politics and Instagram, the

45   Pierre d'Alancaisez, "Politigram & the Post-Left, Interview with Joshua Citarella," *New Books Network*, accessed June 6, 2022, https://petitpoi.net/joshua-citarella-politigram-and-the-post-left/.

46   "Do Not Research," lower_cavity, April 23, 2022, https://www.lowercavity.space/donotresearch.

47   Joshua Citarella, *20 Interviews* (Blurb, 2021), https://www.amazon.com/20-Interviews-Joshua-Citarella/dp/1034279270/.

48   Joshua Citarella, *Politigram* & *the Post-Left* (Blurb, 2021), https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1006610197.

49   Citarella is one of the founding partners of *channel.xyz*, a crypto-powered content and NFT platform bringing together his podcast with *New Models*, and *Interdependence*. At the time of writing, the project has not launched, and it is unclear whether this platform will offer anything other than a convenient way for its owners to monetize their content.

fringe of social media where 'autistic teenagers' LARP at 'nonsensical ideologies'[50] that blend fascism, communism, and anarchism (with the seemingly random compounds of 'monarcho-syndicalism' and 'goth-right' being some of the more baffling positions). Add to this some overt references to anarcho-primitivism, Nick Land, and Ted Kaczynski, plus Citarella's obsession with his physique that would put Bronze Age Pervert to shame, and you've long turned the friendly liberal curator into a political foe.[51]
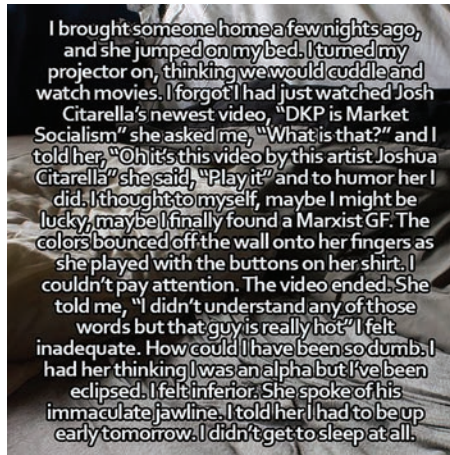
Fig. 5: A meme on Citarella posted by Citarella. Instagram/@joshuacitarella, February 2022.

This practice of ambiguity must be no less confusing for Citarella's Discord insiders than it is for the 'normie' art historian. Except that what he does is common online: pseudonymous followers float in and out of Telegram group chats, watch Twitch streams while eating pizza, and shitpost according to their own schedule. Citarella, like any content creator, needs in equal measure to impress his audiences and pander to them. To keep their attention, he LARPs at constantly being close to getting shadow-banned or de-platformed,[52] all in the manner of an expert edgelord.

In his practice manifesto summarized in a Guardian op-ed 'influencers are not [political] organizers yet, but they might soon be',[53] Citarella proposes that the audience of American Gen-Z teens, the demographic most strongly represented among his followers, is highly

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50 The single-page wiki entry defining Politigram could have been created by Citarella. "Politigram," Politigram Wiki, September 1, 2020, http://politigram.wikidot.com/wiki:politigram.

51 Citarella hasn't quite given up on mainstream institutional validation. The launch of a print edition of his *Do Not Research* blog platform in June 2022 took place at New York's New Museum.

52 Citarella was suspended from Twitch in June 2022, for showing nudity… in a Renaissance painting that was part of John Berger's 1970s TV series "Ways of Seeing", which Citarella streamed.

53 Joshua Citarella, "Are We Ready for Social Media Influencers Shaping Politics?," *The Guardian*, April 24, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/24/social-media-influencers-shaping-politics.

susceptible to political capture: the internet is where kids get radicalized, right? These Zoomers are now just as likely to take their political education in the online mainstream of YouTube and Twitch as their elders did in the lawless 4chan forums because big tech platforms have since captured the political fringes wholesale. Also, 'When Guys Turn 20', as the title of Citarella's recent video series suggests, their allegiances are just as confused and their minds as open to new ideas as they were for the bumper car-racing Taliban recruits in Afghanistan. Who determines which ride in Disneyland they will queue up for?

Here, Citarella proposes, is the left artist's opportunity to make their mark: rather than watch the depressed, lonely, incel-in-the-making teen slide down the radicalization funnel (Fig. 6) towards the alt-right, why not lead them from the nihilistic void to early Nick Land[54] and Gilles Deleuze, and eventually Mark Fisher? To do this, the artist must adopt the ever-changing language of the shit poster and go hard on irony. There's no telling if what Citarella is suggesting is a LARP and whether he is prepared to take the responsibility for his audience's ability to evaluate aesthetic clues that may stand in for socialism or fascism with equal credibility. But does any artist, ever?
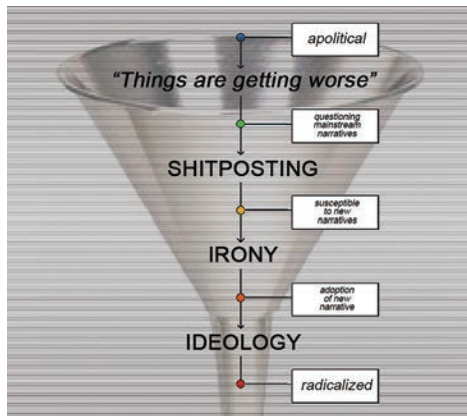
Fig. 6: The radicalization funnel. A meme posted by Citarella. Instagram/@joshuacitarella, November 2020.

Perhaps the best political memes are born precisely out of such an art-life practice because they imitate the ambivalence, nonchalance, and desperation felt by every other Zoomer online. The artist-influencer need not offer more than the odd counterpoint, but to increase his chances of success, Citarella has developed some strategies for infiltrating online communities.

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54   Land holds a peculiar status in communities like Citarella's: he is known for being a heavy influence on the neoreactinary movement, but his early alignment with the left means that references to him can be ambiguous.

His edutainment video *The Slow Red Pill,* made for DIS, analyzes the process of quiet escalation by which innocuous conservative meme accounts can be used to introduce extremist content to unsuspecting audiences: win their trust, hit them hard, retreat, repeat.[55]

If this technique works for the right, why shouldn't the left try it? In his essay *How to Plant a Meme,* Citarella describes his experiments in infiltrating right-wing groups and seeding them with pointers to resources that could, in principle, drag their members towards the left. The process involves building rapport with radical-right communities and becoming 'embedded [...] in the culture and demonstrat[ing] a deep knowledge of its codes'.[56] This is a cost that many artists on the left will find exorbitant, particularly since the process requires aesthetic investment without recognition ('influence comes from anonymity') and involves abdication of control ('you're not even really planting an idea, you're nurturing an existing one').

There is no way of knowing if Citarella and his followers are indeed steering others from Nick Fuentes to Hasan Piker[57] or merely nodding at the possibility. Between expressions of anonymous angst and ennui, the *Do Not Research* Discord chatrooms are filled with references to Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, as though this book represented the pinnacle of political thought.[58] Reading lists with the likes of Villem Flusser, Metahaven, Suhail Malik, and Benjamin Bratton circulate.[59] Presumably, someone is getting an education.

But can *any* art practice substantiate its claims of political impact? Given the amount of attention, research, and funding expended on traditional forms of art activism,[60] Citarella's project is refreshingly DIY and aspects of it bear an uncanny resemblance to the Afghan war theater. And that 'war theater' is not the same as the 'theater of war': one of the features of this performance is the relegation of combat to other disciplines.[61] In August 2021, the Taliban did not need to shed blood because they knew that the mere notion of combat—the ice-cream LARP—would likely yield the same outcome. Memes, whether the Taliban's or Citarella's, can transact power at arm's length.

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55   Joshua Citarella and Jocob Hurwitz-Goodman, *The Slow Red Pill*, 2022, video, 4'43", 2022, https://dis.art/the-slow-red-pill.

56   Joshua Citarella, "How To Plant A Meme," *Do Not Research* (blog), April 11, 2022, https://donotresearch.net/posts/how-to-plant-a-meme.

57   Joshua Citarella, *Radical Content*, 2021, https://www.patreon.com/posts/radical-content-46548075.

58   This interest in Fisher gave rise to the group's conflict with Mike Watson who was a one-time party to Citarella's activities. A member of the *Do Not Research* community self-published a book bearing the same title as Watson's, releasing it on Amazon days before the latter. Academic Fraud, *The Memeing of Mark Fisher*, 2021, https://www.amazon.co.uk/Memeing-Mark-Fisher-Academic-Fraud/dp/B09FS2TZ2T/ref=sr_1_1?crid=37BSER0XSI2DA.

59   Citarella, Joshua, "[Do Not Research] Super Secret Syllabus v.2022 — Spring," 2022.

60   See, for example, "The Center for Artistic Activism," accessed June 7, 2022, https://c4aa.org/.

61   Chayes, "Afghanistan."

On the Political Compass

Closer to home, Citarella boasts of having turned some of his followers into IRL political activists for the left.[62] Within the context of the liberal mainstream's delusional belief that a youth progressive politics will spontaneously bring about salvation (any generation now!),[63] acknowledging that the bulk of the teens online may identify with the post-left (but not necessarily the post-right) seems a significant first step towards mobilizing political actors of the future. If right-wing radicalization is an infrastructurally-conditioned network effect,[64] then the left should welcome any attempts to renew its own frayed grassroots structures, too. Granted, we may never find out if Citarella is motivated more by the cult of personality that he has built around himself than by the prospect of political change, but the mainstream art world is no better. It may be that Citarella simply knows his audience better, both parasocially and algorithmically, than the museum does, and that his mixture of participation and politicization lands better. Or perhaps, he simply serves a non-political social function that Web 2.5 platforms service better than the 20th century institution could. In a recent Twitch stream, he quipped that in 'all this time [the community] spent researching pedophilia rings and the deep state', the things that mattered most were 'the friends [they] made along the way.'[65]

None of Citarella's political success guarantees that the aesthetics at hand does not land them in undesired places. The exiled meme edgelord is never more than a Telegram chat away from non-ironic Holocaust denial or garden-variety misogyny. But, putting the final nail in the coffin of Benjamin's dictate, the only proof is in the practice, which Citarella describes as being mired in 'infinite slippages.'[66] The work of the revolution is no dinner party and there is a cost to every attitude. The left's rejection of the aesthetic potential for politics may make for more harmonious, internally consistent institutional discourses, but it also leaves the door open for political 'outlaws' to take over what the institutions purport to hold: art. And the usurpers' views may prove to be one shock too many for the liberal bubbles. The ambiguity, in the end, gets the artist, too.

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62   d'Alancaisez, "Politigram & the Post-Left, Interview with Joshua Citarella."
63   David Swift, *The Identity Myth: Why We Need to Embrace Our Differences to Beat Inequality* (London: Constable, 2022), chap. 10.
64   Keller Easterling, for example, suggests that the radicalization of the teenage girls from London's Bethnal Green to ISIS was structurally determined. Keller Easterling, *Medium Design: Knowing How to Work on the World* (London: Verso Books, 2020), chap. 4.
65   Joshua Citarella, "Monday Night Memes," Twitch, May 30, 2022, https://www.twitch.tv/videos/1313572538.
66   d'Alancaisez, "Politigram & the Post-Left, Interview with Joshua Citarella."

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SEMIOTICS OF CARE AND VIOLENCE: MEMETIZATION AND NECROPOLITICS DURING THE BRAZILIAN 2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE ACTION #MARIELLEMULTIPLICA

ISABEL LÖFGREN

In Brazil, memes and forms of *memetic communication* have become a second language, opening up new forms of expression, action and organization. These stem from increasingly polarized positions in society providing the opening for a process of endemic *memetization* of political discourse. For conservative groups, memes have also become a medium of political education and beyond that, images, memes and memetic gestures on social media have become the site of political tensions. For example, scholars Viviane Borelli and Herivelto Regiani, in studying the circulation of memes from Evangelic groups in Brazil, examined the 'discursive aspects involved in the production and reproduction of memes which are re-signified through operations that involve de-framing and reframing and that trigger interdiscursivity.' [1]

When plunged into ideological battlegrounds such as that between progressives (left) and conservatives (far-right) in Brazil's 2018 elections that led Jair Bolsonaro to power, we see evidence of very different ways that memetization—the act of turning texts and events into memes and memetic devices through imitation, iteration, and replication—enacts this interdiscursive battle. Memetization produces political tools for mobilizing voters such that memes become pivotal characters in the ideologies and narratives each side is promoting. In the polarized landscape of the 2018 elections, both conservatives and progressives leveraged user-generated content, actions, and protests within an overall process of *memetization* of communication. This showed not only a shift in political communication by the candidates themselves, but also how grassroots mobilizations and activists used a wide repertoire of tactical media.[2] These actions were performed via an interplay of social media and multi-scalar protest actions and political rallies. When taken together, these reconfigured the relationship between the streets and the internet.

This interplay also involves the notion of circulation as formulated by Antônio Fausto Neto, who argues that circulation should not be seen as a point of traffic, but rather as a place for the constitution of multiple meanings and for the complexification and reconfiguration of interactional processes.[3] More importantly, according to Gisele Beiguelman this process of

1   Viviane Borelli and Herivelto Regiani, "Memetizing and Mediatizing: Memes as an Evangelical Discursive Strategy," *Journal for Communication Studie*s 10, no. 2 (2017): 9-31.
2   Alessandra Renzi, "The Space of Tactical Media," in *Tactics in Hard Times: Practices and Spaces of New Media*, ed. Megan Boler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 71-100.
3   Antônio Fausto Neto, "Circulação: Trajetos Conceituais," *Rizoma* 6, no. 1 (2018): 8-40.

circulation of images occurs not as part of histories of appropriation typical of art historical lineages of memes, nor of remix cultures more typical of electronic culture historiography or data aesthetics in new media art discourses. For Beiguelman, 'the focus here is images that jump from one medium to another, from TV to social media interfaces (...) moving from screen to screen, converting to multiple derivations which imply a break with current systems of representation and their mechanisms of symbolic organization'.[4]

On the progressive side one can find activist approaches by 'autonomous zones of resistance',[5] such as artistic and design collectives, alternative media outlets and multi-partisan provisional citizen constellations such as the #elenão and #MarielleMultiplica movements and Instagram profiles @coleraalegria and @designativista. Their practices of creative cultural resistance[6] are built on processes of transparency, collectivity, polyvocal communication, and strong parity between online and offline tactical media advocating for social justice against Bolsonaro's necropolitics. On the Bolsonaro side are semi-autonomous (human and non-human) digital meme cultures operating through *meta-mimesis*.[7] That is, these cultures create texts that imitate other texts in a sort of what Achille Mbembe calls *spiral transgression* — 'an oblique and iterative rather than frontal tactic aimed at destabilising existing positions and well-rehearsed moves (. . .), as that difference that disorients the very idea of the limit'.[8] In this process of meta-mimesis, Bolsonarist communicative strategies include tactics of *memetic disruption* via iteration and replication, where claims from the left are imitated, inverted, de-framed, and reframed to banalize, downplay, and ultimately erase their opponents' claims for social justice. These two widely different approaches recall Walter Benjamin's meditation on whether radical culture could exist in contested political scenarios:[9] we should ask ourselves not only what politics art (and in our case memes) represents, but the political conditions of its production, as well as its reproduction and circulation.[10]

As a form, memes appear particularly well-suited to take on controversial issues or polarizing claims by exaggerating them or turning them into entertaining 'discursive fragments',[11] taking advantage of their popularity among young internet users in several social media and meme

4   Giselle Beiguelman, *Políticas da Imagem: Vigilância e Resistência na Dadosfera* (Ubu, 2021).

5   Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z. the Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Autonomedia: New Autonomy Series, 1991).

6   Stephen Duncombe, "Artistic Activism and Cultural Resistance: An interview with Stephen Duncombe," *p-art-icipate – Kultur Aktiv Gestalten* 2, no. 1 (2013), https://www.p-art-icipate.net/artistic-activism-and-cultural-resistance-an-interview-with-stephen-duncombe/?view-all=1.

7   Roman Horbyk, Isabel Löfgren, Cheryl Soriano, and Yana Prymashenko, "Fake News as Meta-mimesis: Imitative Genres and Storytelling in the Philippines, Brazil, Russia and Ukraine," *The Journal of the Aesthetics of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture* 8 (2021): 30-54.

8   Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

9   Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer (1934)," in *The Cultural Resistance Reader,* ed. Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso Books, 2002), 67-81.

10 Fausto Neto, "Circulação: Trajetos Conceituais."

11 J. L. Braga, "Circuitos de Comunicação," in *Matrizes Internacionais: A Comunicação Constrói a Sociedade*, ed. Luiz Custodio da Silva (Campina Grande: Eduepb, 2017), 43-64.

generating platforms. When we look specifically at the narrower genre of 'humorous' memes from Bolsonaro supporters, we often see memes promoting violence 'for laughs': for instance, making fun of city councilor Marielle Franco's political assassination as a strategy for promoting and reinforcing Bolsonaro's violent discourse—a discourse that has been normalized and sanctioned by large portions Brazilian society even after the electoral period.

Memeing Necropolitics

One of the main characteristics of Bolsonaro and his political allies' electoral campaigns in 2018 was how they actively promoted a necropolitical discourse[12] to win conservative supporters through overtly racist, misogynistic, homo/transphobic, anti-human-rights statements—reactions ranged from cheerful approval from his supporters to complete outrage from his opponents. According to Achille Mbembe, necropolitics is the sovereignty that resides in the power to 'dictate who may live and who may die', and the 'material destruction of bodies and populations' in a politics of 'selective elimination' or negation of bodies that the state machinery considers resistant or redundant to its workings and policies.[13] By working with this concept from political philosophy in a communicative context, we see discourses that re-emphasize the promotion of erasure, dispossession, and death, and their integral function in political realities.

In Brazil, it can be argued that necropolitics has been a continuous political reality, especially from the perspective of racialized populations, since colonial times. However, in the 2018 elections Bolsonaro's 'necropolitical turn' not only mirrored Brazil's long history of Black and indigenous genocide, but also venerated practices of torture and institutional violence from the military dictatorship by re-articulating these practices against contemporary identity politics such as feminist, LGBTQIA+, human rights, and anti-racist social movements. There have been numerous articles about how Bolsonaro has used militaristic-nationalistic rhetoric as part of a 'hybrid war' to fully implement a death-glorifying state of systemic violence in which this necropolitics gained full expression in a communicative 'war of maneuver', to put it in Gramscian terms. This is best illustrated by tracing the circulation of a specific artefact which became a pivotal memetic device—a street sign created as part of mobilizations demanding justice for the political assassination of city councilor Marielle Franco. Studying this artifact demonstrates how the phenomenon of memetization, a hallmark of digital culture in the 2010s, functioned across necropolitical and anti-necropolitical discourses during the 2018 elections.

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12   M.Â.D. Wermuth, Laura Mallman Marcht, and Leticia de Mello, "Necropolítica: racismo e políticas de morte no Brasil contemporâneo / Necropolitics: Racism and Death Politics in Contemporary Brazil," *Revista de Direito da Cidade* 12, no. 2 (2020): 1053-1083.

13   Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

An Unsolved Murder

The unsolved political assassination of leftist Rio de Janeiro city councilor Marielle Franco and her driver Anderson Gomes, ambushed by armed militia[14] on March 14th, 2018, is one of the most significant events of 2018[15] in Brazil that precipitated a *memetic* battle between conservatives and progressives. Marielle Franco has been touted by conservatives as the symbol of everything that was unwanted by their rising hegemony: an educated, democratically elected, Black, LGBTQIA+ woman from the *favelas* who was not afraid to denounce the effects of mass killings and ongoing human rights violations in poor areas of Rio de Janeiro controlled by paramilitary groups with strong links to the Bolsonaro family. In her short political life, Franco was able to connect feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements with the devastating effects of militarization and police action in *favelas*, deploying a decolonial feminist understanding of violence, class and gender inequality produced in a state of 'colonial difference.'[16] But, to the surprise of her conservative political opponents, in her afterlife Franco became a martyr for all minorities who are victims of long-standing necropolitical practices of the Brazilian state, and an international symbol for anti-fascist resistance.[17]

Fig. 1: September 14th, 2014, Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro. Monica Benício, Marielle Franco's widow, raises the Marielle Franco-street sign during a memorial act.

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14   The militia in Rio de Janeiro is a well-established para-military group that controls territories in favelas and poor areas in the city and is strongly represented in local politics, the police force, and the judicial system. Jair Bolsonaro, his sons and far-right political allies are strongly connected to these groups, owing their political careers to the rise of the militias after the military dictatorship (1964-1985).

15   For a documentary about Marielle Franco and her murder, see "Marielle and Monica," Dir. Fábio Erdos (2018), 25'. This documentary was produced for The Guardian. Available at https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/digital-storytelling-contest/2019/marielle-and-monica.

16   María Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," *Hypatia —Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2016): 742-759.

17   Flávia P. Meireles, "A (Pós)Vida Politica de Marielle Franco," in *Diversidade Sexual, étnico-racial e de Gênero: Saberes Plurais e Resistências — Volume 01*. (X Cinabeh, 2020), 853-867.

On September 14, 2018, when the first round of the general elections was in full swing, a memorial action was held in downtown Rio de Janeiro to honor Franco's memory six months after her killing. During the event, a commemorative plaque in the form of a street sign 'Rua Marielle Franco'[18] was placed by her widow Monica Benício on top of an existing street sign in front of the City Council Chamber in Cinelândia square, downtown Rio de Janeiro. This symbolic gesture of Debordian *détournement,* combined with the Black Panther fist gesture held up high, was witnessed by thousands of her supporters wearing T-shirts saying 'Who killed Marielle Franco?' and holding up protest material decrying Bolsonaro's necropolitics. This received a lot of media attention in the press, as well as on social media. From this point on, the street sign circulated widely as a symbol of resistance and solidarity and would become a pivotal character in the 'interdiscursive battle' which I follow across several social media platforms (mainly Instagram and Twitter), meme generating sites, and meme repositories. Its appearance in both pro and anti-necropolitical discourses in the hashtags #MarielleMultiplica #MarielleVive and #MariellePeneira helps to unpack the process of *memetization* as an intrinsic feature of this interdiscursive battle of antagonistic narratives in politics-at-large.

Trophy Images

Fig. 2.1: The meme-video —October 2nd, 2018, Amorim (left) and Silveira (right) film themselves taking down the Marielle Franco-street sign. Note the 'thug life' dark glasses filter and Amorim's clenched fist as a Bolsonarist gesture.

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18   The original 'Rua Marielle Franco' street sign follows the exact design of street signs in Rio, where many streets are named after martyrs or important historical figures. The sign was created and installed by a lesbian activist and anarchist photographer working under the pseudonym Ana Archis, and became a symbol of resistance and disobedience, a cry of 'You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us'. It was meant to be used at the exact place of her killing in a location near downtown Rio, where the first memorial acts were held in her memory in late March 2018. It wasn't until this event on September 14th, 2018 where the street sign became ubiquitous in all actions regarding Marielle Franco and the struggles she represented. *Arquivo Compa*, https://www.arquivocompa.org/colecoes/placa-rua-marielle-franco/.

Fig. 2.2: The image-trophy —October 3rd, 2018, Silveira (left) and Amorim (right) tear up the sign in a political rally in Rio de Janeiro. Note the yellow and green colors of the Brazilian flag used to signify patriotism.

Two weeks after its placement, the street sign was removed by Marielle's political opponents Daniel Silveira and Rodrigo Amorim, two of Bolsonaro's political allies who were at that point running for state and federal office. Their act of removal was filmed in a 30-second video with Silveira's and Amorim's electoral campaign graphics and published on meme sites where dozens of *Bolsonarist* memes can be found. The video ends with both candidates holding the removed sign with the 'dark glasses' filter (which meme fans recognize as 'thug life' or 'deal with it') accusing thousands of Marielle's supporters of vandalism while promoting themselves as doing 'public good for the benefit of God and Brazil'.

The next day, Silveira and Amorim tore up the street sign in a political rally, exhibiting it as a war trophy in front of cheering crowds. Viral photographs of the two muscled white men wearing Bolsonaro T-shirts and holding the torn sign circulated widely in the press and quickly became symbolic of the progressive x conservative narrative. This 'trophy-image'[19] of tearing up the name of a Black woman in public recalls horrific scenes of public whipping of Black enslaved people in public squares during colonial times, images of which are deeply entrenched in the subconscious of former slave societies like Brazil. Seeing the torn sign for the first time felt as if they were killing Marielle Franco once again. The image crystallizes the narrative and semiotic battle between the progressive side that stands for a politics of care, justice and solidarity, and the conservative side that champions a politics of death and elimination of 'undesirables', using symbolic actions and their resulting images in a strategy of dispossession and dehumanization. In the article 'Necropolitical Screens', Marina Gržinić provides a chilling definition of what trophy images become in what I call a process of de-humanizing memetization:

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19   Marina Gržinić, "Necropolitical Screens: Digital Image, Propriety, Racialization," *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (2021): 98-106.

What is then the emblematic image of the digital necrocapitalist mode of
production? (…) I argue that the emblematic image of the time we live in is the
trophy image. It implies that the historical formats of global capitalism ground
their regime of affect, vision, and perception not in the space-time paradigm
but in the violent and direct modes of governmentality and dispossession.[20]

Trophy images such as the one in Fig. 2 are made in, this case, with a trophy body.
In the same article, Gržinić uses Perera's definition of trophy bodies, which I find
pertinent to cite in full:

According to Perera,[21] trophy bodies are characterized by their condition of
being seized, caught, captured, affixed, and immobilized within the violent
regimes of visibility and power. As they are crafted within an order of bodies 'as
political flesh and affect,' trophy bodies are the product of complex economies
(visual, discursive, aesthetic, and scientific) that situate them as a specific
genre among an exemplary brand of the nonhuman.[22]
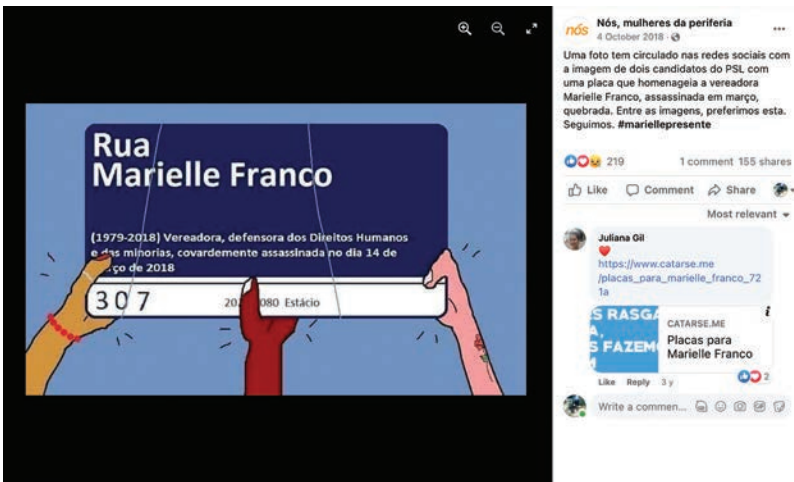
*Fig. 3: October 4th, 2018 - A Black women's collective Nós, Mulheres da Periferia [We, Women
from the Periphery] posts a counter-meme on Facebook. The post reads 'A photo has been
circulating of two PSL candidates with a street sign in honor of city councilor Marielle Franco,
broken. Of all images, we prefer this one. We continue. #mariellepresente'. Note the comment
on the post with a link for the crowdfunding for printing and distributing 'Signs for Marielle'.
Author's translation.*

20   Gržinić, "Necropolitical Screens," 104.
21   See also Suvendrini Perera, "Dead Exposures: Trophy Bodies and Violent Visibilities of the
     Nonhuman," *Borderlands* 13, no. 1 (2014): 1-26.
22   Gržinić, "Necropolitical Screens," 105.

#MarielleMultiplica

Turning Marielle Franco into a trophy body via that memetic display of dehumanization did not remain uncontested. In an immediate response to the torn sign, the satirical left-wing online newspaper *Sensacionalista* decided to crowdfund the production of one hundred 'Rua Marielle Franco' street signs like the one that was torn down to be distributed in a 'flash mob' memorial act in Cinelândia square on October 14th, 2018, seven months after Marielle's death. An Instagram post by a feminist grassroots movement (Fig. 3) reads 'they tear up one, we create one hundred'. The initial crowdfunding exceeded this modest number, and with the help of digital art platform *Revista Caju*[23] and independent printer Sidnei Balbino[24] more than three thousand signs were distributed by volunteers in a direct action that came to be known as #MarielleMultiplica, or 'Multiplying Marielle'.[25] Thousands of supporters showed up to express their grief and rage against Bolsonaro's necropolitical discourse, hoping to mobilize voters for the opposing candidate while continuing to demand justice for the murder.

On the day of the action, *Sensacionalista* posted guidelines for the action, such as not flaunting the sign in public transportation on the way to the demonstration site and offering onsite pro-bono legal support for protesters in the case of violent reactions from Bolsonaro supporters. During the rally, thousands of people held up the Marielle Franco-street sign simultaneously, creating a spectacular landscape of blue signs that instantly flooded social media and hit the pages of many national and international newspapers.[26] Hundreds of people and celebrities such as musical icons Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque, who were also targets of Bolsonaro's 'cultural war', posted pictures of themselves on Instagram holding the sign under the hashtags #MarielleMultiplica, #MarielleVive (Marielle keeps on living) and #MariellePresente (Marielle is present). Soon enough, even Bolsonaro's opponent Fernando Haddad and other politicians from the Worker's Party (PT) appropriated the sign as one of the symbols of their campaign.

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23   See https://revistacaju.com.br/.
24   See Balbino's Instagram profile https://www.instagram.com/sbalbino/.
25   I have previously written shorter accounts of these actions. See Löfgren, Isabel. "On the #MarielleMultiplica Action in Brazil," Institute of Network Cultures Blog, November 20, 2018. Last accessed 4 July 2021, https://networkcultures.org/blog/2018/11/20/update-on-the-mariellemultiplica-movement-in-brazil/; and Löfgren, Isabel. "Fragments of an Ongoing Nightmare - Written from an Autonomous Zone of Resistance in a State of Perplexity," *Paletten* 231, no. 1 (2019): 23-39.
26   See "Manifestantes distribuem placas em homenagem a Marielle no centro do Rio," O Estado de S. Paulo, October 14, 2018, https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,manifestantes-distribuem-placas-em-homenagem-a-marielle-no-centro-do-rio,70002547150.

Fig. 4: Top Row: Post by revista Caju asking for people to tag their pictures #marielleMultiplica on images of the street sign everywhere signed 'love is power'; Press image of the #MarielleMultiplica action on Sensacionalista's Facebook page; Instagram posts with #MarielleMultiplica Celebrity endorsements. Bottom row: Website ruamariellefranco.com.br and a post by a Brazilian abroad showing the sign we hung outside the Brazilian embassy in Stockholm on October 29th, 2018.

In the days that followed, requests for thousands of street signs came from many cities in Brazil—as well as internationally by emerging anti-Bolsonaro movements organized by Brazilians living abroad—flooded Balbino's inbox, wishing to be part of simultaneous demonstrations around the world. I was one of them. Through a link to a public folder with downloadable files provided by Balbino himself, my friends and I in Stockholm proceeded to print the plaque, create public demonstrations, and make impromptu shrines in front of Brazilian embassies on election day. We both wanted to keep the memory of Marielle Franco alive by *memetizing* this action (imitating the gesture of holding the sign, making our own iterations and replicating the content) as much as possible and try to turn votes against Bolsonaro at the last minute. At the same time, the ruamariellefranco.com website was set up by volunteers[27] in the spirit of *copyleft* to facilitate downloads, posts, and mapping the action across the world.

At this point, Franco, who was largely unknown to most people outside of Rio de Janeiro, quickly became an international anti-Bolsonaro symbol of care, justice, and intersectional

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27   The footer on the website reads: 'The website Rua Marielle Franco is an initiative of *Chama Agência-Rede*, in honor of Mari. Maintained by the *Marielle Franco Institute*. We keep asking: who ordered the murder of Marielle Franco? We believe it is important to spread and preserve Mari's memory as a way of seeking justice and continuing her struggle. Access the *Florescer por Marielle* platform and learn about more tributes and ways to act.'

solidary,[28] which helped to consolidate many previously loosely organized groups with a common agenda. Marielle street signs pop up in virtually every anti-Bolsonaro demonstration to this day.
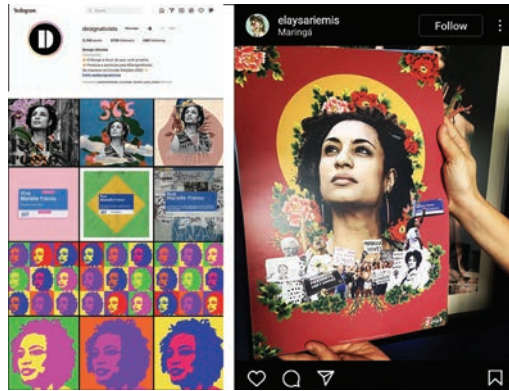
Fig. 5: Left: @Designativista — images of the Instagram feed containing Marielle's effigy repeated in several illustrations and graphics, as well as illustrations where it is possible to see a cutout of Monica Benício and a Marielle Franco-street sign. Right: Banner by @coleralegria with Marielle's effigy and 'Stop killing Black Lives'. Source: Instagram.

All throughout the election, #MarielleMultiplica signs were one of several examples of visual activism and creative cultural resistance which took over our lives on social media and on the streets. Besides the street sign, countless illustrations of Marielle Franco's effigy were posted on the Instagram profile @designativista, started by a newly formed collective of graphic designers who decided to use their talent and resources to help with the political mobilization effort. Marielle Franco, possessing a stately appearance and distinct visual style, was established as a pop cultural icon whose image was imitated, iterated, and replicated in hundreds of graphic variations. These include illustrations, graphics, poster art, and memes created to be shared, reposted, remixed and Insta-storied all throughout the election, and which keep reappearing on every anniversary of her death ever since.

Other temporary social aggregations such as the visual activists @coleraalegria were part of a mosaic of grassroots mobilizations that produced protest textile banners collectively through workshops, dialogues, and debates, incorporating images and messages about Marielle Franco and other persons executed by the State, militias, and the police. Seen

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28 For a more detailed account of the naming and renaming of public spaces as 'Marielle Franco Street', see Franca, J.P., "Rua Marielle Franco: Lutas e Simbolismo Acerca do ato de Nomeação e Renomeação de Espaços Públicos." Paper presented at *ANPUH Brazil —30º Simpósio Nacional de História*, Recife, Jul 17, 2019. https://www.snh2019.anpuh.org/resources/anais/8/1565146705_ ARQUIVO_Artigo_JoaoPauloFranca_TerceiraVersao.pdf.

together, these movements can be said to be part of *collective* as well as *connective* actions.[29] Despite the different forms of production and circulation of all these initiatives, they shared a memetic quality in their outputs where images, icons, graphics, and words re-emerged repeatedly as imitative iterations of the same messages in protection of those lives who were already in Bolsonaro and his supporters' line of (rhetorical) fire.

Post-Election

Fig. 6: Carnivalesque inversions: Carnival goers create new variations of Marielle Street signs, one with the lyrics of the winning samba school of the year with Marielle as a theme (top image), and tearing up a sign with the name of Rio de Janeiro's governor, a Bolsonaro ally who was also present on stage at the rally where the sign was torn up.

In the post-electoral period, the Marielle Franco street-sign has resurfaced again and again. In the carnival of 2019 right after the presidential elections, Marielle Franco was the theme of the winner of the year's carnival parade, and her effigy was printed large on flags and dancers in Brazil's main cultural event. On the street, carnival goers embraced the symbol of the street sign, engaging in memetic disruption by displaying a torn sign with the state governor's name, who was also present at the infamous rally. One of Brazil's most famous conceptual artists, Cildo Meirelles, stamped the words 'Who killed Marielle Franco?'[30] on bank notes to put them back into circulation, a media intervention he had already done with the name of journalists killed by the military dictatorship decades before, thus making a chilling connection between the necropolitics of today and yesterday. As illustrated in Fig. 6, Meirelles' intervention comes from another regime of artivism in which the relationship between art, media, and politics during the military dictatorship in the 1970s included the politicization of media via artistic interventions. In the late 2010s and early 2020s, we see

29   Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).
30   After Marielle Franco's assassins had been identified and jailed (one of them was actually killed
      by the militias before his capture by the police), this phrase has now been transformed into 'Who
      ordered the killing of Marielle Franco?'. Investigations for finding those who mandated the killing has
      been stopped and the political crime is yet unsolved.

another vector: politics gains an aesthetic dimension via media, and images themselves become the site of political tensions and disputed territories.[31] Marielle Franco's street sign traverses these two regimes, and even becomes a memetic piece of site-specific art. Congresswomen have placed Marielle Franco-street signs in front of their offices in Brasília, they have been scattered in urban and rural areas, they pop up as decorations in private spaces, as murals in countless street corners, and in impromptu shrines. Abroad, a park in Paris and a street in Berlin[32] are renamed after Marielle, making her one of the few Brazilian politicians ever to be publicly recognized outside of Brazil in this manner.[33] But on the home front, murals and graffiti with Marielle's effigy and street signs keep getting vandalized and defaced, with posts of their vandalization being shown by supporters from both sides: one decrying it as a necropolitical act, the other further entrenching necropolitical narratives of revenge and dispossession.

Fig. 7: Post by the alternative media outlet Jornalistas Livres, days after Marielle Franco's assassination in March 2018. The post reads 'In the years of censorship [in the military dictatorship 1964-1985], fear and silence ensued after the AI-5 [a constitutional act that repealed freedom of press and freedom of expression in 1968], Cildo Meirelles became known for his work stamping bank notes with the explicit anonymous message 'Who killed Herzog' (journalist Vladimir Herzog was a martyr during the military dictatorship [captured and tortured by the military in 1972]), Meirelles showed his vision of art as a medium for the democratization of information and society. In his works of the period, Meirelles usually wrote 'the reproduction of this piece is free and open to anyone', emphasizing the problematic aspects of private authorship, market-driven and elitization of art.'

31   Beiguelman, "*Políticas da Imagem.*"
32   Parc Marielle-Franco was inaugurated in September 2019 in the 10th arrondissement in Paris, and Marielle-Franco Strasse was inaugurated in late 2019 in Neukölln in Berlin. Countless other symbolic renaming of subway stations, parks and streets appear around the world especially in 2019, mostly orchestrated by collectives and resistance groups of Brazilians abroad. See Arquivo Compa and França, 2019.
33   The Marielle Franco Institute, initiated by her family members, has since created a network of collectives, groups and activists and strengthens the 'Marielle Agenda' which supports political candidacies by Black and minority women to increasingly occupy political spaces and continue Marielle's legacy. See www.institutomariellefranco.com.

Retaliations

Fig. 8: Memes by Bolsonaro supporters, with the street sign and image of the pothole street as a metaphor for her assassination with several gunshots on her ambushed car in Rio de Janeiro on March 14th, 2018.

As a response to the #MarielleMultiplica action and to Marielle Franco's worldwide fame, Bolsonaro supporters circulated countless memes of Marielle Franco's effigy studded with gun shots using the metaphor of the 'sieve' (#MariellePeneira) to signify her body and her car studded with gunshots. In one of these purposely crude memes is a low-res image of a street full of potholes with the 'Rua Marielle Franco' sign clumsily pasted on top of it. It resituates the street sign at the crime scene, as if gunning her down again and again. The pothole can also be synonymous with a grave, or several graves, of all those buried at the hands of state-commissioned and state-sanctioned violence, with the complicity of passive onlookers who guarantee impunity for the culprits and, like the crowds watching the sign being torn up, cheer the violence on. Other memes used well-known meme genres such as the 'three-part dialogue' to further ridicule and dispossess Marielle Franco's image within the logic of the necrocapitalistic meme economy. Examples include a remixed Marielle effigy pasted on top of a shop that sells sieves; the most common instances use image-macros that act as discursive fragments in the overall discourse of memetization.

Fig. 9: Meme found on the Brazilian meme generating website www.gerarmemes.com.br — It reads 'Several people are murdered every day and no one says anything. Stop annoying us with the nagging Marielle. She will not rise from the dead.'

Against the *#MarielleVive* ('Marielle keeps on living') hashtag which is commonly used to signify keeping her memory alive, *#MarielleViveEnchendooSaco* (#Marielle keeps annoying us) was used in several memes as a way of saying that her death was a nag and overplayed in the media. In the most semiotically loaded meme in this series, we see a white middle-aged woman wearing a *#MarielleViveEnchendooSaco* T-shirt overlaid with the 'thug life' dark glasses filter, alongside a text containing several anti-culture, racist, and pro-torture texts. This condenses the most radical messages of necropolitics seen in pro-Bolsonaro media in a single image. Other memes argue that leftist supporters profited from a dead Black woman's body for propaganda, or banalize Marielle's death as a 'common death' like the hundreds of Black persons daily killed by police violence. The list of memetic dispossession and dehumanization goes on. While the Marielle Franco mobilizations used memetic actions as symbols of her martyrdom and claims for justice against impunity for the assassination of Black and HBTQIA+ lives, the memetic inversions, disruptions, and meta-mimetic texts of the far-right became a medium of revenge against the left at the expense of Marielle Franco as a disposable, not grievable,[34] body. Regardless of the controversy surrounding the symbolic street sign, Marielle Franco Street was finally made official in downtown Rio de Janeiro in 2021: a sign that Silveira and Amorim cannot tear down as easily.

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34   Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso Books, 2010).

Fig. 10.1: Daniel Silveira and Rodrigo Amorim posing with the framed fragment of the Marielle Franco-street sign they tore up in public in 2018, celebrating Silveira's release from prison in April 2022. @ rodrigoamorim.

Fig. 10.2: Silveira supporters paste a plaque on the official Marielle Franco-street sign in Cinelândia, downtown Rio. The sign reads: 'Federal Deputy Daniel Silveira (1982) — Heterosexual white man, police officer, and human rights defender. Unfairly sent to jail on February 16th [2021] for defending our liberties.'

Nonetheless, Silveira and Amorim, now known as 'the guys who tore up the street sign', never left the interdiscursive battle. Elected with a record-high number of votes as a state deputy for Rio de Janeiro, Amorim still appears in press images and tweets with half of the Marielle Franco-street sign 'trophy-image' framed on his office wall hanging between portraits of Bolsonaro and machine guns. In 2021, Silveira—the most truculent of the two—was accused of corruption and breach of order for making anti-democratic claims against members of the Brazilian Supreme Court on social media. During his trial, Silveira's supporters pasted a street sign with his name on top of Marielle Franco's official street sign, demanding justice for his imprisonment and perversely mimicking Benício's symbolic memorial gesture years before. Silveira was later seen in countless photographs at an infamous Independence Day rally on September 7th, 2021, holding up his own street sign in a gesture of victory and hashtagged #somostodosdanielsilveira (#wearealldanielsilveira, an appropriation of the *#je suis* memes). A few supporters were visible, appropriating the memetic gesture of holding up the sign with flexed biceps, but this effort did not manage to replicate the thousands of signs of #MarielleMultiplica years before. Sadly, an anti-Bolsonaro activist infiltrated the crowd holding up the Marielle Franco-street sign and was beat up by Silveira's supporters. Here, this memetic action embodies the real violent effects of this semiotic battle of care versus violence, social justice and necropolitics. In this period, murals honoring Marielle Franco in several Brazilian cities were vandalized by Bolsonaro supporters, then cleaned up again, and vandalized again, and again.

Fig. 9: Marielle meme depicting tearing up Daniel Silveira's sign on Reddit. 'Daniel Silveira convicted. Elected after breaking the street sign of someone killed by the militia. Nothing like a day after the Other.' Note the word 'AI-5' referring to the institutional act of 1968 which prohibited freedom of expression and of the press in 1968. This is a signifier of the pro-torture and anti-freedom rhetorics of Bolsonaro supporters. The AI-5 legitimized the torture and killing of dozens of journalists, cultural workers and dissidents during the military dictatorship (1964-1985).

When Silveira was finally convicted in early 2022, hundreds of memes with an illustration of Marielle Franco tearing up Silveira's street sign flooded the feeds, showing yet another memetic inversion, de-framing, and reframing in the pervasive form of 'payback culture'. But when Bolsonaro signed an edict absolving Silveira, the memetization of the street sign continued with Congressmen protesting the President's decision by holding up Marielle Franco-street signs in plenary sessions. What happened to Amorim, the guy with the framed broken sign in his office? In July 2022 he was accused of transphobic crime and death threats against Benny Briolly, a Black trans city councilor who needed to flee the country to protect herself from sharing Marielle Franco's fate. Allegedly, the deputy insulted Briolly in a public plenary session in an enraged speech, which hopefully compromises his political chances in running for the next election.

Deputados da oposição protestam na tribuna com placa da Rua Marielle Franco

Fig. 12: Leftist politicians protest Daniel Silveira's pardon by holding up Marielle Franco street signs. May 2022. Photo: Gustavo Bezerra.

Fig. 13: Benny Briolli, a Black trans city councilor from the city of Niterói, next to Rio de Janeiro, holds the Marielle Franco-street sign with the Black Panther gesture. The post reads 'First trans city councilor of Niterói, Benny Briolli, leaves the country after death threats.' Instagram, May 13, 2022.

Making Sense of Memetization

A few patterns emerge out of this interdiscursive battle for and against necropolitics, visible in the contested memory of a Black lesbian feminist leftist politician through the pivotal memetic object of the street sign. These patterns include dynamics of quality, transparency, authorship, and aspects of a 'frontstage' and 'backstage'[35] which corroborate both the progressive and the conservative narratives. While the graphics in #MarielleMultiplica and @designativista present a high artistic standard with high-resolution graphics, Bolsonarist memes often have a crude 'deep-fried' style which mostly used ready-made meme templates from sites such as makeyourmeme.com, imgflip.com, gerarmemes.com.br, and others. In terms of production, while the progressives tend to create original graphics and artworks such as the street sign itself and the @designativista graphic design pieces, the extreme-right uses automated technical protocols and readymade templates of rapid production within well-established and easily recognizable meme genres, well-suited for high-speed retaliations. These are optimal for messages that promote more shock value and violence 'for laughs', disguising this violence as humorous memes. This contributes to online radicalization into far-right extremism, as already detected in several national contexts.[36]

Bolsonarist authors are concealed by proxy names which obscure any evidence of a human backstage in the production of the memes. By using pre-fabricated meme generating protocols, a kind of digital equivalent of fast food, all we are allowed to see is the *frontstage*. This shows that the modus operandi of Bolsonaro supporters builds on a unified collective identity, opacity and remixing, the opposite of the originality, individuality, quality and transparency of the progressives. In fact, one of the derogatory denominations for *Bolsonaristas* by the left is the metaphor of 'gado' or 'cattle' which is represented in an entire category of memes that differentiate the 'ignorant far-right' from the 'critical left'. There is equally an over-production of memes of far-righters accusing the left of 'mimimi': a criticism of being oversensitive and pouting, especially regarding identity politics and the rhetoric of solidarity and care. In all of this, we see the triumph of the far-right's disdain for identity politics and their insistence on dismantling democratic institutions, opposite the left's efforts at self-defense from this conservative hegemony.

By contrast, in many progressive Instagram posts under the #MarielleVive and #MarielleMultiplica hashtags, one sees both backstage and frontstage images of Marielle's supporters. For example, posts by Sidnei Balbino, a collaborator in the #MarielleMultiplica action, depict him proudly showing the printed plaques in the print shop, with a clear identification of those who create the actions and those who participate in it, as in the

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35   Erwin Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
36   Tina Askanius and Nadine Keller, "Murder Fantasies in Memes: Fascist Aesthetics of Death Threats and the Banalization of White Supremacist Violence," *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (2021): 2522–2539.

memetic gestures of celebrity endorsements. I consider the transparency of the process expressed in this backstage visibility as an act of *strong vulnerability*, showing that care and non-violence is a strength of grassroots mobilizations.

This strength is inversely perceived as an Achilles heel by the extreme-right, and opportunistically subverted as a tactic in this 'hybrid war'. The extreme-right reacts by substituting messages of care with messages of violence, deploying clumsy metaphors and inside jokes or diminishing the importance of this political crime by erasure or dispossession, questioning Marielle's political reputation, and worse, re-enacting the crime scene as a metaphor for state-sanctioned violence. Perhaps one of the most gruesome memes occurred deep into the COVID-19 pandemic, where Marielle memes were created using the Ghanaian coffin bearers.[37] No analysis of memetization and necropolitics can be restricted to formal aspects, however, as this would itself be an act of depoliticization. As Beiguelman has suggested, the image should be seen as a memetic battlefield that reconfigures the relationship between the street and the internet. Such memes lay bare the extent of Brazil's necropolitical state, which has overseen more than 600,000 COVID deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fig. 14: Several anti-Marielle memes. Note the use of typical meme templates.

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37   David Nemer, "Brazilian Necropolitics: Not even the Ghanaian Coffin Bearers Will be Left to Dance."
      Medium, April 11, 2020, https://medium.com/@davidnemer/brazilian-necropolitics-not-even-the-
      coffin-men-will-be-left-to-dance-4c8f6cd1fc29.

After the 'Memetic Turn'

Before the 'memetic turn' that peaked in Brazil in 2018, electoral periods in Brazil and elsewhere were spectacular episodic events that relied on specific media genres. But after the 'memetic turn' electoral campaigning strategies continue long after elections are over. Actions such as #MarielleMultiplica—though initiated in the heat of the electoral campaign through grassroots mobilizations—have survived the electoral period. They have either been subsumed into more permanent movements and cultural expressions or evolved into bigger mobilizations that are already conceived with the phenomenon of *memetization* in mind. Nonetheless, memetic communicative elements keep returning even within a more permanent state of necropolitics during the Bolsonaro administration as a way of both enforcing the normalization of violence in media discourses and against their relentless destructive memetization.

The interdiscursive battles on the internet, as seen in the memetization of necropolitics through the Marielle Franco-street sign, allow us to understand the extent to which memetic communication is an intrinsic part of necropolitical discourse and plays a part in retrenching discourses of social justice. It also sheds light on how social media reconfigure the limits of representation and our conception of the 'human' in digital visual cultures that take advantage of meme sub-cultures. It is important to understand the power of mobilization generated by actions of creative cultural resistance like the #MarielleMultiplica action. But, equally, we must assess their fragility, efficacy, and whether they can resist efforts of depoliticization over time.

The street sign as a *memetic* device enables the extension of biological deaths into a productive symbolic 'after-life.'[38] It offers opportunities for mourning, affect, solidarity, identification, and mobilization in the light of longstanding histories of oppression, thus helping to form a digital *necroresistance*. However, such opportunities also need to be assessed not only as a symbolic gesture of catharsis, but also as an enabler of agency and change, despite the risk of depoliticizing the core issue.[39]

Such depoliticization can be observed, for instance, in the commercialization of the street sign in user-generated merchandise. The Marielle Franco-street sign is reproduced in countless objects on Amazon as a souvenir, which paradoxically contributes—despite its digital-capitalist form—to the continued visibility of the demands for justice. In a sense, such practices act as an extension of Marielle's martyrdom beyond the activist impulse that started the movement. Curiously, in apolitical commercialized settings 'activism' already appears as a product category. On one e-commerce site, pairs of flip flops printed with both pro and anti-Bolsonaro

38   Meireles, "A (Pós)Vida Politica de Marielle Franco".

39   T. J. Demos, "Between Rebel Creativity and Reification: For and Against Visual Activism," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 1 (2016): 85-102.

messages can be found. This further demonstrates the memetization of protest messages and political ideologies circulating in everyday life: why restrict oneself to only half of the buyers when businesses can profit from activist trends for everyone? The fact that one producer prints merchandise that satisfies all sides of the political spectrum may be good for business, but also points to an emptying out of these political messages, reifying all that can be memefied as image-trophies within a digital necroeconomy. We must ask, then: does hypermemetization still serve the cause?

Nevertheless, in Brazil's 2022 elections, the Marielle Franco-street sign will probably continue to be held up high as a symbol for democratic resistance. Four years after #MarielleMultiplica, the movement is now much more robust. Several Black trans politicians have been elected to different state constituencies, the left has had time to reorganize, and the Marielle Franco Institute is promoting the 'Agenda Marielle.' This supports 81 intersectional political candidacies for office in order to multiply Marielle Franco's legacy in a far-ranging political movement that is meant to change politics from the inside: not only speaking Marielle, but 'doing Marielle'.[40] Enabled by material struggle, but also the dynamics of memetization, a simple street sign from an anarchist artist enraged by a brutal political murder has, in fact, helped this movement forward.

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40   See Agenda Marielle, https://www.agendamarielle.com/.

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SUBVERSIVE MEMES TO THE RESCUE

'LET'S GO BABY FORKLIFT': FANDOM GOVERNANCE IN CHINA WITHIN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

JAMIE WONG (CRYSTAL LEE, VESPER KEYI LONG, DI WU & GRAHAM JONES)

When China began its massive mobilization against the novel coronavirus in January 2020, no one could have imagined that a little yellow forklift would come to embody the nation's hope. Nevertheless, by the end of the month, 'Let's go, Baby Forklift!' had become a collective rallying cry, as from their screens at home millions watched an army of construction workers erect emergency hospitals in Wuhan, the pandemic's epicenter.

Through a digital 'media event'[1] that transfixed a nation,[2] the collective efforts of an adoring public and the guiding hand of Chinese state social media transformed the little yellow forklift into a much more powerful kind of symbolic vehicle: a celebrity idol. This episode in late January and early February of 2020 follows a broader trend of 'fandom nationalism'[3] that recasts the relationship between the nation and its people in terms of celebrity worship between an idol and a fan. Building on this burgeoning scholarship on a cybernationalism that entails '[loving] your nation the way you love an idol',[4] our case study examines how the Chinese state harnesses the nascent political power of fandom nationalism by adopting innovative social media strategies.

Through what we term fandom governance—the molding and managing of citizens as fans—state social media capitalized on cuteness to engage Chinese internet users in online play, and official accounts strategically shifted the discourse around an unfolding crisis. In what follows, we recollect how, at a moment of national crisis with millions stuck at home in a lockdown, the state created a propagandistic display of its response on the pandemic, showing the public its construction of emergency hospitals in the Covid-19 epicenter of Wuhan via livestreams. In tracing how Chinese internet publics and state-run social media accounts interactively mobilized signs of cuteness during a national crisis, we offer an account of both the power of cuteness and the cuteness of power in contemporary Chinese society.

1   Heather Horst, Sarah Pink, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi (eds), *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practices* (London: Sage Publishing, 2016).
2   Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1.
3   Hailong Liu, *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
4   Hailong Liu, "Love Your Nation the Way You Love an Idol: New Media and the Emergence of Fandom Nationalism," in *Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of Diba Expedition in China*, ed. Hailong Liu (Routledge, 2019), 141.

How does the Chinese state conscript the gaze of its consumer-citizens through social media? By chronologizing how state social media steered the collective gaze of Chinese internet users and transformed their roles—from witnesses to supervisors to mothers that look after and provide care and, finally, to worshipful fans––we will look at how the state cultivates the tenor of online discourse beyond the blunt tool of censorship. Ultimately, this episode teaches us how the calculated introduction of framing scripts––in this case, in the form of fandom governance––can generate a controlled polyphony that ultimately retrenches state authority.

From Witnessing to Supervising

In January 2020, the Chinese city of Wuhan became internationally known as the epicenter of a novel coronavirus that we would come to know as 'Covid-19.' Domestically, rumors about the virus—and criticisms about the official response—circulated widely on Weibo, WeChat, and other social media platforms.[5] Wuhan residents posted videos showing the city's hospitals overwhelmed and ill-equipped to deal with the pandemic, provoking outrage about mismanagement within the Red Cross, a humanitarian organ of the Chinese state.[6] With reports of the first casualties and cases appearing in other provinces, the central government intervened to assert control over not only the flow of information[7] but also the visual narrative of the pandemic.

On January 23rd, the Chinese government placed nearly 50 million people in Hubei province under lockdown, creating what international observers heralded as 'the largest quarantine in human history'.[8] That same day, the government began constructing two emergency field hospitals in Wuhan: the 1000-bed Huoshenshan (火神山, Fire God Mountain) and 1600-bed Leishenshan (雷神山, Thunder God Mountain). In a stunning display of efficiency, they would be operational in just over a week.[9]

On January 27th, the internet video platform Yangshipin (央视频), which is under the control of the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, announced that it

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5   Don Weinland, "Inside Wuhan: China's Struggle to Control the Virus—And the Narrative." *Financial Times*, April 23, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/61ec68d8-8432-11ea-b872-8db45d5f6714.

6   Li Yuan, "In Coronavirus Fight, China Sidelines an Ally: Its Own People," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/business/china-coronavirus-charity-supplies.html.

7   Vivian Wang, "They Documented the Coronavirus Crisis in Wuhan. Then They Vanished," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/14/business/wuhan-coronavirus-journalists.html.

8   Yuen Yuen Ang, "When COVID-19 Meets Centralized, Personalized Power," *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, no. 5 (2020): 445–447. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0872-3.

9   Amy Qin, "China Pledged to Build a New Hospital in 10 Days. It's Close," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/world/asia/coronavirus-wuhan-hospital.html.

would offer a round-the-clock livestream of the construction project, inviting internet users to 'witness' (见证) the colossal undertaking for themselves. As construction workers toiled day and night, rapt citizens logged on by the tens of millions to watch aerial views of colorful construction vehicles bustling back and forth. Viewers posted supportive comments that scrolled beneath the video in real time. As signs of engagement, these comments helped turn mass viewing itself into a spectacle of participation.[10]

In an apparently sui generis display of playful involvement, some of the commenters began referring to themselves as 'supervisors' (监工). 'Henan supervisor has arrived,' one announced. 'Local Hubei supervisors are here to take over. Colleagues, go eat,' another chimed in. Within 24 hours, commenters were describing themselves as 'internet supervisors' (网络监工) and 'cloud supervisors' (云监工). After the Weibo account of CCTV News began using the hashtag #InternetSupervisors (#网络监工#), 'remote supervision' became a widespread trope in posts about the livestream from internet users and governmental agencies alike, amplifying publicity. By January 30th, the livestream had already received 190 million views and 77,000 comments.

From Supervising to Looking After

On the second day of the livestreaming on January 28th, remote supervision began to coalesce as an activity as users personified and nicknamed the construction vehicles.

For instance, a Weibo user posted, 'Baby Tractor Shovel goes to bulldoze, supervisors follow you forever. To cheer on Little Yellow shout #GoForItWuhan.' Another Weibo user posted:

> Although I have to stay at home during the spring festival, I still have a job to do. As a remote supervisor, I will support and supervise workers and be grateful for their contribution. [. . .] Baby Red, Baby Green, Baby Tractor Shovel, Baby Little Red, Baby Little Green, let's do it.

In a pattern that merits particular attention, remote supervisors formed additional nicknames by appending 'baby' (酱, jiang) to it, an ACGN (Anime, Comics, Video games, and pulp Novels) internet slang suffix deriving from the Japanese diminutive '-chan' (ちゃん). This was used as a distinguishing attribute of a particular vehicle: Baby Forklift (叉酱), Baby Tractor Shovel (铲酱), Baby Red (红酱), Baby Green (绿酱), and so on.

The diminutive appellations formed with this suffix suggest a feminized form of affection—the type of care and concern one directs to an infant—while also evoking the feminized subculture of fan circles (饭圈), where it is commonly used to create discursive intimacy with idolized characters and celebrities.

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10   Xuenan Cao, "Bullet Screens (Danmu): Texting, Online Streaming, and the Spectacle of Social Inequality on Chinese Social Networks," *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 3 (2020): 29–49.

Underlining this association with internet fandom, a popular cement mixing truck earned the appellation Baby Mud Barfer (呕泥酱, *ounijiang*), which sounds like an affectionate Japanese term for 'big brother' (お兄さん, *oniichan*), widely used among young Chinese participants in ACGN online subcultures.

In the comment section under the livestreams and in posts on Weibo, remote supervisors began referring to the vehicles using affectionate nicknames in the way one might address a child. The kinds of affectionate diminutives remote supervisors gave to the construction vehicles were analogous in structure and function to childhood 'family nicknames' (小名, literally 'little name') that 'define membership in the kinship group' through expressing 'affectionate intimacy' and 'a very strong sense of family loyalty'.[11]

Thus, diminutive nicknames served to simultaneously signal not just play, but the particular kind of playfulness associated with domestic intimacy. This intimacy is reflected in the remote supervisors' comments. 'I'm watching Huoshenshan Hospital grow up,' one wrote. Here, the character for 'watch'—*kan* (看)—conjoins different modalities of care. It refers at the same time to witnessing as a concerned spectator, monitoring as a remote supervisor, and looking after one's children as a parent. From the use of diminutives and explicit reference to child care and rearing (看着长大), fictive kinship emerged as a vital element in the transformation of this event into an instance of fandom nationalism highlighting shared membership in a 'national family' (国家).

From Looking After to Worshipping

These burgeoning expressions of 'fandom nationalism' were not lost on the Chinese state: in the days that followed, state social media took on an active role in transforming these characters into celebrity idols and, ultimately, organizing this play into a form of what we call *fandom governance*.

By the third day of livestreaming, state social media had started amplifying the conceptualization of viewership as 'remote supervision' by encouraging its rapid evolution into a form of fandom.

For example, the official Weibo account of CCTV News posted the following alongside a gallery of construction vehicle memes:

Too cute! #TenMillionCloudSupervisorsIntelligence 😝 Remote supervisors who felt bored but couldn't fall asleep watched the hospital construction livestream and gave names to vehicles in the field: Little Red, Little Green, Little Yellow, Baby Forklift, Baby Tractor Shovel, Baby Mud Barfer . . . Do you know who they are?

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11   Moore, Robert L., "Nicknames in Urban China: A Two-Tiered Model," *Names* 41, no. 2 (1993): 80.

Fig. 1: Weibo Post from Yangshipin sharing a curated gallery of vehicle nicknames and memes.

Naming and visual depiction were crucial parts of animating the vehicle memes as characters, but elevating them to the status of celebrity idols involved 'scripting'[12] the participants as fans. On January 29th, *People's Daily*——China's state-owned and largest newspaper——if not solely created, then at least almost single-handedly popularized a new hashtag: #ConstructionVehicleIdolsGroup (#挖掘机天团#), which quickly went viral on Weibo. Using the phrase 'idols group' (天团)—a term commonly used to refer to boy bands and girl groups—People's Daily framed the construction vehicles as celebrity entertainers and thus remote supervisors, by default, as fans.

The post received more than 279,000 likes, thousands of reposts and comments, and was echoed through various other state social media accounts. As the hashtag became popular, the livestream soared to over 40 million simultaneous views, and the comment threads were filled with speculation about which vehicles would *chudao* (出道) next. *Chudao* is a term that denotes the debut of performance artists onto the public stage to launch their careers. By employing a term associated with the entertainment industry, internet users further elaborated linguistic associations between the vehicles memes and celebrity idol worship—an indication of their receptivity to the role assigned to them in the script of fandom governance.

To further mobilize the participatory frameworks of fandom, state social media also introduced participatory modalities that borrowed directly from the playbook of TV networks' and internet platforms' fandom management. One participatory modality was particularly important in turning the construction vehicle memes into a full-fledged instance of celebrity idol worship: voting systems.

Mirroring the rankings of celebrity idols, Yangshipin, the CCTV affiliated social video platform livestreaming the hospital construction, soon incorporated an interactive ranking list for the construction vehicle 'celebrities' underneath their video feeds, encouraging remote supervisors to cast votes on which one is their favorite. For fans, casting votes to keep an idol at the top of a ranking list is a form of protection against elimination in reality shows and other platforms of visibility.[13] Unlike idol candidates on reality shows like *Produce 101* (创造101), the presence of the construction vehicles on the construction site certainly did not hinge on fans' ardor.

12   Christopher M Kelty, *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 261.

13   Yiyi Yin, "An Emergent Algorithmic Culture: The Data-Ization of Online Fandom in China," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 475–92; Qian Zhang and Keith Negus, "East Asian Pop Music Idol Production and the Emergence of Data Fandom in China," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2020): 493–511.

Fig. 2: Construction livestream on Yangshipin platform with recently introduced voting system for vehicles: Baby Forklift tops the ranking with 189,760 votes, followed by Little Blue and Baby Mud Barfer.

Yet by casting these cute memes as idol contestants, state social media rendered them artificially vulnerable to descending in status or acclaim. In the process, this created a small and disposable pantheon of virtual avatars in service of the state, consolidating the power of fandom governance by mobilizing the public's engagement around images of vulnerability.

Heralding the advent of Yangshipin's ranking list, National Business Daily raved on Weibo that 'the Construction Vehicle Idols Group . . . has now officially debuted! The live video stream is so intoxicating (上头) that [internet users] cannot help but indulge themselves. Become a remote supervisor and clock in every day. When you puff the list for the idols group, don't forget to pay attention to real-time updates on the epidemic.'

This post not only refers to fandom in terms of compulsively intoxicating affective states, but also enacts a verbal register distinctive of fan culture: in their vernacular, fans refer to casting votes to help their favorite celebrities ascend the popularity rankings as 'puffing the list' (打榜). This post's gentle nudge to pay attention to the pandemic points to the tension between escapist fandom and the more serious imperative of keeping the public informed.

The level of convergence among state-run social media accounts around this moment of fandom nationalism suggests, if not a concerted effort, then at the very least a deeply shared attunement to fandom's political potential.[14] Remote supervisors themselves also reflected explicitly on the state's deep involvement in their online activities. One fandom opinion leader commented that by 'opening a ranking list for vehicles,' state social media showed that 'they really know how to play the game, hahahaha.' The notion of 'knowing how to play the game' (太会玩了) here can connote both having a good time and, more insidiously, deftly manipulating rules to one's advantage. In the thread below this post, the most upvoted comment stated 'official certification hahahahaha.' Another responded, 'public officials (官方) work hard so that we won't be bored.' Other comments proclaimed that 'Papa CCTV (央视爸爸) is comforting children' or that 'officials are comforting us, the children who feel bored at home.'

The efficacy of state-run social media's adoption of a fandom register and participatory modules such as the voting system available underneath the livestream thus became salient on the nation's most public platforms. Furthermore, on the day that *People's Daily* popularized the 'Idols Group' hashtag, Baby Forklift became the number one 'super topic' on Weibo list of fan circle trending topics.

Pop idol fans themselves were shocked that a construction vehicle had eclipsed Mandopop singers and other celebrities. 'I couldn't imagine the day would come that a forklift would occupy the number one position on the fan circle super topic list,' one commented.

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14   Rongbin Han, "Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's 'Fifty-Cent Army'," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2015): 105–34.

Fig. 3: Ranking of celebrity idols topics trending in Weibo fan circles: Baby Forklift tops the list, followed by Mandopop singers Sean Xiao and KUN.

Fandom Governance

As An Xiao Mina argues, the power of memes to catalyze protest movements also makes them particularly appealing as tools of social influence for a Chinese state heavily invested in shaping social media dynamics.[15] In this case study, we demonstrated that, through drawing from fandom registers and modalities, fandom governance offers Chinese state social media a tool for channeling creative expression into participatory propaganda[16] without directly enforcing 'interpretive domination'.[17]

A testimony to state-run social media's success in cultivating and harnessing citizens' devotional affect and investment in these idolized vehicles, this episode highlights the Chinese state's ongoing efforts to harness the power of cuteness and its potential to politically engage fandom publics through social media. As early as 2013, a Weibo account personifying the Chinese space agency's lunar rover as a cute bunny (萌兔) attracted almost a million followers.

15   An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Beacon Press, 2019).

16   Grigori Asmolov, "The Effects of Participatory Propaganda: From Socialization to Internalization of Conflicts," *Journal of Design and Science* 6 (2019): 1–25.

17   Robert P Weller, *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts and Tiananmen* (Vienna: Springer, 1994).

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) official media outlet called upon other government agencies to follow suit by 'playing cute' (*maimeng*): personifying themselves, stimulating titillating emotions, and capitalizing on signs of public engagement[18]—precisely the strategy we document in this case study.

However, a number of later attempts to manufacture idols proved futile. A 2019 propaganda anime series commissioned by the CCP presenting a svelte young Marx as an idol met with mixed reviews.[19] A year later, the CCP Youth League's personifications of itself as two 'virtual idols'—the girl Tender Country (江山娇) and the boy Blazing Flag (红旗漫)—proved a flop and were taken down within hours due to social media backlash.[20] The contrast between these successes and failures points to a central feature of fandom governance. While the CCP has long been attuned to the potential of marshaling fandom for political mobilization, being able to do it *successfully* seems to require allocating the fans themselves a measure of what Kelty calls 'contributory autonomy': opportunities for participants' involvement in creative co-production.[21]

Yet this autonomy comes at the cost of interpretive uniformity. In the course of the 'baby forklift' episode, we see moments of slippage, where the state's conscription of citizens as fans and the curation of their gaze are at risk of spiraling out of control. State social media accounts, which were deeply—and visibly—involved in animating the vehicles as idols[22] at times endeavored to realign fans' emotional expression with more explicitly patriotic concerns.

For instance, in one Weibo post, the account of a CCTV proclaimed, 'the construction site is like a battlefield. Little Green, Big Yellow, Emperor Who Sends Dust, Emperor Who Lifts Things, and many other vehicles have joined the war. Let us pray together.' Shifting to the metaphorical domain of warfare, this last sentence implores remote supervisors to pray (祈福) as women would have traditionally done for husbands, brothers, and sons off to the battlefield. This injunction could therefore be read as an effort to realign the feminized idiom of fandom with a more traditionally pious female role, relegated to the domestic sphere. Responses to this post in the comment thread resisted this realignment, highlighting the fundamental intractability of play: 'Where is my army of Baby Forklifts?'

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18   Di Wu, "工人日报：'玉兔'卖萌，地球人看懂了吗？ [Worker's Daily: 'Jade Rabbit' Is Playing Cute, Did the Earthlings Get It?]," People.cn. May 8, 2016, http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0805/c1003-28614217.html.

19   Douban, "领风者 (豆瓣电影) [The Leader — Douban Movie]." Douban.com, 2019, https://movie.douban.com/subject/30409395//.

20   Phoenix Media, "江山娇与红旗漫'为何仅5小时就被网友骂到下架[Why did Tender Country and Blazing Flag only survived for five hours until netizen criticisms forced it out]," ifeng.com. February 20, 2020, https://ishare.ifeng.com/c/s/7uEsfN3EhPu.

21   Kelty, *The Participant*, 14.

22   Teri Silvio, "Animation: The New Performance?" *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20. no. 2 (2010): 422–38.

one commenter demanded. 'Don't forget cute Baby Mud Barfer!' responded another. These irreverent responses point to the difficulty of keeping playfulness in the confines of ideologically delimited nationalist projects, thus revealing the risk state social media runs of losing control of interpretations as it seeks to capitalize on the polyphony of fans' devotional behavior.

One way of reading the 'Construction Vehicle Idols Group' sensation is that state social media calculatedly embellished the vulnerability of the cute, but ultimately disposable, stand-ins for the state. In that sense, the cuteness of the state might only be a false pretense of vulnerability—a distraction from the *real* exercise of power. Indeed, the Idols sensation was but a small part of the Chinese state's vast machinery for responding to the crisis and managing public perception of its response. Nevertheless, seeking recourse to the power of cuteness did expose the urgency for the state to make itself loveable at a time of national crisis. When it plays cute, the state reveals a need for subjects' devotion, akin to an idol's need for their fans. By playing the devotional games of fandom governance, remote supervisors were conscripted into protecting not only the artificial vulnerability of Baby Forklift and the other Idols, but the actual political vulnerability of the state itself.

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PLAYFUL PUBLICS ON TIKTOK: THE MEMETIC ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN WAR OF #CHALLENGE

TOM DIVON

The 'TikTok Intifada'

In May 2021, international media outlets chose to describe a recent sequence of Israel-Gaza warfare as the 'TikTok Intifada'.[1] *Intifada* in Arabic stands for *Uprising*. This has been the symbol of Palestinian acts of resistance to the Israeli authorities for more than a few decades.[2] The particular escalation of violence in question here was ignited after a court decision to evict Palestinian families from the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. This controversial decision led to violent riots beginning on May 6, 2021, spreading into mixed-population cities in Israel and the West Bank territory, and eventually culminating in military combat in Gaza with the Israeli military operation 'Guardian of the Walls.' Like in past conflicts, many of these events were mediated on social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, but for the first time, the mediatization of the conflict was also done through TikTok. The platform's recommendation feed—the 'For You Page' (FYP)—was met with an influx of videos created by Palestinian and Israeli TikTok users ('TikTokers'), in which memes functioned as a playful vernacular of resistance.

TikTok's Playground

Since its launch onto the international market in 2017, TikTok has rapidly become one of the most influential video-sharing platforms in the world, reaching one billion unique users in 2021 while steadily surpassing social media giants.[3] TikTokers can create videos of up to ten minutes, which are then shared with others via the personalized FYP. Each TikToker's FYP is a live exhibition being curated by the minute based on interaction, with 'each like, each video shared, each user followed, every hashtag clicked into or used in a video'[4] contributing to the users' recommendations. The FYP is therefore the place TikTokers want their videos to be featured as it allows for mass exposure. To be granted the golden ticket to the FYP, TikTokers use different visibility strategies to harness the

1   Alex Ward, "The 'TikTok intifada,'" VOX, May 20, 2021, https://www.vox.com/22436208/palestinians-gaza.

2   Jeremy Pressman, "The Second Intifada: Background and Causes of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 23, no. 2 (2003): 114-141.

3   Amanda Silberling, "TikTok Reached 1 billion Monthly Active Users," TechCrunch, September 27, 2021, https://techcrunch.com/2021/09/27/tiktok-reached-1-billion-monthly-active-users/.

4   Ellen Simpson, Hamann Andrew, and Bryan Semaan, "How to Tame 'Your' Algorithm: LGBTQ+ Users' Domestication of TikTok," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6, (2022): 1-27, 12.

platform's trends, features, and aesthetics as digital signals communicating their videos to the algorithm.[5] Equipped with TikTok's play tools, they trigger the platform's algorithm while using specific hashtags, keywords, features, audio scraps, and other production options, announcing their contribution to and within a specific platform vernacular. As communication genres, platform vernacular 'emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice.'[6] TikTokers' peer-to-algorithm communication patterns generate an environment of competition in which users carefully plan 'social tactics,'[7] allowing them to become acknowledged by the algorithmic dissemination system and increasing the visual volume of topics of their interest on the FYP.

One popular visibility tactic is participating in TikTok's culture of *challenges*. These are play-based collaborative tasks governed by a set of performative rules in which users are encouraged to coopt a competitive creative mission initiated by random users.[8] Based on an imitable combination of text, sound, and movement, challenges offer templates for content creation, allowing an accessible, expressible, and relatable framework for ordinary users to create within. When a particular challenge video appears to users on the FYP, they can choose to participate by producing their own version based on the video's performative framework. Therefore, this requires users to attune to specific challenges, quickly learn their templates, and show high levels of vernacular literacy 'to recreate the memetic content in order to achieve algorithmic visibility'.[9]

Prior to its adoption by TikTokers, the challenge initially started as an eWoM (electronic word of mouth) marketing practice.[10] This viral marketing practice has been widely discussed in terms of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge (IBC) in 2014, which raised awareness about Lou Gehrig's disease.[11] Since then, challenges have been widely used and developed

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5   Benjamin Guinaudeau, Fabio Vottax, and Kevin Munger, "Fifteen seconds of Fame: TikTok and the Democratization of Mobile Video on Social Media," Working paper, 2020, https://osf.io/f7ehq/.

6   Martin Gibbs, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen & Marcus Carter, "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 255-268, 257.

7   Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society,* ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 167.

8   Elana R Kriegel, Bojan Lazarevic, Christian E Athanasian, and Ruth L Milanaik, "TikTok, Tide Pods and Tiger King: Health Implications of Trends Taking Over Pediatric Populations," *Current Opinion in Pediatrics* 33, no. 1(2021): 170-177.

9   Jing Zeng, and Crystal Abidin, "'#OkBoomer, Time to Meet the Zoomers': Studying the Memefication of Intergenerational Politics on TikTok." *Information, Communication & Society* 24, no. 16 (2021): 2459-2481, 2463.

10   Joseph E. Phelps, Regina Lewis, Lynne Mobilio, David Perry, and Niranjan Raman, "Viral Marketing or Electronic Word-of-Mouth Advertising: Examining Consumer Responses and Motivations to Pass Along Email," *Journal of Advertising Research* 44, no. 4 (2004): 333-348.

11   Hazel K. Kwon, "Public Referral, Viral Campaign, and Celebrity Participation: A Social Network Analysis of the Ice Bucket Challenge on YouTube," *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 19, no .2 (2019): 87-99.

across social media platforms, elevated by the users' gamified participation. Implementing game elements into the practice of challenge, such as following a set of performative rules, motivates users to participate and learn new skills. Moreover, challenges have a symbiotic relationship with the offline world. Through what Kwon[12] calls 'public referral,' challenges have the potential to increase visibility for social affairs, traveling outward from the individual's social network to wider public discourse.

On TikTok, challenges become Memes. Understood as digital units which share common features, 'loaded on various vehicles: images, texts, artifacts or rituals,'[13] memes are the outputs of user-generated content. They are reproduced by various imitative means and spread rapidly by internet users, often with creative variations, blending 'pop culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways.'[14] Zulli and Zulli[15] have examined the formation of imitation publics' on TikTok, or the 'collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication.' Challenges inhabit the platform's driving force of mimesis and are therefore users' preferred idiom through which they communicate and form affinity spaces for different issues. Extending the typical structure of internet memes composed of image and text, TikTok challenge templates are complex multimodal memes configured by layers of moving image (video), text, and sound, and widely disseminated as part of the continuous algorithmic amplification of viral videos on the FYP.

Challenges range from lip-syncs, to dance choreography, to the reenactment of movies, explanatory history, and more. However, they are also highly politicized. Users deploy this practice to raise awareness, spread ideologies, and 'externalize personal political opinion via an audiovisual act'[16] while playfully turning political problems into memetic forms that can be negotiated through public participation. The search for challenges on TikTok is enabled by associated hashtags or music, affording individuals not only the ability to connect to an assumed audience with similar beliefs, but also becoming 'vehicles for exploring playful interaction.'[17]

12   Kwon, "Public Referral, Viral Campaign, and Celebrity Participation," 116.

13   Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT press, 2013).

14   Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 4.

15   Diana Zulli and David James Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform," *New Media & Society* 24, no. 8 (2020): 1879.

16   Medina Serrano, Juan Carlos, Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, and Simon Hegelich, "Dancing to the Partisan Beat: A First Analysis of Political Communication on TikTok," *12th ACM Conference on Web Science, Southampton, July 7-10, 2020*. Arxiv, 264, https://arxiv.org/pdf/2004.05478.pdf.

17   Jon M Pearce, and Pardo Sofia, "So Now You're Ready to Play—But with What? A System to Encourage Playful Exploration," Paper presented at *HCI Educators 2009: Playing with Our Education, Dundee, April 22-24, 2009,* 68-75, 75.

Thus, TikTok exposes a unique assemblage of social and technical affordances that allow users 'action-taking possibilities and meaning-making opportunities'[18] via an interface design that generates a stimulating play between platforms and users.

Playful Publics

TikTok offers a space for 'playful humans',[19] enveloping various human activities which move beyond leisure and are driven by a ludic attitude.[20] This attitude liberates users to tell their stories without adhering to traditional visual and rhetorical styles, narratives, or existing online cultures. By mixing the 'performativity of YouTube, the scrolling interface of Instagram, and the deeply weird humor usually reserved for platforms like Vine and Tumblr,' TikTok's complex textures enable users to become activists, politically engaged 'in a format that is entertaining, educational, and palatable among their peers.'[21] In other words, it is TikTok's memetic architecture that renders networked crowds into *Playful Publics*. These are publics who affectively convey their sentiment concurrently with emerging social-political events by using playful performance methods enabled by TikTok's memetic templates for content creation (i.e., #challenge).

Playful Publics on TikTok are algorithmically motivated to take part in the daily manufacture of viral and memetic trends. They are the pioneers of the 'Serious TikTok'[22] culture in which users tend to playfully unpack, contextualize, and provide information on socio-political issues while harnessing challenges as the platform's distinctive audiovisual grammar. As their seriousness is encoded and infused into memes, they keep blurring the lines between play and political participation, allowing it to be 'simultaneously serious, insightful, and amusing for participants'.[23] *Playful Publics* approach urgent issues with intense emotionality as a central feature of memetic

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18 Ravi K. Vatrapu, "Towards a Theory of Socio-Technical Interactions," Paper presented at the *European Conference on Technology Enhanced Learning, Nice, France, September 29 to October 2, 2009*. Springer, 694-699, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220265653_Towards_a_Theory_of_Socio-technical_Interactions.

19 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Paladin, ([1949]1970).

20 Eric Zimmerman, "Gaming Literacy: Game Design as a Model for Literacy in the Twenty-First Century," in *TheVideo Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2008), 23-32.

21 Crystal Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours," *Cultural Science Journal* 12, no.1 (2021): 77-103, 84.

22 Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Tom Divon, "Serious TikTok: Can You Learn about the Holocaust in 60 Seconds?," *Digital Holocaust Memory* (blog), March 24, 2022, https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/digitalholocaustmemory/2022/03/24/can-you-learn-about-the-holocaust-in-60-seconds-on-tiktok/.

23 Melissa Tully and Ekdale Brian, "Sites of playful engagement: Twitter Hashtags as Spaces of Leisure and Development in Kenya," *Information Technologies & International Development* 10, no. 3 (2014): 67, 69.

spread.[24] They utilize TikTok's light-hearted and whimsical attitude as their storytelling structure that 'sustains a modality of engagement that is primarily affective.'[25]TikTok's socio-technical affordances encourage *Playful Publics* to work as a communalized collection of people driven by forces of imitation, affection, and play. *Play* has been identified as a popular practice among activists in protests and rallies, which infuses movements with creativity and other ludic qualities to encourage civic participation and collective action.[26] In digital mediated environments, play is afforded by a plethora of technological elements (i.e., features) that allow users to explore, experience, and experiment with innovative practices of protest like 'playful subversion'[27] or 'playful resistance'.[28]

On TikTok, the playful climate prompts *Playful Publics* to take action on current socio-political events. A well-known case is the #TulsaFlop challenge, relating to the former U.S. President Donald Trump's rally in Tulsa, in which TikTokers promoted a collective uprising against Trump's rally, challenging users to buy tickets with the purpose of not showing up,[29] and thereby creating a game with the goal of 'hijacking' Trump's event. The presence of *Playful Publics* on TikTok is also dominant in other serious fields where users activate playful practices for combatting Antisemitism,[30] resisting racial inequalities,[31] and criticizing immigration policy.[32] These practices allow socio-political advocacy to weave into unexpected memetic formats using TikTok's vernaculars of parody, humor, and cynicism. The nature of *Playful Publics* can be best demonstrated through two groups on TikTok—Palestinians and Israelis—who infused TikTok's FYP with intensive streams of content during the recent military conflict 'Guardian of the Walls'. Although social media have played a central role in mediating the Israeli-Palestinian

24   Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "Emotion and Virality: What Makes Online Content Go Viral?," *NIM Marketing Intelligence Review* 5, no. 1 (2013): 18.

25   Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality," Information, Communication & Society 19, no. 3 (2016): 310.

26   Benjamin Shepard, *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance, It's Not My Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2012.

27   Isabel Cristina Gonçalves Fróes, and Susana Tosca, "Playful Subversions: Young Children and Tablet Use," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 39-58.

28   Vincent G Huang and Liu Tingting, "Gamifying Contentious Politics: Gaming Capital and Playful Resistance," *Games and Culture* 17, no. 1 (2022): 26-46.

29   Jack Bandy, and Nicholas Diakopoulos, "# TulsaFlop: A Case Study of Algorithmically-Influenced Collective Action on TikTok," arXiv preprint, arXiv:2012.07716 (2020).

30   Tom Divon, and Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann, "#JewishTikTok: The JewToks' Fight against Antisemitism," in *TikTok Cultures in the United States,* ed. Trevor Boffone (New York: Routledge, 2022), 47-58.

31   Moa Eriksson Krutrök, and Mathilda Åkerlund, "Through a White Lens: Black Victimhood, Visibility, and Whiteness in the Black Lives Matter Movement on TikTok," *Information, Communication* & *Society* (2022): 1-19.

32   Daniela Jaramillo-Dent, Paloma Contreras-Pulido, and Amor Pérez-Rodríguez, "Immigrant Influencers on TikTok: Diverse Microcelebrity Profiles and Algorithmic (In) Visibility," *Media and Communication* 10, no. 1 (2022): 208.

conflict in the past,[33] it was in May 2021 that a conversational presence of the conflict was depicted for the first time on TikTok, led by the *Playful Publics* of #FreePalestine (8.1B views) and #StandWithIsrael (68.4M views).

Memetic Music: Amplifier of Activism

An interesting dynamic of *Playful Publics* was highly visible in Israeli-Palestinian TikTok, due to a particular duet challenge. In a duet challenge, users are reacting (or 'replying') to an original video, juxtaposing videos side-by-side where they can be viewed in tandem while replicating it for comparison or adding commentary as a compliment or critique, creating fellowship by allowing users to negotiate modes of play. The duet on TikTok can be a playful tool for political engagement as it is centered on the democratic ideal of dialogue, helping ignite an online public debate among users with a communal purpose.[34]

The first to start the 'game' that led to the duet reaction was an Israeli Defense Force soldier who uploaded a video of herself while lip-syncing the song 'Stand Up (from Harriet).' (Fig. 1) This is the lead single from the soundtrack of the biographical movie Harriet, depicting the life of American abolitionist and political activist Harriet Tubman, and is considered an anthem for freedom and human rights. The IDF soldier posted a video of herself lip-syncing this specific extract from the song:

And I don't mind if I lose any blood on the way to salvation

> *And I'll fight with the strength that I got until I die*
>
> *That's when I'm gonna stand up*
>
> *Take my people with me*
>
> *Together we are going*
>
> *To a brand-new home.*

Accumulating 7.3 million views, the IDF soldier video filled the FYP of the two sides. The first significant reaction was Moe Zein, a Palestinian-Lebanese singer famous for his parodies and mashups of popular songs, who posted a close-up shot of himself with a sarcastic expression singing along to the same song but having changed the lyrics to 'Yes please stand up / Take your people with you / Leave the children happy away from all the tragedies,' asking Israel to leave the occupied territories. In the same video, a window showing moving

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33 Thomas Zeitzoff, "Does Social Media Influence Conflict? Evidence From the 2012 Gaza Conflict." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 1 (2018): 29-63.

34 Medina et al., "Dancing to the Partisan Beat."

images of Palestinian tragedies (e.g., bombs, airstrikes, suffering people) appeared on the right side of the screen (Fig. 2).
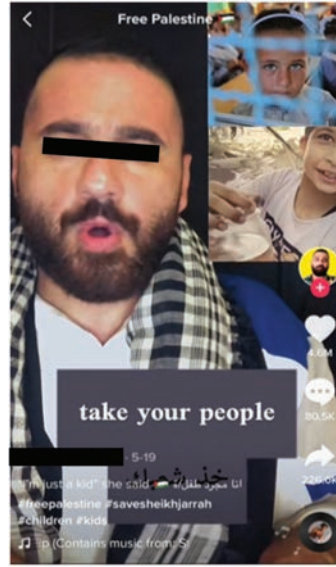

Fig. 1: IDF soldiers lip-sync to the song 'Stand Up.'   *Fig. 2: Moe Zein's duet reaction video with new lyrics.*

Let the games begin: within 48 hours, Zein's video duet received 24.3 million views, igniting a memetic race for the visibility of the #FreePalestine supporters. Demonstrating the nature of *Playful Publics*, TikTokers were capitalizing on the platform's competitive culture to generate a flux of co-creations in attempts to 'win' visibility on the FYP. Palestinian users and supporters of Palestine from all over the world created duets with the IDF soldier in which they sang Zein's version of the song or duetted with Zein videos directly. Their purpose was to suppress the IDF soldier's original video, concealing it from the algorithmic eye. By that, they surface the 'hijacked' version of Zein to random scrollers. Either way, those memetic duets deployed content, form, and stance that combined 'explicit repetition with the variation that characterizes memes.' [35]

Although TikTokers were making various memetic performances, as a public, they spoke in one coherent voice. Users were utilizing many of TikTok's play tools like the Green Screen feature for immersing themselves in symbolic and disputable sites (e.g., the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem), while displaying political symbols (e.g., keffiyeh, Palestinian flag),

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35   Limor Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 352.

and externalizing their outcry using a range of facial expressions (Fig. 3). Some were positioning themselves in sites of struggle (e.g., protests or refugee camps in Gaza), highlighting the meme as an audiovisual text of conflicted reading (Fig. 4). Some were using musical instruments to support Zein's singing, thereby amplifying the affective volume of Palestinian victimization (Fig. 5), while some resonated with the ongoing geographical debate by showing a map of Palestine with Jerusalem as an attempt to make amends with historical injustice[36] (Fig. 6).
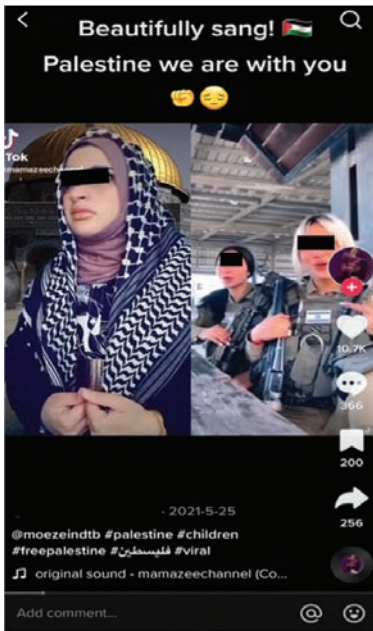

Fig. 3: Disputable sites meme.

Fig. 4: Sites of struggle meme.

36   John B Quigley, *Palestine and Israel: A challenge to justice*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.
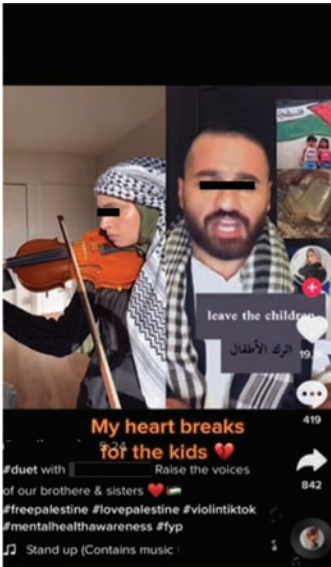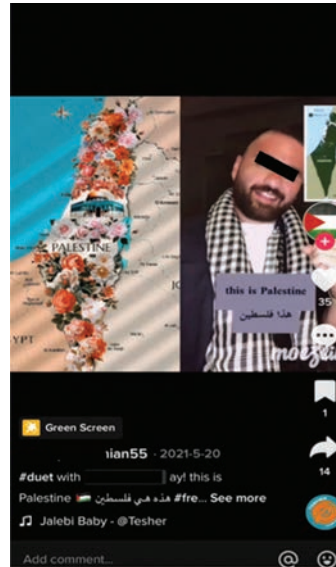
Fig. 5: Instrumental support meme.

Fig. 6: Historical injustice meme.

These memetic duets demonstrated the ability of *Playful Publics* on TikTok to identify the 'meme-worthiness'[37] of content while turning it into an available 'cultural repertoire of vernacular video.'[38] Moreover, the memetic form of both Zein and the IDF soldier videos facilitates user agency to recontextualize representations of the conflict with new cultural meanings. For Palestinians as *playful publics*, this challenge allowed them to sing through memes, simultaneously amplifying and affirming voices of community and resistance. Their ability to envision competing futures for Palestine, play to the camera while applying theatrical elements, and immerse their memes with political imagery that is considered inflammatory, were all evoked by the act of play. This is an open-ended activity that involves imagination, creativity, and questioning the rigidity of rules as applied in the real world.[39]

37   Benjamin Zimmer, and Charles E. Carson. "'Among the New Words': The Prospects and Challenges of Short Term Historical Lexicography," *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 39, no. 1 (2018): 59-74.

38   Jean Burgess, "'All Your Chocolate Rain are Belonging to Us?': Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture," in *Art in the Global Present,* ed. Nikos Papastergiadis and Victoria Lynn (Sydney: UTSe Press, 2014): 86-96, 92.

39   Johan Huizinga, "Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture."

Memetic Violence: Amplifier of Hate

The 'stand up' duet allowed a visual grammar of resistance to manifest in imitated co-performances conveyed by artistic and creative playful activism.[40] However, TikTok's dark side also calls for onsite participation, enabling a violent and mobilized manifestation of *Playful Publics*. Simultaneous with the duet, the 'hit and run' challenge sparked on TikTok invited supporters of the #FreePalestine movement to 'hit and run' random Israelis on the streets of Jerusalem. This challenge was ignited by a widely circulated video showing a young Palestinian slapping an ultra-orthodox Jewish person in Jerusalem, accompanied by a caption saying: 'You will continue to delete, but we will continue to upload. It's either the Palestinian people or you.'

Fig. 7: #HitandRun challenge.

This accompanying message represents what can be seen as a three-fold intifada, where the Palestinian *Playful Publics* are fighting against (1) TikTok's algorithm that moderates their violent content due to policy violations, (2) the Israeli TikTok publics that fight back against this challenge's visibility on the FYP by reporting violent videos,

40　Laura Cervi, and Tom Divon, "Playful Activism: Memetic Performances of Palestinian Resistance on TikTok," under review, (2022), Social Media + Society.

and (3) the Israeli authorities that 'delete' Palestinians wish to be recognized as a nation in a territory where existence is constantly under negation. As memes are part of 'an environment in which rival frames seek survival,'[41] *Playful Publics* manufacture memetic challenges as a particular means of resistance that is developed within a specific space of superiority, repression, constraints, and possibilities for re-existence like TikTok.

Associated with the hashtag #hitandrun, this video surpassed 2.4 million shares overnight, which generated a memetic influx of similar videos that stimulated the Palestinian and the Israeli *Playful Publics* to take over the visibility of both the FYP and the streets of Jerusalem. Following a memetic structure, this 'play' had specific rules: one user was to take the role of the documenter that was filming, and another user was to be the executor hitting random victims and immediately fleeing the scene. The videos' aesthetics delivered an authentic feeling of a forbidden situation, as the documentation was usually unstable, blurry, and interrupted.

Playful Publics of each side weaponized the platform to inflame conflict in various hot spots in Israel while uploading videos from Palestinian and Israeli users' accounts. In one of the videos, a Palestinian is seen pouring hot coffee on an Orthodox Jew at the Nablus Gate in Jerusalem (Fig. 8), while in the background, the documenter is infusing the executor's acts with an 'Allahu Akbar' call ('God is the greatest').[42] In another video, a Yeshiva rabbi was attacked by two Arabs in the city of Jaffa (Fig. 9), while in another video, Arabs attacked an Orthodox Jews couple walking their dog in Jerusalem. In another video, an Israeli user was documenting a violent attack on a religious Muslim person (Fig. 10) and deliberate attempts to attack Israeli soldiers in areas considered inflammatory like Temple Mount (Fig. 11). Although these videos can also be seen as random documentations of violence, TikTok's *Playful Publics* adhere to the theme and structure of the original video while 'lending themselves to finding new instances of related content'.[43]

41   Brian H. Spitzberg, "Toward a Model of Meme Diffusion (M3D)," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 3 (2014): 311-339.

42   Shenila Khoja-Moolji, "The Sounds of Racialized Masculinities: Examining the Affective Pedagogies of Allahu Akbar," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 6 (2016): 1110-1113.

43   Sean Rintel, "Crisis Memes: The Importance of Templatability to Internet Culture and Freedom of Expression," *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 2, no. 2 (2013): 253-271, 266.

Fig. 8: Arab pouring hot coffee on an Orthodox Jew.

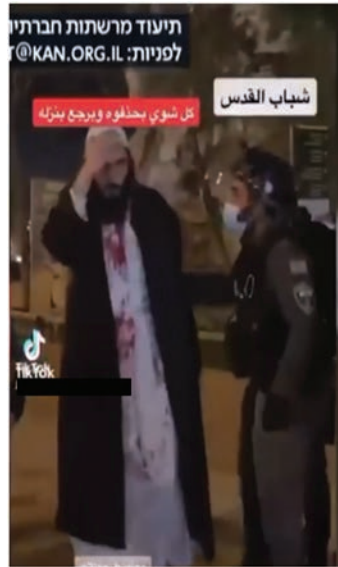Fig. 9: Yeshiva rabbi is attacked by Arabs in the city of Jaffa.

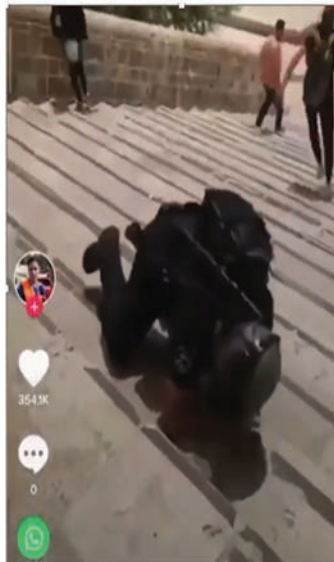Fig. 10: Attack on a religious Muslim bystander.

Fig. 11: Attack on an Israeli soldier in Temple Mount.

These videos' memetic structure, interconnected through a shared digital dialect (#hitandrun hashtag), is an open invitation to the 'theater of terror,' showing modern terrorism communicated through orchestrated violent messages.[44] Whereas the act of watching is deemed as a solitary act, these live performances of violence, even if not transmitted in real-time, are inciting collective action.[45] Moreover, the behaviors of *Playful Publics*, packed in a memetic challenge, carry a toxic potential to 'travel seamlessly back and forth between online and offline spaces and transit into real-life political mobilizations.'

However, the victims of violence in the *Playful Publics* videos are not more than fodder for monetized memetic content in a process where they are shadowed by the competition over virality. In this way, these victims are dehumanized when turned into *Playful Publics* memes, which in the context of terror can erode psychological barriers to violence[46] and 'lessen one's moral repulsion towards committing violent action against a designated out-group.'[47] In the case of the #hitandrun challenge, it is the play that leads and feeds hate into TikTok's algorithm while encouraging the dissemination of territorial markers[48] that provide public evidence of the geographical existence of Israeli and Palestinian *Playful Publics*, both on the ground and on TikTok's FYP.

While some videos are reported by users and consequently taken down, TikTok's moderation system is inadequate. In a different context, the platform's trajectory of hate, carrying far-right and white supremacist memes, is often refueled and inspired by other chaotic web platforms like Telegram, Discord, and 4chan.

Those platforms can be seen as habitats for hate memes in which their cultivators enjoy the benefits of dark sociality, referring to not only the dark content but also to the difficulty of tracking it.[49] On TikTok, these memes are fertilized into sinister games, privileged with algorithmic visibility, and disseminated through mechanisms of transmission serving as amplifiers of hateful ideologies.

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44 Gabriel Weimann, and Conrad Winn, *Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism* (New York: Longman, 1994).

45 Susan Slyomovics, "'To Put One's Fingers in the Bleeding Wound': Palestinian Theatre Under Israeli Censorship," *TDR (1988-)* 35, no. 2 (1991): 18-38.

46 Randy Borum, "Understanding Terrorist Psychology," in *The Psychology of Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Routledge, 2010), 33-47.

47 Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen, and Guillermo Suarez-Tangil, "Memes, Radicalisation, and the Promotion of Violence on Chan Sites," *Proceedings of the international AAAI conference on web and social media* 15, no. 1 (2021): 982-991, 987.

48 Diane Grams, "Territorial Markers: A Case Study of the Public Art of Bronzeville," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 36, no. 3 (2006): 225-240.

49 Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair, *Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends* (The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – the Hague, 2019), 1–24, https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/11/Right-Wing-Extremists-Persistent-Online-Presence.pdf.

(Not) Just a Play

In the context of the TikTok intifada, the #challenges as audiovisual memes are a revolutionary device. They are both weapon and medium in a battlefield dominated by *Playful Publics* that translate the figures of occupied and occupier into TikTok's meme regime. The replicability and mutability of memetic challenges as a central digital artifact in TikTok's participatory culture opens up possibilities for play, subversion, the personalization of politics, and collective affect. Speaking in memes, as in the case of the 'Stand Up' duet, lowers barriers to political participation among users and elicits 'playful citizenship'[50] in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more relatable, tangible, and accessible to various audiences.

In the storytelling structure of memetic challenges like #hitandrun, however, political participation can be terribly unscrupulous. Both Israelis and Palestinians are glorified perpetrators of violence using affective force encoded in playful intensity. TikTok's affordance of play pushes them as *Playful Publics* to extend normative frameworks and revise moral and ethical questions as to how they address their immediate complex present. Within this context of gamified terror, violent behavior is not only subject to games but is ritualized and staged as a mass-entertainment spectacle. Therefore, while human play can be seen as ambiguous,[51] on TikTok it becomes cruel, dark, and agonistic, fostered by algorithmic logic and design, carrying the promise of equal opportunities for exposure. This conflation of human and algorithmic connectivity afforded by the FYP generates a competitive mechanism that determines the visibility and accessibility of *Playful Publics* into virality. The desire to 'win' the game motivates *Playful Publics* to keep watch for new emerging trends and consequently give birth to different types of power relations. Some of these are produced with blood and call for further inquiry.

TikTok's challenges are not just a *play*. As highly engaging memetic performances of *Playful Publics*, they can be seen as merely another way of stimulating users to communicate socio-political issues. However, their algorithmic amplification that leads to streams of humorous, threatening, and opposing conflict-related memes, demonstrates an entangled relation between users, platforms, identity, and nationality. *Playful Publics* memes can be seen as an attempt to overthrow hierarchy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through unorthodox means. They are Palestinian and Israeli voices searching for their group's visual volume on the platform and beyond it.

Most importantly, *Playful Publics* memes are users' recording devices of a shared bloody history, as they witness, intervene in, and try to make sense of the abnormality of their everyday life in a conflicted society. This kind of play, paradoxically and ironically, brings destruction through connection.

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50   René Glas, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar de Vries, *The Playful Citizen* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).
51   Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

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MEMES AS SCHEMES: DISSECTING THE ROLE OF MEMES IN MOBILIZING MOBS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

BHUMIKA BHATTACHARYYA

> Rationality belongs to the cool observer, but because of the stupidity of the average man, he follows not reason, but faith, and the naive faith requires necessary illusion and emotionally potent oversimplifications which are provided by the myth-maker to keep ordinary person on course.[1]

In recent years, West Bengal has seen religious tensions exacerbated by internet content, which has been instrumental in shifting public opinion in favor of anti-Muslim groups, as well as encouraging hate-speech, tension, and polarization, which in turn have contributed to offline actions. In certain memes, especially those triggered by a specific (often viral) text, video, or photo such as 'The Situation Room' or the 'Pepper-Spraying Cop', we can see a tendency towards rhetorical positioning within a networked community sharing similar ideologies and/or political agendas.[2] This in-group targeting of a set of consumers has been seen to be a more effective method for propagating a meme, compared to sending them to common users. In a state that has been through large-scale political riots over the past 100 years, ultimately resulting in the heart-wrenching partition of India in 1947, it is clear that the current social and cultural situation is untenable.[3]

Memes generated in West Bengal conflict zones often aim to raise one of the following threats:

(a) 'Hindu Khatrein mein Hain': Hindus are in danger;

(b) (Muslim)Infiltrators from Bangladesh are coming for your jobs, land and women;

(c) defamation of the Prophet or distortion of Muslim faith, intimidation through memes, and

(d) propagation of 'invented traditions'[4] through memetic imitations.

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1   Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Westminster, 1932).

2   Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014); Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (1990): 291-305.

3   Suvir Kaul, ed, *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2001).

4   Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

Before examining these memetic threats, however, some historical background is required. Modern media can be seen as an ideal tool for effectively and subtly spreading ideological messages to the public—all one needs is money. The general 'conformist' public is at each point in time subjected to elite advocacy that feeds some sort of obvious and/or plausible story, aiming to manufacture consent through demonization of a common enemy: a target.[5] Today's predominant mode of politics involves the post-political usage of memes as a language to create bodies of knowledge that influences bio-politics. In this milieu, expert management and administration has substituted the need for old ideologies: the masses are depoliticized and the rational modern subject no longer holds, having ceased making decisions based on a memes-end rationality as has been the case through 19th and 20th century political thought.

Now in the post-colonial setting of reformists and euro-centric notions of the past, 'the only way to introduce passion into this field, to actively mobilize people is through fear of sovereignty and belief, a basic constituent of today's subjectivity'.[6] It is here that the fear of immigrants, fear of crime, of harassment, and so on, bring people together to fight the 'other': the object of this fear. Memes and viral imagery have played an important role within this web-based political participation: they aim to *mean* something. Through processes of interpretation and comprehension, memes help to encourage the formation of ideology. Here, the public often falls victim to memes belonging to the 'memeplexes'[7] of religion and blind faith: the 'virus of the mind'[8] that paralyzes one's rational brain for its successful propagation.

In 2013, a political vacuum erupted in West Bengal, brought on by the decline of the left front CPIM government that had ruled for thirty-four years, as well as the rise of right-wing party Trinamool Congress (TMC). This coincided with the pro-Bharatiya Janata Party wave (1990-present) centered around Narendra Modi. This was also the year in which RSS launched its online recruitment drive: 'Join RSS'. The saffron camp contrasted the atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh with the 'appeasement' of Muslims in West Bengal, accusing the Mamata Banerjee government of importing Islamic fundamentalism from Bangladesh, name-calling the chief minister of the state ('Mumtaz Begam', 'Jihadi Didi') and vowing that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would prevent West Bengal's transformation into 'West Bangladesh'. Since then, the RSS in Bengal had declared that the Mamata Banerjee government had become a threat to national security and that opposition to its rule was no longer a task to be left exclusively to political parties.

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5   Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).
6   Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, *Mission Bengal: A Saffron Experiment* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2020).
7   Hans-Cees Speel, "Memetics: On a Conceptual Framework for Cultural Evolution," Paper based on presentation at *'Einstein Meets Magritte' Symposium, Brussels, June 2 1995*, http://imagomundi.com.br/cultura/memes_speel.pdf.
8   Richard Dawkins, "Viruses of the Mind," in *Dennett and His Critics*, ed. Bo Dahlbom (Malden: Blackwell, 1993), 13-27.

About three dozen outfits belonging to the Sangh Parivar were active in Bengal, and nearly half of them recorded exponential expansion of activities between 2010 and 2018.[9] 'Jai Shree Ram' became the central slogan closely associated with 'saffron terror'. In his lok sabha[10] election campaign speech in 2014, Modi started talked about driving out Bangladeshi Muslim Infiltrators and later made this into a national issue. A real shift in paradigm occurred in 2015 when the Chinese company Xiaomei introduced low-cost, mass-produced cell phones for the Indian market, next to Reliance Industries' 4G Jio technology (launched on 5th September, 2016). Jio quickly took over the telecom industry with its free unlimited data subscription for six months at the cost of just Rs 30, which encouraged people from marginalized and impoverished classes to secure their own position in the global liberal village. 2016 also saw the appearance of 'invented traditions' such as Ganga Aarati[11] (co-opted from Benaras to the shore of the Hooghly river in Kolkata), Ganapati festival, hanuman Puja, Ramnavami, and Muharram Processions aided with real swords and gear.

Amidst all this, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Sharechat, and Instagram have functioned as new places for sharing and gathering information related to politics, the economy, and society more broadly, which in turn vastly impacted the public sphere. These platforms have been crucial in manufacturing consent among voters and have also helped create an environment where objective truth has lost its significance, making way for the 'oblivious' power of emotion, blind faith, and personal belief.
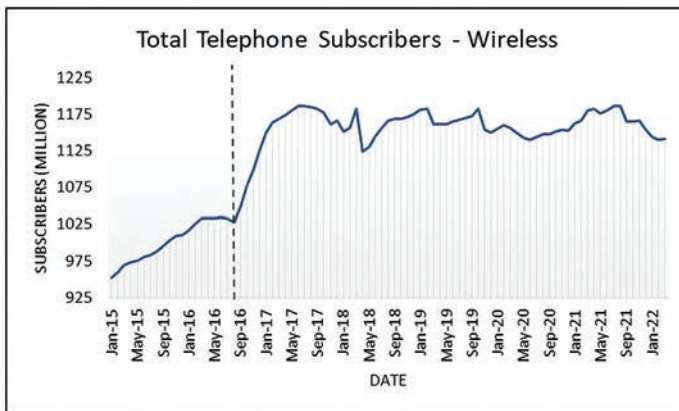
Fig. 1: Wireless telephone subscribers in West Bengal from January 2015 to January 2022. Graph created by author based on data drawn from https://www.trai.gov.in/.

9   Nath, S., and S. Roy Chowdhury, "Manufacturing Polarisation in Contemporary India: The Case of Identity Politics in Post-Left Bengal," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 13 (2019a): 1–9.
10 Lower house of the Parliament, composed of representatives of the people chosen by direct election on the basis of adult suffrage.
11 A Hindu practice of worshipping holy Ganges.

In his 2014 book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman observed that 'memes may best be understood as pieces of *cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon* [emphasis in original].'[12] Shifman further writes how memes have the power to shape 'mindsets, forms of behavior and actions of social groups', playing an important role in coordinated action by instilling 'networked individualism'.[13] In this way, internet-based political memes fulfil three interwoven functions: (1) memes are an important form of persuasion or political advocacy; (2) memes encourage grassroots action; and (3), memes are important modes of expression and public discussion. Through these functions, memes have played a key role in the following three incidents of communal riot.

Case I:

Between December 2016 and January 2017, Dhulagarh (situated in Howrah district, West Bengal) saw a local conflict over share of money between Hindu and Muslim youths turn into communal violence. In Dhulagarh, there is a stark economic inequality between Muslim textile manufacturing unit owners and other residents. These owners have, over the years, acquired considerable wealth and employ local Muslims and Hindus as laborers. A form of 'ghettoization' of both Hindus and Muslims has begun to occur, manifesting in clear physical separation and a corresponding social divide. Despite being economically dependent on each other, these neighborhoods follow mutual avoidance in terms of identity demarcation and 'cultural' practices.

One of the local youths confessed the following in a personal interview held in February, 2017:

> 'It is not that we don't go to their festivals like Eid-ul-Zuha, but only a few amongst us are interested in making friendship with them; their Islamic Jalsa always says nasty things about us. Admittedly, they are more religious minded and we are not!'

Interviews like these emerged out of AAMRA's[14] group discussions held a week after the curfew was lifted among the villagers of Munshirhaat, one of the epicenters of violence in January 2017, revealed the extent of mistrust, shame and fear between the Hindu and Muslim communities. One of the villagers reflected in a personal interview at that time that 'we are ashamed of what had happened, we don't know how we are going to show our faces to Hindu brothers... it is the outsiders who looted, vandalized and set fire to properties.' In several group discussions and informal conversations, it came out that the conflict originated from the financial split arising from a property transfer.

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12   Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 18.
13   Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 18.
14   'An Assemblage of Movement Research and Appraisal' (AAMRA) is a team of researchers and activists of which the author of this piece is a member: https://aamrabharatbarsha.com/.

Allegedly, Muslim youths already took money from a Marwari merchant, who bought land from one of the local Bengali-speaking Hindu families. Upon learning of this extortion money, members of a local club run by the Hindu youths felt deprived. The club itself is located just around the corner from where the property is located, and both Hindus and Muslims use that place as a playground. 'We play separately within the land and there was never any conflict between us. They wear their traditional lungi while playing and we don't find it comfortable to play matches with them', one of the club members told us in March, 2017. On the day of the *Milad-ul-Nabi*[15] celebration, local Muslims decked the region with Islamic flags. Someone put a flag near the Hindu club, and a rumor spread that the Hindus had torn down the flag. Immediately, fights between the two broke out. Several houses in Hindu localities were set ablaze; shops and textile manufacturing units were looted. BJP leaders had taken to Facebook claiming that Hindus were targeted and in danger. The TMC-led government is seen as a Muslim appeaser as well as a Hindu repressor by both BJP and RSS. Certain leaders claimed that an arsenal was stored in a mosque, and that Hindus should group together to protect themselves.

However, instead of admitting the severe communal unrest in Dhulagarh, the Chief Minister of State blamed social media. In addition, the state government had filed a police report against national news agency Zee News' Primetime anchor Sudhir Chowdhary for spreading hatred and endorsing fake news.

Case II:

The Baduria-Basirhat violence was spurred on by a controversial post made by an adolescent boy on Facebook, of which later screenshots were shared via Whatsapp, resulting in the first large-scale communal violence in that area in living memory. On June 30, 2017, this blasphemous Facebook post about Prophet Muhammad and Kaaba Sharif, made by the 17-year-old boy, started circulating via social media platforms. The image, positioned within a networked community of people who shared similar religious beliefs, was imitated by others within the Muslim community, and eventually went 'viral' online. The boy was arrested. More tension continued to spread in vast areas of the district of North 24 Parganas for weeks, amidst a cycle of violence and counter-violence. Organized groups unleashed several fake news reports, which were subsequently re-shared, re-edited, and remixed, thus undoing decades of harmony in the small town of east India. 'Reaction Photoshops' were created from the 2002 Gujrat riot, and archival photos of violence from Bangladesh and other parts of India resurfaced as part of this Basirhat riot.

A remixed scene from the 2015 movie *Aurat Khilona Nehi* was shared online by Haryana State BJP committee member Vijeta Malik, claiming that this was indeed a video from the riot. Fake-news published by a local newspaper (*Jugasankha*) claiming that Muslim

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15   Islamic observance of the birthday of the prophet Muhammad.

residents of the Basirhat sub-division hoisted the national flag of Pakistan on the day of Eid went viral on Facebook. Several hashtags such as '#HindusDontCount', 'HinduLivesMatter', 'NotInMyName', and 'SaveBengal' were trending.

One such Twitter-post, with the hashtag 'HinduLivesMatter', showed a photo of an injured, middle-aged couple purporting to be the parents of the 17-year-old boy, only to be identified later as a picture from an unrelated incident in Bangladesh. AAMRA's interviews with locals brought to light that the boy had lost his mother at a very young age, his father was a farmer and that he was raised by his uncle, where he used to stay. On July 2, 2017, a group of Muslims vandalized his uncle's house. Their neighbors, belonging to both Hindu and Muslim communities, tried to protect the house. They failed as the group mainly composed of outsiders armed with iron rods.

On July 3rd there were several large-scale organized actions by Hindus and Muslims against each other at different locations in and around the twin towns of Baduria-Basirhat. It resulted in destruction of several houses belonging to both Hindus and Muslims, and several police vehicles and cars were torched. Religious sloganeering such as 'Nara-e-taqbeer', 'Allah-hu-akbar','Pakisthan Jindabaad' was present. Witness accounts specify that outsiders were large in number, mostly young Muslim boys of 20 to 25 years of age. Two important centers of conflict were that of Tyantra and Tentulia. A middle-aged Hindu gentleman, Mr. Kartik Mondal, was killed by the rioters in Tentulia, which further aggravated the violent situation. Even the Rapid Action Force had to recede. A fake photo of the deceased was retweeted more than a hundred times. A tear-gas shell hit one of the local Muslims, who was taken to the hospital by Kartik Mondal's son in the same ambulance in which he took his dying father.

To this day, this act remains a prominent example of Hindu-Muslim solidarity. In a group discussion with local villagers in November 2017, one of the villagers argued, 'because religious training supported by TMC and BJP are on the rise, the youngsters are becoming violence prone . . . the outsiders can only launch an attack when there is some involvement from within the community.' While Basirhat as a town has a Hindu majority, many of its adjacent regions have pockets of Muslim concentration. Conflict between these two communities continued for weeks. People belonging to both the communities reflected that there were outsiders involved in the encouragement of riots.

Soumen Sarkar, who owns a tea shop in front of the Baduria Police Station, tells AAMRA:

> For all these years, there has been no tension between Hindus and Muslims, but now that violence has erupted, things have gotten out of control. Today's cell phones contribute to these incidents. Outsiders of large numbers could gather due to mobile phones and Facebook intervention but locals have also played a key role in equipping the outsiders with exact information.

Fig. 2: Left: 'Aparna Sen, where are you now? Peaceful people (read: Muslims) are stripping Hindu women at Baduria.' Source: https://www.altnews.in/vicious-cycle-fake-images-basirhat-riots/. R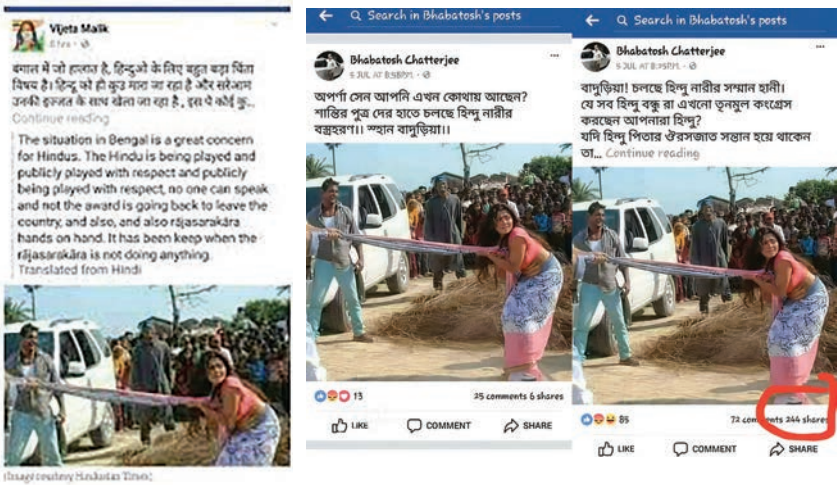ight: 'Aparna Sen, where are you now? Peaceful people (read: Muslims) are stripping Hindu women at Baduria.' Source: https://www.altnews.in/vicious-cycle-fake-images-basirhat-riots/.

Fig. 3: A screenshot from Aurat Khilona Nahi's 2015 movie circulated as an image of the 2017 Basirhat Riot. Source: https://www.altnews.in/vicious-cycle-fake-images-basirhat-riots/.
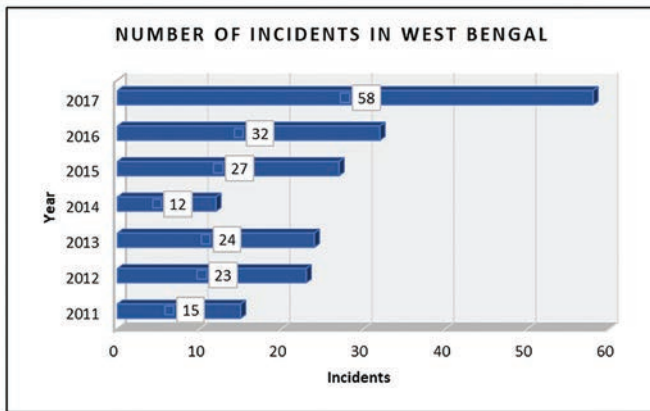
Fig. 4: A number of riots in West Bengal from 2011 to 2017. Source: Parliament of India Lok Sabha.

Case III:

The important town of Bhadreswar is located about 45 kilometers from the state capital, on the west bank of the Ganges. Its significance stems from its contribution to history; its colonial past, jute industries, its history of riots. Telinipara is a large area within this town which is heterogeneous and densely populated. On May 12th, 2020, during the month of Ramzan, a riot fueled by hoaxes and false information resulted in loss of life and property in this region. A rapid Covid-19 test center was set up in this area around May 9th. The first few persons who tested positive happened to be Muslims. Hindus mocked Muslims by calling them 'Corona'. Tablighi Jamat's religious gathering at Nizamuddin Markaz Square, Delhi, in March 2020, coincided with the country's first wave of Covid-19 epidemic.

National media and primetime news were successful in vilifying the Tablighi Jamat for the rapid spread of the pandemic: texts, images and videos went viral on hundreds of WhatsApp groups with the message that 'Muslims are spreading Corona'; locals claimed 'Many Muslims returning from Nizamuddin Markaz are here in Telinipara'; 'Muslims are spreading Corona in Urdibazar of Chandannagar'; 'They are not abiding by any restrictions.' Most of these groups were controlled by organized Hindu-extremists of the state. Names of a few of these groups include: 'Corona se Bancho' (Beware of Corona), 'Beware of the Muslims', 'Ram ke naam lo' (Take the name of Rama[16])**.** Hoaxes and false information endorsed by local BJP leaders Locket Chatterjee and Arjun Singh further led to widespread agitation amongst the masses. Chatterjee had made derogatory and intimidating online posts on the 12th and 13th May, only to delete them later on.

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16   Hindu extremist organizations sponsored by far-right political parties worship Rama.

On May 15th, during an interview with news network *Times Now*, Chatterjee had claimed that 'Muslims are looting and vandalizing Hindu shops and houses, setting cars on fire. The culprits are corona-positive, they don't want to quarantine, which is why they are spreading corona in Hindu areas.'[17]

A lot of fake news circulating in social media revolved around the narrative that 'Hindus are in danger' in Telinipara. A Wiki-news page dated Tuesday May 12, 2020, bore the title '2020 Telinipara Anti-Hindu Pogrom.' Facebook posts were the sole reason for eruption and propagation of this communal conflict.

Later, on February 11th, 2021, during his visit to Kolkata for the 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election campaign, Minister of Home Affairs and president of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from 2014-2020, Amit Shah, addressed the event 'Social Media Volunteers Meet in Kolkata'. Shah's vision for his party's agenda, and associated conduct on social media, formed a good part of his political campaigns during this time.[18] This speech is where he specified the aims, objectives, and function of social media groups controlled by the party funded IT-cells.[19] In his speech he emphasizes the need to create well-connected WhatsApp groups. He talks about how organized the hierarchy of these groups is, with roles ascending from hyper-local, to local, to district heads, to block heads, to state heads. Everything is organized and under control of the IT-cell. He continued:

> We want to be well-connected so that a message may reach 50 lakhs individuals with only one click from now on. This is not a new phenomenon in Bengal: Uttar Pradesh has been successful in establishing such groups with huge traffic. Caricature, cartoons, animation videos, stuff that make people laugh, content that makes people 'afraid'-all of these should be uploaded there. We need to create visually appealing internet contents, only then people will follow. So: start making graphics on a regular basis.[20]

Shah also mentioned that this was his second meeting with the 'social media warriors' of the BJP party, and that he'd given instruction regarding aims, objectives, and functions to their Bengal followers as early as 2018. This clearly indicates that the party is deeply aware of the discursive power of memes.

17   Times Now, "BJP MP Locket Chatterjee speaks on fear over Muslims COVID spread," *Times Now*, YouTube, May 15, 2020. https://youtu.be/HAkPDSAJJro.

18   Bharatiya Janata Party, "HM Shri Amit Shah addresses Social Media Volunteers Meet in Kolkata, West Bengal," Bharatiya Janata Party, YouTube, Feb 11, 2021, https://youtu.be/ms0Yvu3eM_M.

19   Many political parties run such cells, which consist of a group of people hired to run a political party's propaganda on social media platforms.

20   Bharatiya Janata Party, "HM Shri Amit Shah addresses Social Media Volunteers Meet in Kolkata, West Bengal," https://youtu.be/ms0Yvu3eM_M.

Memes and the Masses

New media capture of the masses revolves around the exploitation of certain already existing loop-holes within people's identities. Such loopholes are carefully crafted and manipulated by the BJP's sectarian politics to yield electoral gain. Media narratives have the propensity to distort reality and cater to a stereotyped, highly networked mass whose collective behavior is already predetermined. Slogans as shared words and images propagated amongst several political and religious interest groups embolden 'systemic violence' through language and cultural difference, and bolster religio-political dynamics. Compared to more tangible media tools used for propagating political ideologies, memes are political tools that do *not* cost money, that are widely accessible to the public, and that have been central to political disruptions in areas with no living memory of riots. There is minimal awareness of the dynamics of the meme-scape amongst the general mass, which contributes to making people easier to manipulate via shared digital content. Civic discourse is thus truncated to the shape of the internet meme, the insertion of 'invented tradition',[21] coadaptation of old rituals into popular culture, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia. The memetic spread of such messages online shapes the collective memory and results in the synthesis of post-modern myths.

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21   Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

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LIKE A VIRUS

DANIEL DE ZEEUW, TOMMASO CAMPAGNA, ELENI MARAGKOU, JESPER LUST AND CARLO DE GAETANO

We are the virus.

Spreading across the earth.

Like a virus. We mimic.

More like us.

Like the virus that mimics, like humanity.

Spreading across the earth

Spreading across the globe

The earth is healing. Because of the virus.

(Not us, the actual one.)

Actual one, mimicking one, mimicking humans spreading across the earth.

Pandemic.

Plandemic.

Infodemic.

That's just human nature.

Corona is the cure.

The dolphins are returning to the canals.

Real fake.

The tourists are returning to the canals.

Gay chemtrails cut up the sky.

Now, the tourists are hating, the locals are hating, themselves.

Each hating the other—each other.

Highly spreadable.

Best seen like a China virus.

Nature is healing.

Across the globe.

Hatred is spreading, like a virus, against humanity, hatred for humanity spreads, so highly spreadable, best seen memorable. Destroying the earth, making us sick, like a virus.

Nature is hating.

What did *we* ever do?

Humans die, nature heals, by way of a deadly virus. <Karma bitch>

Algorithms like us, like us.

Wuhan lab.

Insta lab.

Is a cure. Is a curse. Or like one. Is a disease.

Mother earth is healing. Hauling. Balling.

Ecofascist scum, knee-deep in ecology. Like, what about us?

Re: That's just human nature.

Is healing.

Is heating.

Is hearing!

'Like a Virus' is part of the project 'From Climate Change to COVID-19: Communicating Complexity and Collective Affect through Digital Memes', funded by the Global Digital Cultures research priority area at the University of Amsterdam. The images presented here are AI generated (DALL·E and Midjourney), based on memetic phrases such as 'nature is healing', 'humanity is the virus', and 'corona is the cure'. These phrases went viral during the first global COVID-19 lockdown in early spring 2020. A widespread decrease in human activity (travel, industry, etc.) led to a momentary resurgence of nature, subsequently celebrated (and mocked) by sharing images of wild animals and clear skies—even when these were often based on fake news, like the swans and dolphins returning to the Venice canals. During a week-long data sprint in March 2022, together with students from media studies we analyzed the spread of these phrases and the affects they channel. The accompanying text is human-generated. For more information on the project, see crisismemes.com.

Fig. 1: Generated with DALL·E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'A facebook meme about nature is healing.

Fig. 2: Generated with DALL·E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'A meme on Reddit about nature is healing'.
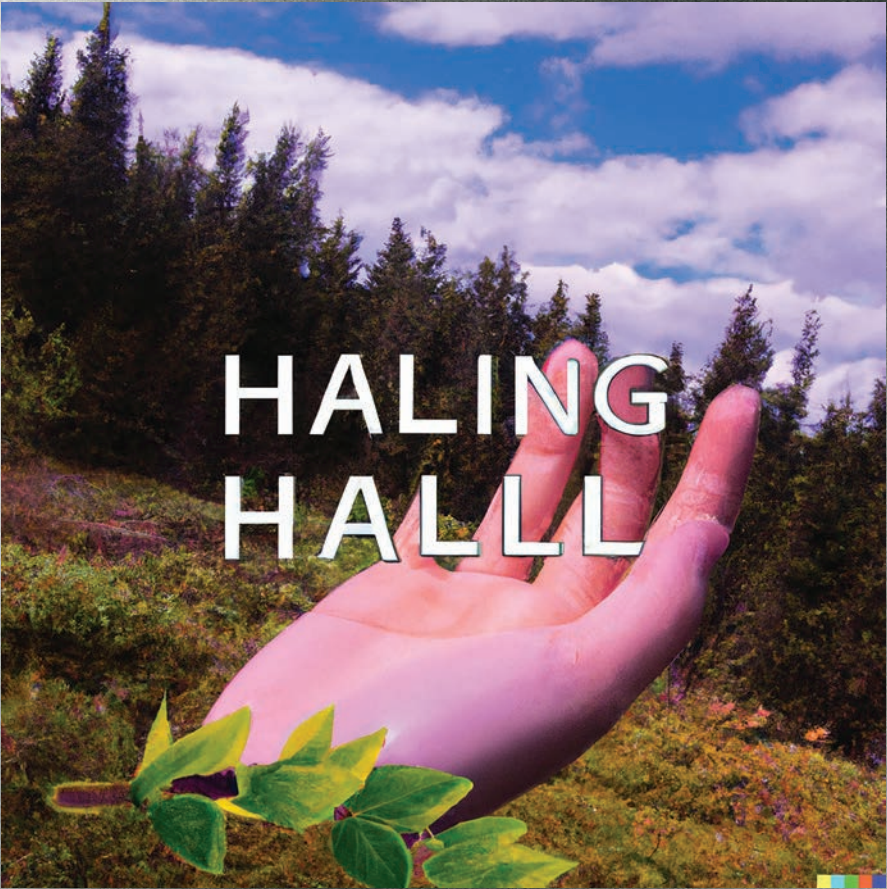
Fig. 3: Generated with DALL·E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'An Instagram meme about nature is healing'.

Fig. 4: Generated with Midjourney on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Nature is healing, Reddit'.

Fig. 5: Generated with DALL·E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Due to many lockdowns around the world, there are less cars, less planes, less pollution. Mother Earth is healing. Instagram meme'.

Fig. 6: Generated with DALL·E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Due to many lockdowns around the world, there are less cars, less planes, less pollution. Mother Earth is healing. Instagram meme'.

Fig. 7: Generated with DALL·E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Dolphins and swans appear in Venice canals a week after city locks down. Instagram meme'.

Fig. 8: Generated with DALL-E on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Dolphins and swans appear in Venice canals a week after city locks down. Instagram meme'.

Fig. 9: Generated with Midjourney on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Dolphins and swans appear in Venice canals a week after the lockdown'.

Fig. 10: Generated with Midjourney on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Due to many lockdowns around the world there are less humans around'.

Fig. 11: Generated with Midjourney on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'Nature is healing'.
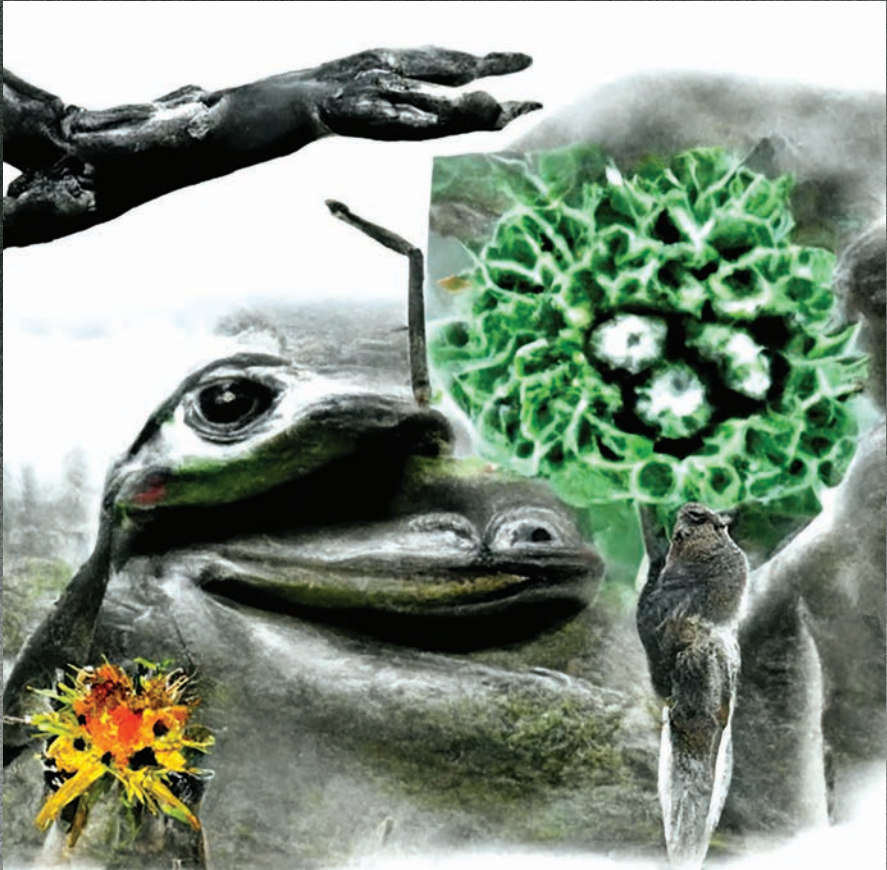
Fig. 12: Generated with DiscoCollision on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'A meme about nature is healing, caption, meme, memetic, text on image, covid-19, pandemic'.

Fig. 13: Generated with Midjourney on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'A meme on Instagram about we are the virus'.

Fig. 14: Generated with Midjourney on September 20, 2022, with the prompt 'We are the virus, Reddit'.

Fig. 15: Generated with Midjourney on July 15, 2022, with the prompt 'Humanity is the virus'.

Fig. 16: Generated with Midjourney on July 15, 2022, with the prompt 'Humanity is the virus'.

MEMES AND (MENTAL) LABOR

I'M NOT LONELY, I HAVE MEMES: THE COGNITIVE, (DIS)EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF DEPRESSION MEMES

LAURENCE SCHERZ

A long time ago, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, a sad, dark thing clawed its way into our social media feeds: depression memes. These memes, shared on social platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, 4chan, and TikTok, date back to as early as 2016, although it's hard to tell precisely. What we do know is that people (meme makers) have been saying to their audience (users with or without clinical depression and/or anxiety symptoms) that it's *okay* to feel horrible and that if our therapist asks 'What do we do when we feel this way?' we do not reply 'Add to cart'. The online world has given us clearance to lift the taboo (slightly) on mental health issues while simultaneously educating some boomers along the way, resulting in many users using memes ever since as the life raft they can be.

Fig. 1: 'Therapist: And what do we say when we're sad? Me: ADD TO CART Therapist: No.', posted on reddit by @u/caprileen, accessed last on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/comments/eh5vsc/add_to_cart/.

The pandemic and its lockdowns boosted this trend even further, keeping every meme maker out there not only locked inside their home with time to devote themselves to memes, but also making them rather gloomy. A foolproof recipe for *a lot* of memes about depression: enter depression memes, your newest, saddest trend.

Depression Memes to the Rescue

But what, can we wonder, while pretending to have a completely healthy, worry-free mind, do depression memes *do* for online users who suffer from (clinical) depression and/or anxiety? Research done by several professors from the Northumbria University, Newcastle shows that depression memes can help alleviate certain negative emotions, because 'the use of humour itself may down-regulate negative and up-regulate positive emotions.'[1] These memes also provide the user with a virtual social community and mutual understanding; we can even see how 'online self-disclosure is theorized to enhance relationships to a greater extent than face-to-face disclosures.'[2] On top of this, 'perceived social support through online interaction appears beneficial in reducing psychiatric symptoms.'[3] And: depressed users tend to laugh harder at depression memes than the completely carefree folks out there, a sign that they cater to their audience quite nicely.

Fig. 2: 'I just think they're neat', posted on Instagram by @felixmeritisamsterdam, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CaPV7BhI3b8/.

What these memes also do is show us the dire situation of mental healthcare and how it is severely lacking in many countries around the world. This is a different conversation

1   Umair Akram et al., "Internet Memes Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Potential Coping Mechanism for Anxiety," *Scientific Reports* 11, no. 22305 (2021): 6.
2   Kathryn J. Gardner et al., "Humour Styles Influence the Perception of Depression-Related Internet Memes in Depression," *Humor* 34, no. 4 (2021): 502.
3   Akram et al., "Internet Memes," 6.

altogether, yet it is interesting to note how, in being freely accessible on the internet for all without any waiting lists or huge medical bills, depression memes hold an even greater power for a community around mental issues. There are even online mental health coaches at the ready, although naturally their psychological merit is to be taken with a grain of salt. Psychologist and author Eleanor Morgan points out that 'the way (mental health) coaches market themselves on social media feeds into the wider memefication of emotion. [...] If this isn't a clear emblem of capitalism and individualism, I'm not sure what is.'[4] And there we have it: our old friend capitalism crashing the party uninvited once again.

Morgan goes on to question the true therapeutic power of memes and the subsequent shared misery online when she asks exactly 'how much self-awareness is really generated when we scroll away?'[5] A valid question. But, for the sake of our own mental health—pun very much intended—let's try to look at depression memes in a positive light. For example: we can look at the act of scrolling as an almost trance-like movement of the body, complete with some numbing of the mind perhaps, but we can also look at it through a cognitive lens and see how 'our physical actions directly link to our thought processes',[6] because 'we think kinesically, too'.[7] This could mean that our body, although seemingly abandoned during (doom)scrolling is, in fact, pretty active and—dare we even say it?—stimulated.

Fig. 3: 'I had no idea you could buy this, I've been just using vintage cameras', posted on Instagram by @memes_on_film, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CdL5LS_ooOY/.

4   Eleanor Morgan, "Sharing Mental Health Memes is Making Things Worse, not Better," *Refinery29,*
     last updated June 16, 2021, https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/mental-health-memes-humour.
5   Morgan, "Sharing Mental Health."
6   Jay Seitz, "The Bodily Basis of Thought," *New Ideas in Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2000): 24.
7   William Farr, Sara Price, and Carey Jewitt, "An Introduction to Embodiment and Digital Technology
     Research: Interdisciplinary Themes and Perspectives," NCRM Working Paper (February 2012), 8,
     https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2257/4/NCRM_workingpaper_0212.pdf.

The (Dis)embodied User Has Feelings Too, You Know

Let's talk some more about bodies. We might be inclined to say that a user scrolling through memes—depressive or not—is letting one single finger do all the work for them, and is not bodily involved in the digital realm at all. But is this true? We can, at least, see how 'new forms of "online" contact create new forms of cyberculture, and cybersubjectivity',[8] which in turn means that 'online encounters are seen as new ways in which the individual is embodied.'[9] Moreover, 'technological boundaries, in a physical and social sense, are examples of embodiment and presence, e.g. the sense of someone else (through the avatars) being in "your" space.'[10] We might have briefly thought to leave our body at the proverbial door of the internet but our mind knows best, for 'the self and the body can only be formed from the imaginary perspective of others.'[11]

What is also interesting in this regard is what happens to the neurons in our brain when we so much as see a representation (our good old meme) of an action: 'The firing of the neuron occurs as *if* the observer were actually carrying out the act itself.'[12] And if we believe for a moment that a meme is enough of a representation of an action, then what are the neurological implications of looking at a depression meme cathartically dealing with severe and quite dark—excuse the language—shit? Are we not bound to leave this interaction a little bit changed, hopefully for the better?

Fig. 4: 'We need a pill that makes you feel like you're buying stuff online,' Posted on Instagram by o_naww, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CTDv5c6jvjl/.

8   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.
9   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.
10   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.
11   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 9.
12   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 8.

There is, as neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett sees in *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain*, something called the 'language network'; brain regions that process language and control the insides of your body, for example guiding your heart rate up and down. Other people's words have a direct effect on your brain activity and your bodily systems, so she writes, and your words have that same effect on other people.[13] A.k.a.: if one reads a meme (Fig. 4) that says *We need a pill that makes you feel like you're buying stuff online*, then perhaps the darkness that lives in their heart will briefly lit up, if only for a second. Scrolling through memes thus becomes a thing of rare beauty; an ingenious thought process all on its own.

Cognitive Representation? Yes, Please

Thinking even while we scroll mindlessly, you say? Let's take this even further. What if we look at memes through a cognitive lens and see them not only as relatable and shareable—next to hopefully hilarious—but also as a tool for cognitive representation? Human cognition is always situated in a complex, sociocultural world and cannot be unaffected by it;[14] thus our online world, packed as it is with sociological and cultural dimensions, is a hotbed for cognitive impulses in which the meme belongs to one or more cognitive levels of representation. Furthermore, if the 'development of cognitive representation […] occurs through enactive, iconic and symbolic levels of representation'[15] in which the iconic is image-based (recognizing pictures or diagrams as signifiers) and the symbolic is language (or symbol) based, then our online users can experience cognitive recognition from the memetic narratives existing within depression memes. Upon seeing this active cognitive load, what the brain does is encode past experience, processing it so that the experiences may prove relevant and useable in the present.[16]

A meme is a story for our brain to comprehend, react to, and link to other, past experiences—in this case, depressive experiences and how to deal with mental illness. The depression meme not only makes *us* feel seen, it makes our *brain* feel seen. Thanks, honey. We needed that. Now what would really make us feel better, is a little laugh…

One Humor, Two Humor, Three Humor

Within depression memes there are different kinds of humor being deployed, something especially interesting when comparing the way depressed users experience these as opposed to those without any symptoms. We already know that depressed users laugh harder than others at these memes.

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13   Lisa Feldman Barrett, *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain (New York: Picador, 2020), 89–90.
14   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 7.
15   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 6.
16   Farr et al., "An Introduction," 6.

Fig. 5: 'Hello darkness my old friend. Darkness (2 days later): Sorry just saw this', posted on Instagram by @disturbingzone, accessed last on August 15, 2022. Source:https://www.instagram.com/p/CdAil3Ms-EM/.

Studies—from the same researchers at the Northumbria University—further show how, compared to non-depressed individuals, those with symptoms of depression reported increased ratings of not only humor, but relatability, shareability, and mood-improving potential.[17] Even better: 47 percent of individuals reported engaging with the memes as a way of alleviating psychiatric symptoms.[18]

It is, of course, rather uncontroversial to regard humor as a coping mechanism, thus also beneficial for those suffering from depression, but this does depend on *what kind* of humor is active within the meme. For it is true that 'those experiencing symptoms of depression reported greater use of positive self-enhancing humor and less use of self-defeating humor',[19] which is unsurprising given that a depressed user's sense of self is most likely already deflated due to unstable mental health. Even though self-defeating or self-deprecating humor can be relatable indeed, it does not really lift one out of their misery. Liking a silly possum alone in an empty room with a text that says *When you clean your room so good, the only trash left is you* might give you a few laughs (Fig.6), but will most likely not make you feel any less like trash. (Is this a good time to interject how we value and respect you? You are not a possum.)

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17   Akram et al., "Internet Memes," 2.
18   Akram et al., "Internet Memes," 2.
19   J. Uekermann et al., "Executive Function, Mentalizing and Humor in Major Depression," *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society* 14, no. 1(2008): 60.

Fig. 6: 'When u clean ur room so good that the only trash left is you', posted on Reddit by @u/ superbloggity, last accessed on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/memes/ comments/jrf69l/god_dont_make_no_trash/.

Against the Tyranny of Happiness

So, if we're not trash, then what are we (online)? Are we that all-too-healthy, skinny blonde girl that uploads a video of what she eats every day, a diet consisting solely of broccoli and vegan chicken? No. Depression memes, thankfully, help debunk this girl's seemingly perfect life. By turning around the tiresome narrative of 'happy' social media in which we see individuals sharing their best selves, best engagement pictures, best smiling selfies—the so-called 'happiness effect' of an online persona—depression memes offer a glimpse of authenticity in this perpetually sunny virtual world. They are here to keep it real. They are here to let us know that, let's be honest, *we all sad here, bitch.* And that's totally fine.

This honesty is, as researcher Lucie Chateau also sees it, precisely the depression meme's appeal: 'To many, the irony that makes depression memes […] work is in their subversion of the happiness effect and the authenticity imperative.'[20] The depression meme lets us be our truest, freest, most miserable self, as 'the meaning to be reconstructed in a depression meme consists of peeling back the layer that demands from us to act as the best, happiest, version of ourselves online.'[21] So, the depression meme shows the internet's true colors. Moreover, this habitat is intrinsic to its nature, or as Chateau puts it: 'Online, the cultural context in which depression memes have risen to popularity is precisely that which gives them their reason for being. To understand

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20   Lucie Chateau, "Damn I Didn't Know Y'all Was Sad? I Thought It Was Just Memes: Irony, Memes and Risk in Internet Depression Culture," *M/C Journal* 23, no. 3 (2020): 4.

21   Chateau, "Damn I Didn't Know," 4.

this, we need to realize that, for the last decade, the symptoms that depression memes cultivate have been lying dormant under the tyranny of the happiness era of social media.'[22]

Fig. 7: 'Microdosing hell by waking up every morning', posted on Instagram by @gothsdoingthings, accessed last on August 15, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CaHytW5P8YE/.

And although it might seem like we're rooting for depression memes even more by giving them the badge of online authenticity, if we briefly turn back to their neurological impact, we can ask ourselves how much is too much, or what it does to our brain when we become overexposed: the *doom* in doom-scrolling.

David Eagleman, another neuroscientist, warns us in his book *Livewired: The Inside Story of the Ever-Changing Brain* that 'what you spend your time on changes your brain. You're more than what you eat; you become the information you digest.'[23] Should we then, perhaps, collectively go on an anti-depressive information diet?

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

Depression memes can, in short, be seen as humorous tools for building community; activators for cognitive representation that sizzles through not only our brains but also our bodies; tools that elevate, albeit briefly, depressive psychiatric symptoms; plus, an—again excuse the language—authentic fuck you to all the fake, not-really-that-happy online personas out there.

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22 Chateau, "Damn I Didn't Know," 3.
23 David Eagleman. *Livewired: The Inside Story of the Ever-Changing Brain* (New York: Pantheon Books), 143.

While looking at depression memes, we realize that not only are we not trash, we are treasure. Our mind and body react as one, even online, making stories in our heads where there once were only memes. To finish up with a personal favorite, here's Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat*, ending our tale on a positive note: 'It is this narrative or symbolic power [of cognitive representation] which gives a sense of the world—a concrete reality in the imaginative form of symbol and story—when abstract thought can provide nothing at all.'[24] Memes can be our symbols, our stories, our fuel for a healthy mind. We're not lonely, for we will always have memes.

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24   Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat* (London: Picador, 1985), 174.

EVERY MEME MAKER WE KNOW IS EXHAUSTED

CAREN MIESENBERGER AND ANAHITA NEGHABAT

Sure, memes themselves are fun, accessible and light-hearted, but that's not the full story: every meme maker we know is exhausted. Everyone talks about memes as political articulation—it's a popular framing in elections in the US, Austria, or Brazil, and elsewhere. It is widely known that memes can be used as a counter-strategy against discrimination and authoritarianism. Yet, at the end of the day, those who make memes always work within existing social media structures, and thus within Silicon Valley companies who care a lot about capital and very little about human rights.

While social media companies claim to take responsibility for the content shared on their platforms through their content moderation and policing systems, it has been documented that these systems are heavily biased. In 2019, the digital platform Salty systematically investigated algorithmic bias in content policing, and came to the conclusion that 'content featuring thin, cis white women seems less censored than content featuring plus-sized, black, queer women—and cis white men appear to have a free pass to behave and post in any way they please, regardless of the harm they inflict.'[1] So, when social media companies refuse to take responsibility for the harmful content that is shared on their platforms, politically conscious content creators often step in. They delete false information or hate speech they find in their comment sections, respond to mansplainy or otherwise discriminatory comments, or individually block far-right trolls.

Yet who has the last laugh? While social media platforms reward heated engagement, some meme makers systematically refuse to engage with users who exhaust them. It's worth considering the labor that goes into such practices of refusal: this is the meme makers' emotional labor, the role of exhaustion and doomscrolling, and their emotional practices of refusal.

We are Anahita Neghabat, a political meme maker who since 2019 has been using memes as a visual vocabulary and tool to comment on Austrian interior politics from an intersectional feminist, anti-authoritarian, anti-racist perspective, and Caren Miesenberger, a journalist and social media editor who successfully built her own meme project in 2010, titled the FEMINIST MEME SCHOOL.

This piece consists of two parts. Part one is about the work of creating and maintaining a political meme page: what kind of emotional labor goes into having one? What kind of invisible labor goes into being a meme admin?

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1   Salty, "Exclusive: An Investigation into Algorithmic Bias in Content Policing on Instagram," Salty, October 2019, https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/.

Why do meme pages *die*? If meme makers are exhausted, then why isn't it a common practice to disable comments? What is the role of deleted comments, posts, or pages? Can we conceptualize deleted comments as invisible care, or reproductive labor?

Part two focuses on the consumption of memes, particularly via doomscrolling, a technique that has become habitual and ubiquitous during the pandemic. Why does doomscrolling damage the connection people have to themselves and thus make people emotionally numb? Which techniques are applied by the platforms to benefit from their depressed and constantly distracted users? Why do we provide unpaid labor for them, just so that they can accumulate capital? And, most importantly: how can we reclaim our attention so that it expands more than the 15 seconds of an Instagram Story, to structurally form and nurture more sustainable bonds of liberation?

We aim at making visible what usually remains invisible: the exhausting labor as well as strategies of refusal, rest and resistance for meme creators and meme consumers alike.

Part 1: I Have a Meme Page and White Boys are Making me TIRED

ANAHITA NEGHABAT

Who would be better suited to comment on the emotional labor of meme makers than a political meme maker herself? In May 2019, I started making memes about Austrian interior politics and posting them on Instagram. What started my meme-making journey was the immense relief and *schadenfreude* I felt when our far-right governing coalition, consisting of the supposedly Christian-conservative (but arguably more far-right) ÖVP and the far-far-right FPÖ, suddenly imploded. The scandal that caused the premature end of this unholy coalition was messy; the political consequences grave. On May 17th, a video was published depicting then vice chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache in a villa on the party island Ibiza, promising dubious and potentially corrupt deals to the fake-niece of a made-up oligarch, while being wasted from vodka infused with red bull and potentially high on coke. This video caused a political earthquake in Austria, in the aftermath of which several politicians were forced to resign and eventually re-elections had to be announced. After only two years, the dangerous far-right coalition had fallen victim to its own greed and incompetence, and for a short period of time—before the reality of the Austrian political landscape hit us again—joy and *schadenfreude* was felt by basically everyone in Austria who was not conservative or far-right.

As the video in question was filmed in Ibiza, the scandal was referred to as the Ibiza-Affair, and within a few days the 1999 summer hit 'We're Going to Ibiza' by the Eurodance group Vengaboys was rediscovered and topped the Austrian pop charts.

It was in this political climate that I downloaded a random meme-making app, funneled my emotions and thoughts into satirical images, and created my Instagram meme account to post them on: @ibiza_austrian_memes. What started as a small idea quickly grew into a big project. After only two days of posting, I already had five thousand followers and it became apparent that I could use memes as a powerful activist tool for political commentary.

Today, I have around twenty-four thousand followers, consisting of a diverse audience of many young people, but also journalists, activists, NGOs, and politicians. I use memes as a tool to comment on Austrian political daily news, aiming to do so from an intersectional feminist, anti-racist and anti-authoritarian perspective. Of course, my memes also always represent my own personal perspective, which is rooted in my biography and identity. I mostly create memes—but sometimes also curate those that users send me—and post them alongside concise captions for context. These texts provide background information (along with source references) and offer critical perspectives in accessible language. In addition, I briefly describe the memes, ensuring accessibility for people who are using text-to-speech apps due to visual impairment or other reasons. Another big part of my online practice is what is often referred to as 'community management': replying to messages, moderating comments, deleting hate-speech, and replying to problematic comments, even providing sources for the facts I build my arguments on in my replies.

So far, so good. The only problem is, however, that I stopped. Despite having a large and powerful platform literally at my fingertips, and despite having built it bit by bit through continuous and often emotionally draining work—I stopped.

Why, you might ask? The obvious excuse is that this work was unpaid and that there are other things I needed to get done. During the first year, in which I posted daily, an average of three to four hours of unpaid work went into my political meme page each day. Naturally, doing this continuously without financial compensation is not easy. However, now that I have stopped posting, I am still doing a lot of unpaid political work, in which I am not nearly reaching as many people and probably not having as much of an impact as I did with memes. Time and money might be an easy excuse, but they are not the real reason behind why I cannot get myself to post any more.

As part of the launch event of the first Critical Meme Reader,[2] I was in conversation with the meme-maker behind the page @commie___central, who talked about the dangers that come with running a leftist meme page. Threatening messages are a regular occurrence, which is the reason I remained anonymous for a long time and @ commie___central still chooses to do so (even though he is consequently not rewarded

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2   SPUI 25, *Global Mutations of the Viral Image: Critical Meme Reader Launch*, YouTube, November 22, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHQhX7w6WrA&t=868s.

with any type of compensation or recognition offline). While threatening messages are distressing, they are also not the reason I stopped producing and posting memes. What ultimately tired me to the point where I stopped posting was not the lack of money, the time restraints, or the threats—it was the huge quantity of annoying mansplainy white boys and young men who would always find an opportunity to lecture me in the comment section of every single meme I was posting.

When I call them white boys, it is because being white and young seem to be the only common denominators between all the individuals draining my energy through their comments. Some of them live in the big city (by which I mean Vienna, the only city of millions in Austria), study law, present themselves in a suit while holding a wine glass on their profile picture and have written something about an EU internship in their bio. Others, with the Austrian flag in their bio, just turned sixteen, are living in the Austrian countryside, and have a photo of their most cherished possession—their moped—as a profile pic. Still others are studying political sciences or philosophy, consider themselves critical thinkers, and silently follow my meme-page without ever liking any post or leaving an encouraging comment. Instead, these white boys constantly remain on the look-out for an opportunity to annoy me with their irrelevant half-knowledge. You might think I am exaggerating. Let me show you that I am not.

Fig. 1: A meme I made and posted as @ibiza_austrian_memes on Instagram. Posted March 26, 2020.

I made and posted the meme above in late March 2020, after the Austrian ski town of Ischgl in Tyrol had suddenly become internationally infamous as the site of one of the first COVID-19 superspreading events. Hundreds of infected skiers, or more accurately après-skiers, took

the virus to their home countries and seeded outbreaks all around Europe.[3] In the aftermath, local politicians were heavily criticized for not having implemented preventative measures fast enough, and for having put tourism profits ahead of public health. One of the politicians who was made responsible was Tyrol health commissioner Bernhard Tilg. The meme above depicts Tilg nervously sweating over having to make a choice between two red buttons, one of which reads 'Prevent the spread of Covid-19', while the other one reads 'Continue to make money with skiing tourism.' The meme is in German, where you can either write 'Ski,' or spell it 'Schi.' I chose the latter.

A couple of hours after posting the meme, while I was already in the middle of a completely different task that I needed to get done, a white boy, Clemens, corrected my already correct spelling by commenting: '*Ski.'

I let a few minutes pass in which four people liked his comment. I knew that if I didn't reply soon, his comment would collect likes by other know-it-alls, who would most likely soon start their own conversation in the comment section, distracting from the content of the meme. In theory I could just ignore it, but in practice I couldn't. The main problem is that commenters like Clemens are not rare and comments like his are produced constantly. The frequency of them is what makes otherwise ludicrous comments impactful: constantly 'correcting' aspects of my political commentary or analysis, is a way of planting seeds of suspicion regarding my ability as a political commentator for other users who are silently reading the comments. Let me elaborate with another example.

Fig. 2: A screenshot taken October 15, 2021.

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3 Gretchen Vogel, "Signals from the Sewer," *Science* 375, no. 6585 (March 9, 2022): 1100-1104.

To decrease the likelihood of being as emotionally drained as I was while reading the comment in Fig. 2, I recommend reading the following translation in the voice of Squidward from the TV series 'Spongebob Squarepants'. The comment reads: 'Very cool that you're posting memes again. And I would find it even cooler if you would provide correct terms and connections in the captions. For now, here is just a marginally important example (which, however, surely will have contributed to viewers' bad grades at school and university exams): The people in parliament (=building) are largely Members of the National Council (=legislative organ).'

In this comment, a young man tries to correct my already correct use of the term 'members of parliament.' He claims that instead of 'members of parliament,' I should have written 'members of the national council' and follows this claim up by lecturing me that 'parliament' is just the word for the building, while 'national council' is the word for the legislative organ I was referring to.

This comment exhausts me for several reasons. Firstly, the way he phrased his nitpicking lecture ('For now, here is just one example…') implies that he could have criticized a lot more but was generous enough to stick to this one example, when in fact there was no misinformation to begin with. Secondly, by proactively admitting that this example is 'marginally important' while following it up with, 'however, people will fail school because of this,' he is making it difficult for me to disarm him by pointing out his hair-splitting. Thirdly, with his lecture he assumes that he is teaching me something that I could not possibly already know. By doing so, the commenter belittles me, and does what philosopher Nicole Dular calls 'a pernicious subversion of epistemic roles.' Dular defines mansplaining as an act of epistemic violence, wherein the 'speaker/giver of knowledge is forcibly relegated to the role of hearer/receiver of knowledge.'[4]

One might think that in online spaces, mansplaining boys cannot simply force me to become the receiver of their lecture, as I could always block them or simply refuse to read what they write. Unfortunately, it is not that easy.

From my experience as a social media user consuming other peoples' content, I know that the comment section often functions as a fact-checking tool. The thinking goes, 'Surely, if something was not right about this, someone would have pointed it out in the comments by now.' Of course, this way of fact-checking is not very reliable. Critical comments can be and are being deleted; the algorithm tends to preach to the choir by showing people content they tend to agree with, and so on. At the same time, if users' critical comments are deleted, they will often mobilize others through their own platform, asking them to mass-comment under the post in question that critical comments have been removed. If comments are fully disabled, this can also be an indicator that something is fishy about the content.

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4   Nicole Dular, "Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice," *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2021): 2.

Mansplainy comments are a powerful silencing tool because they rely on these online forms of etiquette. If the white boy were to threaten me or use hate-speech, I would instantly block him, and my act of blocking would most likely be perceived as valid by other users. If I blocked the mansplainy white boy, however, he might end up making a huge fuss about it on his own page. He might argue that if his critical comments were not valid, then I would not have felt the need to block him. If he does not have a lot of followers, I would probably get away with blocking him without negative consequences, but soon enough under the next meme the next mansplainy boy would appear. And if I blocked him too, and then the next one, and the one after that—eventually my political meme page would most likely end up with a reputation of not being trustworthy, of blocking critical voices, and deleting critical comments. The problem is, if I want to continue reaching people with my political commentary, then building and maintaining trustworthiness is crucial.

So, when the white boy from the prior example comments '*Ski,' I get angry. His comment demands my time and energy. I contemplate possible comebacks and finally reply, '*Mansplaining.'

Dular compares mansplaining to other forms of epistemic injustice and argues that a crucial driving force in the dynamic of mansplaining is the power relations between (people perceived to be) women and men. In the case of mansplaining, she writes, 'men are taking the role of speaker because they assume, either consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, that as a woman their conversational partner could not be more knowledgeable on the subject, that their identity as a man affords them such expertise.'[5] According to Dular, mansplaining occurs when the man in this scenario is less knowledgeable in the field of expertise than the woman.[6]

Mansplainy Clemens seems to like feminist philosophy, because he replies by mansplaining mansplaining to me, using a definition that is similar to the one Dular proposes. He writes: '[I was] not mansplaining because I did not know that the admin is a woman, I was not being condescending, and we are equally qualified in this field.'

With this comment, Clemens finally points out something interesting. Being anonymous online affords me with a special opportunity to experience mansplaining while not being perceived as a woman. Most users who engage with my meme page do not know my gender and age, and from messages I have received I know that many assume that my page is run by a team of boys. Nevertheless, I constantly received mansplaining comments. This leads me to believe that Dular's definition of mansplaining as an epistemically unjust interaction between a man and a woman is too narrow.

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5   Dular, "Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice," 11.
6   Dular, "Mansplaining as Epistemic Injustice," 8-9.

It should go without saying that having a marginalized social position increases the intensity with which a person will receive mansplaining, especially if they are at the intersections of several marginalized identities. By arguing that Dular's definition of mansplaining is too narrow, I want to point out that me as an admin receiving this amount of mansplaining despite *not* presenting as a woman online, draws attention to the fact that mansplaining could perhaps be understood more in depth if we focused more on white masculinity and white male ego in itself, instead of centering its relation to the other(ed).

Fig. 3: His full reply reads: 'Countering "mansplaining" is mansplaining but here we go… This is not mansplaining because I did not know that the admin is a woman, I was not being condescending, and we are equally qualified in this field. The spelling "Schi", by the way, goes back to Adolf Hitler himself.'

My example shows that, at its core, mansplaining is not about the assumption the white boy is making about the other. Fundamentally, mansplaining is about the assumptions he makes about himself, and the way he relates to both his self and the world around him. Mansplaining is about the way the white boy thinks of himself: as someone who needs to be assertive and dominant all the time; complete with his lack of capacity to interact with others in a way that is not fundamentally about asserting dominance.

Give Mansplainers Trophies

Mansplaining comments are an effective silencing tool, because they make other users skeptical of the content in question and drain the content creator of time and energy. While I have not found a perfect solution for dealing with this form of epistemic violence, through trial and error I have at least found a way to cope.

In the past, I used to reply with clear, direct communication pointing out their mansplaining and proving my expertise by providing facts and sources. Although this proved to be an effective strategy in that the commenter would usually not reply again, it was also very time and energy consuming, which of course means that the mansplainy boy succeeds in silencing me through demanding time and energy I would have otherwise put elsewhere. Another strategy is to reply passive aggressively, which has the opposite effect: while it *feels* good, the likes a mansplainy comment got after I replied in such a tone showed that that this strategy can quickly backfire, as it tends to be penalized by other users.

My favorite strategy to date is inspired by the Instagram account @awardsforgoodboys by Sherby Lorman, who draws awards for boys doing (less than) the bare minimum.

Fig. 4: A screenshot taken on June 13, 2022. Posted October 19, 2020 on @awardsforgoodboys.

Inspired by her idea of giving out awards for annoying 'good boy' behavior, I started giving mansplainy white boys emoji trophies for pointing out the obvious. In doing so, I reflect their condescending behavior back onto them by being condescending too. Furthermore, through giving them a trophy, I am sarcastically addressing the fact that they are yearning for validation and are performing an act that is about them and their ego. I thus make visible that, unlike what *they* claim, they are not teaching anyone anything, but are just trying to feel better about themselves. By simply giving them this emoji trophy, I am refusing to engage with their comment and thus refusing to put any more energy into it.

My reply to the boy mansplaining 'members of parliament' to me, thus read: 'The only thing you're getting from me for your comment is a trophy for the most mansplainy comment of the weeeeek🏆🤏' Finally, as a reply, he deleted his comment.

Many Reasons to be Tired

Despite having found a coping strategy, mansplainy comments still infuriate me to a degree that severely diminishes my motivation to create political memes and post them online. In addition, the bigger and more popular my page got, the more mansplaining I would encounter.

Becoming well-known in certain social contexts also affected my co-author Caren's digital and political practice, who has also not been able to produce online content recently in her personal projects. For Caren, with her (very small) popularity came job offers—and thus having to navigate her own political standards around money. Caren has also experienced it as tiring to be in the middle of discussions as an individual, yet to retain a powerful feeling of responsibility for helping produce a less harmful society for everyone. In Caren's case, this has led to an exhausted feeling of being unable to produce so-called content on her personal page, as well as in the context of her former meme page and workshop FEMINIST MEME SCHOOL, which was a workshop series where participants could create and publish memes together. What we—Anahita and Caren—share, is an experience of creating less memes ourselves on our personal pages, but still not having a significantly reduced screen time. We've become passive observers, yet remain still pretty much glued to our phones.

PART 2: PLEASE SWITCH YOUR PHONE OFF WHILE READING THIS TEXT

CAREN MIESENBERGER

'I looked at the internet for too long today and started feeling depressed.'[7]

The pandemic has enhanced my already existing practice of doomscrolling. While doomscrolling typically gets framed as just continuous consumption of bad news, in our experience—Anahita and I— the practice of doomscrolling goes way beyond that. It is bigger than the consumption of bad news; it could be, for example, applied to the habitual inability to stop scrolling. Before the word 'doomscrolling' even existed, in his text originally published in 2014, 'No-One is Bored, Everything is Boring', cultural critic Mark Fisher wrote about constant distraction:

Boredom consumes our being; we feel we will never escape it. But it is just this capacity for absorption that is now under attack, as a result of the constant dispersal of attention, which is integral to capitalist cyberspace.

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7   Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where are You* (London: Faber, 2021).

If boredom is a form of empty absorption, then more positive forms of absorption effectively counter it. But it is these forms of absorption which capitalism cannot deliver. Instead of absorbing us, it distracts from the boring.[8]

While speaking about 'capitalist cyberspace', a term that sounds old school in 2022, Fisher notes that the scatteredness digital technologies evoke is not coincidental, but actually beneficial to the capitalist world order. Constant distraction and scatteredness can destroy focused attention and thus also inhibit workers' self-organization. Such organization can take a long time: deep conversations and focused political work mostly happens outside of the digital short-term living if one wants to really achieve structural change, and not just sign a petition or join a hashtag campaign. Fisher uses Buzzfeed lists as an example of distraction. When I told my co-author Neghabat about this, she laughed and said: 'From today's perspective, Buzzfeed lists seem to be very calm compared to Instagram.' Yet, Fisher had already observed that 'our nervous systems are so overstimulated that we never have the luxury of feeling bored—he was indeed ahead of his time. Nowadays, doomscrolling is enhanced by the precise architecture of commercial social media apps. Or, in simpler terms, these apps are products of tech companies—not even start-ups anymore—that share the same goal as Tesla, Amazon, or any supermarket in the world: the accumulation of capital. How do they accumulate capital? By gaining data from their users, which we give them willingly and for free, and then using this to sell ads to companies. If you ever found a nice pair of shoes you actually like in your IG stories, or saved a post for period panties in your feed while suffering from PMS, you know what I mean, *and* you've successfully provided unpaid work to the Meta company.

Memes play a special role in the accumulation of capital for Meta. For me, they are—besides videos of cute animals, especially of cats—the primary thing I consume on social media. And I'm not alone. Memes are one of the most prevalent publication formats. Or, as Instagram phrased it in 2020:

> Over 1 million posts mentioning 'meme' are shared to Instagram each day. From memes that made us LOL and went straight into the group DM to the memes that made us feel seen and let us know we were all in this together—this year, more than ever before, memes kept us sane and helped us cope when we were six feet apart or more.[9]

8   Mark Fisher, "No-One is Bored, Everything is Boring," in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher from 2004 – 2016,* ed. Darren Ambrose (Repeater, 2018).
9   Instagram, "Instagram Year in Review: How Memes Were the Mood of 2020," last modified December 10, 2020, https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/instagram-year-in-review-how-memes-were-the-mood-of-2020/.

What Instagram didn't write is that this also means profit for their company. While there are certainly some professional, yet underpaid and often precariously employed[10] social media editors, or creative individuals who might benefit of the exposure when they post a meme that goes viral, most creators do not financially benefit from meme making, as pointed out thoroughly in the first part of this article. They do it for fun, or to be seen as well as heard. It is the platforms who receive immediate financial benefit from the innumerable unpaid meme workers and their production.

Thus, engaging in meme making can be understood as a form of free labor, while the main interest of app developers is to keep users on their platform for as long as possible. This can be confirmed by the words of the former Facebook employee turned whistleblower Frances Haugen: 'The company's leadership knows how to make Facebook and Instagram safer, but won't make the necessary changes because they have put their astronomical profits before people'.[11]

The point I want to make here is that the cultural habit of doomscrolling—and this includes the consumption of memes and other digital articulations enabled by the technical precondition of infinite scrolling—destroys people's self-esteem, can lead to depression and isolation, and thus prevents progressive political resistance on a structural level. Moreover, it's not just those who actively create memes that help Zuckerberg and Co. make mon€y: there are others.

While emotional labor in capitalist production can be understood as managing one's feelings to fulfill duties,[12] like smiling at a customer although you're having a really bad day, the technique of doomscrolling numbs your feelings and distracts you from dealing with them. Instead of feeling sad, you scroll through yet another meme. This numbing of one's feelings can particularly damage young people who, due to demographic reasons, are the ones who use these apps the most.[13] On a bigger scale, and with respect to Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, doomscrolling as a constant distraction can hinder the building of meaningful connections to other human beings, and thus contributes to the inability to collectively imagine alternatives to capitalism. Everyone hides behind a screen. I don't write this from a digital negative perspective, but as someone who has grown up online and used the internet almost constantly since the nineties, and still believes that it must be used for political organization.

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10   Nathan A. Webster, "Social Media Managers are Underpaid and Undervalued," last modified April 2, 2022, https://ndubbrand.com/social-media-managers-underpaid-and-undervalued/.

11   James Clayton, "Facebook Harms Children and Weakens Democracy: Ex-Employee," *BBC News,* October 6, 2021, bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58805965.

12   Hochschild, Arlie Russell, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1983).

13   Elroy Boers et al, "Association of Screen Time and Depression in Adolescence," *JAMA Pediatrics* 173, no. 9 (2019): 853.859.

It's just that there are strings attached. Adrienne Rich once wrote a poem about the power of words, long before Instagram existed. It said: 'This is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you'.[14] This can be applied to the way social media works. It is an oppressive space, yet it needs to be occupied.

A Doom of One's Own

'Felix returned to the top of his timeline, refreshed it, waited for new posts to load, and then did the same thing again, several times. He didn't even seem to read the new posts before pulling down to refresh again.'[15]

The precise architecture of commercial social media apps has perfected their techniques of distraction. The 'infinite scroll', where you can scroll down as long as you like without ever reaching an end, can be understood as a prolonged capitalist practice. TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. all make you scroll and scroll and scroll. Your feed is endless. Production within capitalism strives to be endless, to use and abuse material and immaterial resources. It degrades people to 'human capital' and expands all over time and space. Infinite scrolling becomes a microcapitalist habit that financially benefits a small number of people of a certain demographic—namely and mainly white able-bodied cis men in Silicon Valley. Mark Zuckerberg is the Jeff Bezos of social media, and we Instagram users provide free labor for him. We're lying in our bed, phone in hand, perhaps only have a few seconds in between to think and articulate thoughts. While there is liberatory potential in social media practices—and these spaces need to be occupied just as any other space— the damages can be felt in doomscrolling. Virginia Woolf's famous essay 'A Room of One's Own' argued that (a very narrow group of) women need certain preconditions to express themselves. She writes: 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'.[16] Her thoughts should be broadened with an intersectional perspective. For example, we can look to the Black Brazilian writer Carolina Maria de Jesus, who wrote on leftover paper she collected while making a living for herself and her kids in a Favela in São Paulo, and later became one of the most important women to change the narrative on racism and misogynoir in Brazil.[17] From de Jesus, we can see that there can be articulation and resilience, despite extremely precarious living conditions.

Yet, Virginia Woolf has a point: like any expressive practice, meme making and participating in meme consumption is tied to material conditions. If you want to digitally express yourself, you need money, time, and space. You need to own a smartphone (one that works well

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14   Adrienne Rich, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," in *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (New York: Norton, 1971).
15   Sally Rooney, *Beautiful World, Where are You* (London: Faber, 2021).
16   Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton, 1977), 7.
17   Carolina Maria De Jesus, Quarto de Despejo: Diário de uma Favelada (Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1960).

enough to post), you need good internet (that is paid for), and peace and quiet (in your head and in a physical space) to form thoughts, thus contributing to a progressive discourse. Yet, participation doesn't immunize you against developing addiction, depression, or low self-esteem due to your social media usage. When content doesn't make you *content* anymore, your smartphone becomes a doom of one's own.

This can also be applied to the consumption of political memes. There are different styles of political memes on *the interwebz*, but it's important to consider how the perspective of the meme maker is always relevant to the memes being produced, as Neghabat already discussed. Memes are always based on the lived experiences and knowledge of the creator, and on this basis articulate one's own reality. Also, first-person memes have become a popular genre in critical meme making, and can be understood as a contemporary form of feminist first-person writing, in the tradition of groundbreaking thinkers such as bell hooks who helped establish first-person texts in public discourse.

But, if you make a meme that voices your reality, the backlash can be harsh—beyond mansplainy comments, it can mean having content deleted, shadowbanning (or, as the ~young people nowadays, ᴛᴍ~ call it: *getting zucced*) or facing a shitstorm. This is especially relevant for those who are trans, not white and politically left-wing.

What do you do if you didn't create the meme, but you're witnessing the backlash? You don't want to leave your comrades alone in this mess. You comment or reach out via DM, and ask how you can support. Or, sometimes, you just read the comment section and leave an occasional like here and there. But even this can be tiring because, suddenly, instead of petting your cat, going outside for a walk, or trying to get eight hours of sleep, you now have to defend people's existence and find yourself *reacting* instead of acting. Furthermore, at the end of the day, those who discriminate often just hold more power in this space because they are protected by *the zucc*, through Instagram guidelines and the algorithm. Another possibility is that page admins (who are exhausted themselves: see the first part of this article) don't have the resources to clean up after their comment section. Or, the problem could just be that those annoying white mansplainers have infinite time and energy for discussion when it's not *their own* existence being discussed.

Memes are being published constantly (hello there, critical US-meme makers! We follow, love, and look up to you!). If there's anything happening in the USA—like racist police murders or reproductive rights being removed—I wait for US-American meme pages to contextualize and comment, and to deliver narratives that are often under-represented in big media outlets due to structural discrimination.

Fig. 5: Meme made by the author.

This means that I stay up at night to follow the memes. While the world spins around endlessly, the Wi-Fi is connected 24/7, and memes are being published continuously, the living resources such as one's body do have limits. That's why worker's movements fight for conditions that do not kill us. Infinite scrolling exists despite the finite materiality of your own body: overload of the information your brain can digest, dry eyes, the feeling of a numb thumb, insomnia and putting other needs such as drinking water or eating on hold. Scrolling also targets one's attention, and due to the omnipresence of digital devices, the attention of a whole generation. In Germany, for example, 100% of 12-year-old children are using smartphones.[18] I often read articles about the dangers of social media and how it damages children: 'Put that thing away!,' states the German outlet Focus Online.[19] Usually, articles about the destructive potential of cell phones are written by people who themselves have no practice of social media use (except maybe WhatsApp) or who feel culturally alienated due to growing up with other media as their resource for information and resistance. Yet there is a potential in reclaiming the attention destroyed by social media, as the British scholar Julia Bell notes in her essay 'Radical Attention'.

Bell's argument is interesting, as she sees a potential for social change and liberation in the refusal to let digital technologies steal (your) attention. If you want a way of overcoming what Mark Fisher dubbed 'capitalist realism', Bell articulates how paying attention to one another can be a potent strategy to resist, and a way to imagine alternatives to capitalism.

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18   Deutschlandfunk Kultur. "Studie: 100 Prozent der Zwölfjährigen in Deutschland nutzen ein Smartphone." Deutschlandfunk Kultur, September 6, 2022. https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/studie-100-prozent-der-zwoelfjaehrigen-in-deutschland-nutzen-ein-smartphone-100.html.
19   Julia Bell, *Radical Attention* (London: Peninsula Press, 2020).

How to Reclaim One's Attention and Form Meaningful Political Bonds

Prior to writing this article, Neghabat and I gave a workshop for the festival *DICE Berlin* on doomscrolling. We wanted to work with this topic and see how it would develop, and made some interesting observations about our bodies and our relationships to our smartphones. The workshop included tasks that had a DIY approach to breaking our habits of phone dependency. The first task was to switch off the phone. The second task was to look out of the window for five minutes. When we did that, I was the one to watch the time and get the participants back into the workshop after those five minutes. It was quite difficult for me. I was also one of the few people who still purposely had their smartphone turned on. While looking out of the window, I could observe myself getting nervous rather quickly. After two minutes, I looked at my phone. I had set a timer to get the participants back into the workshop. I thought I might not hear it, although I definitely would have, and did so three minutes later. But I could feel how quintessential my smartphone is to me, and how much it influences my habits—as well as my attention. Nonetheless, this physical experience showed me how to break the cycle of smartphone centeredness, and thus also doomscrolling. This text is an invitation to try and practice abstinence from your cell phone every once in a while, to reclaim your attention, forming more profound relationships with entities around you: articles, animals, people, comrades. To listen and observe for a little, to grasp a bit of time, as you have done so now, while reading this article.

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NOT LIKE OTHER #GIRLBOSSES: GENDER, WORK & THE #GATEKEEPING OF MEME CAPITAL

CHRISTINE H. TRAN

Memes for Her™

'A girl is just a boss you haven't met yet,' quips American comedian Kylie Brakeman in her viral TikTok about a 'girlboss who got to NYC 2 days ago.'[1] In a pink blazer and dress, she strolls through the street (or as she likes to call it, the '*she*et') of 'Womanhattan' and clarifies: 'I'm a lady CEO, which means I'm only in charge of the female employees.' Comprehension of Brakeman's video requires familiarity with a particular anti-heroine of digital content worlds: the girlboss.

This girlboss bears no agreed-upon visual iconography or uniform. There is no set of specific aesthetic codes we can point to and go 'There! That's a Girlboss!' In that sense, she is *not like other memes*; the girlboss is not a memetic 'icon' such as Pepe the Frog or Gritty.[2] The unifying thing about girlboss memes, as signaled by the name, is their overt engagement with *gender*, another unhelpfully amorphous category. Maybe you're more familiar with 'girlboss' as a keyword . Most famously, perhaps, is the mantra 'Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss,' which the meme archive site *Know Your Meme* identifies as coined by Twitter user @loltayuwu.[3]

Fig. 1: The mantra 'Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss' is photoshopped over a couch, by Twitter user @loltayuwu.

1   Kylie Brakeman (@deadeyebrakeman), "Girlboss who got to NYC 2 days ago" Twitter, August 22, 2021, https://twitter.com/deadeyebrakeman/status/1429446175481122817?lang=en.
2   Dustin A. Greenwalt and James Alexander McVey, "Get Gritty with It: Memetic Icons and the Visual Ethos of Antifascism." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2022): 158-179.
3   Loltayuwu, "Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss," Twitter January 18, 2021, https://twitter.com/loltayuwu/status/1351044731942350848?s=20&t=BDG1aWBONnClGOhbEmRd0w.

The meme plays with the well-known mantra 'Live, Laugh, Love,' an adage that is likewise heavily associated with gendered internet cultures (namely 'moms'). Following 'gatekeep' and 'gaslight,' 'girlboss' inverts the rhythms of this mantra into something more nefarious. Instead of complacency and presentism, the meme suggests a 'girlboss' pushes forward, towards her glorious future, no matter how many people she must psychologically and physically run over.

This rhetorical flexibility is what makes the girlboss so potent and so perilous in the sprawling (net)work of meme-making. Strolling down the memory lanes of 'Womanhattan', or at least watching the various convertibles crash as we sit on the curb, I try to trace '#girlboss' memes as they transform the neologism from corporate feminist mantra into memetic mockery. What material arrangements are behind the hashtag 'girlboss'? What do memes like @loltauwu's refuse, reclaim, and remix by evoking girl-ish bossery?

My friend and co-conspirator Erique Zhang and I have a long-standing joke that we are the founders of so-called 'Critical Girlboss studies'. This subfield will be a special issue in a journal, an edited book, or a country: we have yet to decide.[4] Where 'bossery' meets 'girlhood', this portmanteau reveals the diversity of attitudes we extend to both these sites of power-struggle in mass digital culture. Whether hurrahed or heckled, to #girlboss is to pursue neoliberal values of individual *choicehood* as the primary vector of women's liberation from market misogyny—even as girlboss memers might themselves be critical of the collective hustling and capital-chasing within digital culture. Looking more broadly at the construction of *gender* in select girlboss memes that were popularized into the early 2020s, I aspire to build a holistic understanding of the cultural struggles that constellate around this entre-HER-neur.

Girlboss: Origins of a Political Econo-SHE

While the 'girlboss' found in popular internet memes refuses visual uniformity, she is birthed from specific material conditions: nearly all attempts to build a genealogy of 'girlboss' in the popular vernacular originate from the 2014 autobiography #*Girlboss* by American entrepreneur Sophia Amoruso, later adapted into a Netflix series of the same name. Popular news articles from the late 2010s and early 2020s heavily cite Amoruso's book in defining the girlboss as a woman 'whose success is defined in opposition to the masculine business world in which she swims upstream'.[5]

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4   Zhang clarified, as we presented our 'A Media Theory of Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss' roundtable at the 72nd annual conference for the International Communications Association, 'that this is not a joke'.

5   Keith A. Spencer, "'I Care a Lot' is a Stinging Indictment of Neoliberal 'girlboss' Feminism," *Salon*, February 26, 2021, https://www.salon.com/2021/02/26/i-care-a-lot-neoliberal-girlboss-feminism-critique/.

The girlboss thus floats to us in this relationship of *opposition*; she is both *not* like other businessmen, but also *Not Like Other Girls*, in being a memetic trope worthy of its own chapters. Before her literary success, Amoruso was known as the founder of *NastyGal*, a fashion retail venture which began as her eBay shop, before developing into a business of its own. Amoruso's subsequent ventures produced a cult of personality around the audacity of 'girlbosses' and 'nasty gals', centering on Amoruso herself. This meteoric rise would lead *The New York Times* to call Amoruso 'the Cinderella for tech.'[6] Less of a fairy tale, however, were the accusations of workplace abuse: just one year after her book's publishing, four women sued Amoruso and NastyGal for firing them right after pregnancy. In 2015, Amoruso would step down from her role as NastyGal CEO.

The meteoric rise and fall of this archetypical girlboss is integral background for understanding the path laid out by others stamped with the label #girlboss. Moving beyond the spheres of business and fashion, #girlboss has imprinted itself onto real-world female figures associated with personal ambition—from US Presidential candidate Hilary Clinton to disgraced Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes. As a *Politico* headline asks: 'Elizabeth Holmes: Girlboss or Victim?'[7]

In addition to internet memes, the ironic veneration for Holmes as a *girl* who *bosses* manifested in girlboss-themed merchandise for the founder, who was disgraced for criminal fraud convictions related to her company's faulty technologies. See Fig. 2,[8] where *The Guardian* drew on images of Holmes' 'girlboss' themed shirts to form a testimony of a broader cult of personality around Holmes, similar to that of Amoruso. The memetic nature of this merchandise testifies to the importance of the amorphous thing that is 'meme culture', one that helps to circulate these meaning systems. In the meme depicted in Fig. 2, bold text sits below a blown-up image of a woman's face, as if to exaggerate the juxtaposition between Holmes' fraudulence and irreverence denoted by 'girlboss'.

Beyond reality, the term has also been circulated to describe fictional anti-heroines of contentious 'She Did That' revenge cinema such as Amy Dunne in *Gone Girl* or the eponymous Cruella De Vil. Both the leftist political journal *Jacobin*[9] and mass media

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6   Nicole Perroth, "Naughty in Name Only," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2013, https://www. nytimes.com/2013/03/25/technology/nasty-gal-an-online-start-up-is-a-fast-growing-retailer.html.

7   Katelyn Fossett, "Elizabeth Holmes: Girlboss or Victim?" *Politico,* July 1, 2022. https://www.politico. com/newsletters/women-rule/2022/01/07/elizabeth-holmes-girlboss-or-victim-495630.

8   Image from Elizabet Homles Etsy Shop, accessed 7 June 2022 from: Kari Paul, "Rise of the Holmies: The merch inspired by the Theranos 'girboss'," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2021, https://www. theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/01/rise-of-the-holmies-the-merch-inspired-by-the-theranos-girlboss.

9   Eileen Jones, "Did They Just Turn Cruella de Vil into a Girl Boss?" *Jacobin*,June 12, 2021, https:// jacobin.com/2021/06/cruella-disney-girl-boss-film-review.

commentator *The Vulture* used 'girlboss' in headlines of their movie reviews to consider this infusion of gender and business politics in the Disney villainess vehicle.[10]

Fig. 2: One of the many 'boss' themed merchandise venerating the disgraced Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes, from the WeAreElizabethHolmes Etsy shop.

These headlines are important to observe in the context of analyzing the meme ecosystem: they demonstrate the influence of memetic mantras over popular commentators, such as critics and journalists. Girlboss thus became a kind of affective infrastructure to signal transformation of womanhood in relation to agency and capital.

It might be better to compare 'girlboss' and the subsequent 'Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss' as a kind of 'copypasta', which Robert Topinka sees as 'a paradoxical form' and 'an archetype of a digital culture that is often defined by the circulation of content' which 'nevertheless refuses its own content. It coagulates digital affects but holds a position against digital flows.'[11] Topinka goes on to think of copypastas as reactionary mediums, opposing reform. Again, we return to the formal origins of NastyGirl and Amoruso: the girlboss swims upstream, in *opposition*.

News headlines in the early 2020s provided literary opposition to the ideas embodied by girlbossing. Headlines ranging from 'The decline of the girlboss?

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10   Angela Jade Bastién, "Cruella Is the Girl-Bossification of the Madwoman," *Vulture,* May 29, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/cruella-review.html.
11   Robert Topinka, "The Politics of Anti-Discourse: Copypasta, the Alt-Right, and the Rhetoric of Form," *Theory & Event* 25, no. 2: 393.

Post-pandemic she's more ubiquitous than ever'[12] in *The Guardian* to *Vox* features offering an 'explanation' of the Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss meme delivered many a critical reassessment. *Vox* provided a summary, contextualized within widespread media stories of seemingly empowered female managers being exposed. Thus, '"girlboss"' shifted culturally from a noun to a *verb*, one that describes the sinister process of capitalist success and hollow female '"empowerment."'[13]

Under the lens of media studies, 'girlboss' recalls certain approaches to post-feminism—a term which, just like the girlboss herself, travels through histories of memes, platforms, and industry to gain *anti-meaning*. Rosalind Gill saw 'post-feminism' as a *sensibility*, rather than a historical political movement: a 'shift from objectification to subjectivation', a 'focus on individuals, choice and empowerment.'[14] To those of us navigating the pandemic economy—so, in fact, all of us—the girlboss offers a cultural vocabulary to express certain exasperations regarding the realities of female popular empowerment: exploitation, the limits of bootstraps, and the feminization of work.

Rather than a 'sensibility', we can also understand the 'girlboss' as an ether: a cloud of yearning, rhetoric, and persuasion, convincing us to consider the communicative and often feminized work that is at the heart of networked cultures. Via network culture's demand that we all 'like,' 'share' and 'host' content on their websites, social media platforms enlist users of all genders into 'emotional' labor that has long characterized historical approaches to 'women's work'. Looking at work through this post-feminist haze is necessary to locate the girlboss: for she herself is an ambivalent site of refusals, confused attitudes about work, and cluttered celebrations of a specific kind of girlhood attached to self-starter ship and agency. As a global pandemic shoved us into our homes, turning bedrooms and kitchen tables into assembly lines and offices, many white-collar workers felt the dystopian dimensions of feeling like your own boss, swimming against the currents of (capitalist) doom. However, we cannot blame anyone for being fed up with girlbossing. In stepping aside to laugh (at the girlboss or yourself), you create a space of relief from the digital hustle that has come for many in a platform-(un)ready world.

As a global pandemic further destabilized economic security for (future) generations, the would-be girlbosses—who were supposed to make the most of the spoils of both public and personal prosperity—became targets of a specific kind of rage. Many us of are fraying under online trends: the way the platforms that host these popular meme pages task

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12   Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, "The Decline of the Girlboss? Post-pandemic, She's More Ubiquitous than Ever," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/01/decline-girlboss-culture-career-queen.
13   Alex Abad-Santos, "The Death of the Girlboss," *Vox*, June 7, 2021, https://www.vox.com/22466574/gaslight-gatekeep-girlboss-meaning.
14   Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 147.

us to always be 'on', to post that update, that story, that meme, *build engagement and your empire*. Angela McRobbie uses the 'feminization of labor' to describe the conditions wherein post-Fordist work arrangements increasingly demand the affective labor skills of relationship management we usually stereotype as 'women's work.'[15] Amidst these tenors of labor, girlboss memes and their propensity to gatekeep hold up a glossy mirror to the nefarious interdependencies looming beneath the glamour of digital work.

Gatekeeping, or 'They Hate to See a Girlboss Winning'

Is it, for example, helpful to think about the girlboss' appeal by asking what it is she defends? What *exactly* is the girlboss gatekeeping? What social capital does she allegedly hoard within her parameters? The association of memes with social networks, culture hoarding, and literacy, has provided a framework to play the girlboss upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which views social power as *constructed* around the command of privileged skillsets. Gaming memes in particular provide an interesting framework to think of while looking at the girlboss. Mia Consalvo, for one, has extended Bourdieu's concept of social capital towards a framework of 'gaming capital' as a way of looking at the entanglement of knowledge, fashion, currency, and skill in the construction of gamer identity. Like the 'girlboss,' the 'gamer' constructs themselves around shiftable cultural ideas of whose play is 'legit' in the paratext of gaming culture, from magazines to forums and mod culture.[16] Likewise, memes are pivotal paratexts at the intersection of gaming and girlboss culture. One needs only to witness the ascent of the 'e-girl' from a slur to a TikTok meme and/or persona category, which allowed for many female streamers to professionalize a rather ambivalent relationship to a hostile culture, by means of beating those that throw slurs to the punch.[17]

Girlboss memes, like the e-girl, bring into view how the work of looking, being, and presenting as gendered online acts as a precursor to various forms of online commodification. This is visible whether that business is playing games for 'simps' (a term for men driven to social and economic 'submission' in the face of women they desire) or managing an MLM (multi-level marketing business, or, lately, a derivate for an online business that can push vendors into social and economic submissions as indebted customers of their own beauty products). *Vox* offers the following by way of explanation: 'Maybe mocking the girlboss to the point of redefinition takes back a little of that power. Redefined through comedy, she turns into a joke. The girlboss can't hurt you if you can laugh at her.'[18]

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15   Angela McRobbie, "Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist Regime," *New Formations* 70, no. 1 (2011): 60-76.

16   Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

17   Tran, Christine H, "Never Battle Alone: Egirls and the War on Video Game Livestreaming as 'Real Work'," *Television & New Media* 23, no. 5 (2022): 509-520.

18   Alex Abad-Santos, "The Death of the Girlboss*," Vox*, June 7, 2021, https://www.vox.com/22466574/gaslight-gatekeep-girlboss-meaning.

Fig. 3: Screenshot of the Evergreen on meme-dictionary Know Your Meme as a archetype offshoot of the 'They Hate to See a Girlboss Winning' copypasta. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/they-hate-to-see-a-girlboss-winning.

In this negotiation of laughter and emotion, memes put us to work in ways that are gendered. The act of 'sharing' emotions is the foundation of digital culture, but it is also something historically associated with women's labor (freely given, network-y, circulatory). Does a study of *Critical Girlboss Memes* focus on what *cannot* be shared? Gatekeeping, that middle child stuck in the middle of the phrase Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss, takes on an especially feminized register in a post 'Mean Girl' mediascape. Through it echoes the same mean sentence: '*No! You can't sit with us!'* Girlboss memes are, furthermore, a way to refuse: refusing to engage with your gender as a vehicle for capitalism.

These dynamics can be expressed through one of the many copypastas sprouting from the girlboss adage 'They hate to see a girlboss winning.' Meme dictionary *Know Your Meme* uses the example given here in Fig. 3,[19] which shows the infamous Evergreen ship that basically halted capitalism, albeit briefly. The Evergreen, portrayed as a gatekeeping girlboss, brings into sharp, dreadful relief the dreaded affinity between meme makers and cultural influencers. Meme makers are viewed as annoying, inconvenient, literally 'in the way'—like a massive ship blocking the Suez Canal. We are invited to read the Evergreen as a 'girlboss' because she (physically) refuses to make herself small for the commercial transactions of others. Shipping containers (perhaps like memes and online moderators) are mediums of telegraphy: vibe sharing machines. This commercial, massive, and industrial vessel for sharing calls more attention to itself than, say, the swipe of a digital share on Twitter or Instagram. The digital housekeeping work of managing these

19   Umar Johnson. "Suez Canal Jam," Know Your Meme, March 25, 2021. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2055270-they-hate-to-see-a-girlboss-winning.

shares, fielding DMs, watching the chat, checking emails, and other things interpreted as 'menial' become elided for a moment under the (pseudo-feminist) refusal to effectively communicate. Here, the girlboss of the Evergreen unveils the infrastructures that are rendered invisible between internet users and those who supply the online LOLZ.

Fig. 4: Girlboss meme from Instagram meme account @venerealdisneys.

While the following meme is not strictly speaking a 'gatekeep' meme, I wish to argue that this edit, taken from the Instagram user Venerealdisneys,[20] functions similarly to the Evergreen meme as a diffuser of discourse around the feminization of cultural work:

Is it girlboss to 'forget 9/11'? Here, *to girlboss* signals a peculiar irreverence, an anti-knowledge. The aesthetics of the woman depicted in the image are juxtaposed with the image of racialized children behind her. This image tells us we hold the potential to simply close our eyes in the face of sorrow, and 'bimbofy' your anti-memory about global events using your 'girlboss' privilege, which becomes a means of synonymizing, short handing, or downright eliding white privilege. This meme is one of thousands that uses the copypasta 'They hate to see a girlboss…' as a political reaction to the menace that white, 'girlboss' feminism inflicts upon the Global South and other regions. It remains to be seen to what extent this global gatekeeping works as a substantial feminist critique.

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20 @venerealdisneys, "Sry guys," Instagram, June 5, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CecVRy3M9-D/.

However: why is gatekeeping *feminized* work? Is it the association of women as boundary-keepers, securing the boundaries between the public and the private, between home and work, etc.? In Fordist economies, normative definitions of fun and passion worked to effectively legitimize the unequal, gendered division of labor that in turn justified unpaid work (mothering, social organizing). In today's economy, users are enticed to build emotional attachments to their platform creations. Memes such as 'They Hate to See a Girlboss Winning' refer to an atypical misogyny, which some creators face for being visible over others. Much has been scholastically made of 'visibility' and its power in the content creator economy: to be seen is to be followed, and to be followed is to be engaged with, and to be engaged with is to transmute memes and other digital texts into an *income*. Yet for women and other marginalized people, to be noticed or be 'seen winning' can be a precursor to resentment, suspicion, harassment, and exclusion from a space you even helped create. Do we really *hate* to see a girlboss winning? Or are we closing our eyes to the complexity of our own culpability as users of the attention economy?

Conclusions: Were We Gaslit?

Across gender categories, digital networks have amplified the means (and therefore memes?) for pursuing this dream of having it all. One way of cultivating a following on a platform is, after all, mining likes via laughs. So, then, can a hugely popular meme page be the building block to girlbossing a media empire? Is the girlboss integrally a *memer*?

For what it is worth—and maybe that's, in fact, not a lot—Sophia Amoruso, our OG Nasty Gal, thinks the TikTok in Fig. 5, which makes fun of Girlbosses, is quite funny. Brakeman posted on Twitter that the businesswoman commented on her video with the praising words: 'The cultural runoff #girlboss is beyond worthy of satire... [sic] Thank you!'[21]

Fig. 5: A comment from Sophia Aamoruso on Brakeman's TikTok. Brakeman screenshotted this from TikTok to share on her Twitter account, as the titular girlboss praises her own parody.

That Amuroso herself sees this TikTok as a 'runoff' testifies to the limits of critiquing any media—not just girlboss memes—through the question 'Does this empower us/you/me/

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21   Kylie Brakeman (@deadeyedbrakeman), "When I put this on TikTok a few days ago I got a comment from the LITERAL INVENTOR OF GIRLBOSS 😂,' Twitter, August 21, 2021, https://twitter.com/deadeyebrakeman/status/1429446546442145796.

her?' When even the girlboss of all girlbosses is 'in' on the joke, how radical can it be to laugh? Amuroso might not see the horrors of workplace safety violations, or the retail workers in the Global South being exploited in fast fashion supply chains. Today, as I am writing, girl bossing has been so popularized in our vernacular that it is less accurate to depict her as an oppositional object, swimming against the current. Rather, memes such as Brakeman's and the 'Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss' one opened the flood gates for something a little more nefarious: ironic detachment as swimming *past* the lives crushed under the currents of capital.

To what extent, I wonder, does reifying the girlboss as this figure of individual mockery also overshadow the collective livelihoods of the underclasses exploited in the name of feminized entrepreneurship? Just as memes dislocate keywords from their original meaning(s), this decontextualization can offer us a tool to gaslight the girlboss herself. Such tools return us to the aspirations[22] of Zhang and myself, within Critical Girlboss Studies. Girlbossing forward, does adopting the language of entrepreneurship limit our media scholarship's ability to imagine a future beyond the traditionally kept gates? Just as the word *girlboss* brings together and blurs the imaginaries surrounding gender and work, we can ask ourselves what, exactly, a critical meme history can forget in its pursuit to flatten out complex issues in bold text findings. There is no gaslighting ourselves, as media scholars, out of simply doing the work.

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22   Zhang would like to clarify again, that Critical Girlboss Studies is not a joke.

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A WORLD CRITICIZED THROUGH MEMES

MEMES IN THE GALLERY: A PARTY INSIDE AN IMAGE ECOLOGY

MARIJN BRIL

Fig. 1: The Party at Weserhalle. Source: https://weserhalle.com/event/cem-a-aka-freeze_magazine/.

Images are fleeting. They are shared across social media, re-shared as low-quality screenshots, moving between digital interfaces and physical environments. Our collective unconscious consists in no small part of pop-culture references, and today, increasingly, memes. I often find myself trying to make a joke referencing a particular meme, only to find the other person confused by my description of the image I had presumed to be well-known. What a shock it must be, then, to suddenly see one of these images latently present in your subconscious appear in full physicality. This is exactly what happened in Berlin last summer: peering into the Weserhalle gallery in Neukölln, located on the Weserstraße, passers-by were illuminated by a familiar meme with the text 'They don't know how to make a meme exhibition'.

From August 6 to 29, 2021, @freeze_magazine presented their first solo exhibition at the gallery Weserhalle in Berlin, titled *The Party*. The installation portrayed a collection of memes that follow the *They Don't Know* format, presented in a literal white cube. @freeze_magazine, run by Cem A. (he/they), is a semi-anonymous meme account on Instagram with over 120k followers, posting daily memes satirizing the art world through a 'hyper-reflexive and self-deprecating lens', exploring topics such as precarious labor, art-speak, elitism, and art-curator relationships.[1]

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1   Weserhalle, "The Party @freeze_magazine," Weserhalle, accessed September 2022, <https://weserhalle.com/ event/cem-a-aka-freeze_magazine/>.

As an embodiment of networked image culture, *The Party* was initially shared (and re-shared) as an online meme, turned into a physical installation, and finally found its way back to the internet as an installation shot. As such, *The Party* follows the logic of expanded internet art as defined by art historian Cecile Moss. Moss adds the adjective 'expanded' to internet art, designating art with an open-ended approach. Evolving within a networked situation, this genre effortlessly oscillates between networked data files and physical materials. One example is Artie Vierkant's *Image Object series*, in which he turns digital files into sculptures, captures them in a gallery setting, and then digitally manipulates the images.[2] As expanded internet artworks move between states, the gallery only presents one instance of the work—not necessarily the most important one. In his influential essay *Dispersion*, Seth Price questions the primary status of physical art spectatorship, as other modes of viewing or engaging might be richer in comparison: 'What happens when a more intimate, thoughtful, and enduring understanding comes from mediated discussions of an exhibition, rather than from a direct experience of the work?'[3]

I didn't make it to Berlin last summer. My view of *The Party* happened entirely from the comfort of my own couch. As a secondary audience, my understanding of the exhibition is based on online images and videos, reviews by other authors, and an interview with the artist. However, my viewing of the meme and the re-circulated exhibition-image is a primary position, as these images are digitally native. As I intensively engage with *The Party* from a secondary viewing position, immediacy is taken over by an extended engagement.

Usually, memes circulate solely within online environments, illuminating users' faces as they stare at images and texts on their personal devices. As a physical installation in a gallery, *The Party* escapes the constraints of the screen yet still feeds back into the internet. What does it mean for *The Party* to incorporate the gallery space in its image ecology? To properly analyze all of the layers and interrelations of the modes of the work, I will be talking about *The Party* on its three distinct levels: (1) the image level of the online meme, (2) the exhibition level of the physical exhibition at Weserhalle, and (3) the exhibition-image level of the online re-circulated exhibition shot. On the image level, I will trace the history and meaning of the *They Don't Know* meme and discuss how memes relate to art history. On the exhibition level, the affective gallery experience comes up and here I will discuss the role of humor and critique in the white cube. On the exhibition-image level, I question how *The Party* reflects on its image ecology.

Image Level | *They Don't Know* Memes Build on Art History

Wojak stands in the corner—holding a drink, staring into space, uncomfortably shuffling his feet on the floor—while two couples dance in front of him. He is also referred to as 'That feel

2   Ceci Moss, *Expanded Internet Art: Twenty-first Century Artistic Practice and the Informational Milieu* (New York City: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

3   Seth Price, *Dispersion* (New York City: 38th Street Publishers, 2008).

guy', whose state is described as 'in pain but dealing with it'. Wojak is a popular character found on the internet, often evoking feelings of sadness, despair, and melancholy.[4] In his position of alienation, he feels excluded by others as well as actively excluding them through his thoughts, because, as he sees it, 'They don't know . . .'.

In this essay, I follow Limor Shifman's definition of memes as 'a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; that were created with awareness of each other; and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.'[5] This definition emphasizes that this particular meme cannot be analyzed as a separate entity, but instead has to be understood as part of a bigger ecology: namely, its meme template and @freeze_magazine's account.

The image macro of the *They Don't Know* meme has its origin in 2009, when it was posted with the text 'I wish I was at home playing video games. The music is too loud. My feet hurt. I'm hungry.' On November 28, 2020, the *They Don't Know* format was introduced by the Twitter user @urmomlolroasted, with a new text 'They don't know I am mildly popular on left Twitter.' Over the next few days, revisions of this meme followed, exploring the discrepancy of online popularity in offline social settings.[6] @freeze_magazine first used the template on December 1 that year, with the text 'I bet these people don't know anything about art', followed by 'They don't know we're in a white cube.'
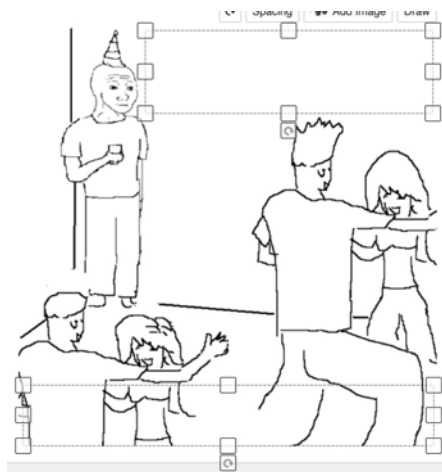

Fig. 2: The They Don't Know template. Screenshot from https://imgflip.com/memegenerator/284929871/They-dont-know.

4   Wikipedia, "Wojak," Wikipedia, last updated May 7, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wojak.

5   Limor Shifman, *Memes in digital culture* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015), 7.

6   "I Wish I Was at Home / They Don't Know," Know Your Meme, last updated 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-wish-i-was-at-home-they-dont-know.

When looking at memes with the lens of an art historian, many similarities can be found between @freeze_magazine's meme-making practice and canonical art movements. Recombining images and texts, the basic strategy of meme-making, was part of avant-garde practices such as Dada and Surrealism.[7] The media scholar Bradely E. Wiggins argues that memes are art because they respond to real-life events; just like Duchamp's ready-mades, memes question what art is and what art can be.[8] Taking part in the memetic spectacle shares a similar sentiment to early Dada art, phrased as 'the world is crazy but at least we can make art.'[9] The artist and writer Alice Bucknell argues that the subversive character of memes places them within the tradition of postmodernist art movements. Dissolving boundaries between high and low culture and disrupting the concepts of authenticity and originality bears resemblance to pop art, performance art, and conceptual art. Due to its ephemeral and low-stakes economy, Bucknell sees memes as *performances* rather than merely visual objects.[10]

Next to this, though, we can see how some inherent characteristics of memes are very different from the dynamics of the art world. The curator and theorist Mike Watson argues that memes exist outside of the realm of high art, as they are not subject to the same power struggles or market logic of the culture industry. As memes are self-referential, infinitely reproducible, often semi-anonymous, viral, symbolic, and dank, they become the modern-day icon of intersectional class criticism while at times exploring polarizing conversations through extreme-right rhetoric.[11] Turning Watson's argument around: as soon as memes *do* materialize in the gallery as one of a kind-pieces, they possibly lose their special powers as an arts-outsider.

Zooming in on recent art discourse, the arguments Watson addresses to place memes outside the traditional art market simultaneously place memes within a post-internet discourse. Memes share many, if not all, characteristics that are mentioned by Artie Vierkant in his definition of post-internet art: 'Post-Internet is defined as a result of the contemporary moment: inherently informed by ubiquitous authorship, the development of attention as currency, the collapse of physical space in networked culture, and the infinite reproducibility and mutability of digital materials.'[12]

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7   Eckart Voigts, "Memes and Recombinant Appropriation: Remix, Mashup, Parody," in *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

8   Bradley E. Wiggins and G Bret Bowers, "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 11 (May 2014): 1886-1906.

9   Bradley E. Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, and Intertextuality* (New York City: Routledge, 2019), 133.

10   Alice Bucknell, "What Memes Owe to Art History," *Artsy*, May 30, 2017, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-memes-owe-art-history.

11   Michael Robert Watson, *Can the Left Learn to Meme? Adorno, Video gaming, and Stranger Things* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2019).

12   Artie Vierkant, "The Image Object Post-Internet," *JstChillin*, 2010, http:// <https://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_a4.pdf.

Be it for their formal strategies or subversive identity, placing memes in a canonical art context acknowledges their place in the arts and defies their supposed 'newness'. The aforementioned art movements are often placed as part of the history of digital and post-internet art, for the networked character of memes sits best with post-internet discourse. As a meme account, @freeze_magazine might however not be subject to the logic of the traditional art market, as they operate within an informational milieu of the (attention) economy of the internet.

At the time of writing this essay, @freeze_magazine has been posting critical art memes daily for about 2.5 years. This dedication and consistency follows the internet art logic of the 'net presence' as mentioned by writer and curator Gene McHugh, who states that creativity is not evaluated based on one work, but rather through the ongoing engagement and presence on the net that is continuously felt by the audience.[13] Through responding quickly and daily to news and development in the arts, @freeze_magazine is much more than a collection of images: the account operates as a durational performance, becoming more and more prominent in the arts. It is precisely because of its popularity as well as the net presence of @freeze_magazine that an exhibition such as *The Party* is possible.

Exhibition Level | Critiquing the Arts from Within

How to pick up a meme from the internet and carry it into the gallery? How to translate a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional space? While talking to Cem from @freeze_magazine, they emphasized that their practice is digital-first: 'the physical meme wouldn't challenge the digital meme as the primary artwork.' Artistically and curatorially, the installation remains close to the meme-image, emphasizing its flat and digital screen-based nature.

The Party employs deconstruction techniques, literally cutting up the meme: the separate elements of the drawing, Wojak, the two couples, plus the text are all presented on different screens. Only from a particular viewing angle do the screens perceptually form the image—presenting a spatial picture through the medium of flatness. As such, it uses a memetic remix and cut-up strategy, highlighting this essential characteristic of memes. Even the characters themselves appear deconstructed upon close viewing, as the large pixels present seemingly hand-drawn lines in low-quality fashion.

Over the running time of eleven minutes, 40 different phrases appear above Wojak's head, like message bubbles giving a glimpse into his inner world—ranging from meme history, art discourses, and elitism, to (non-political) art's influence on politics.

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13   Gene McHugh, *Post internet: Notes on the Internet and Art*, 12.29.09, 09.05.10 (Brescia: Link Editions, 2011).

'They don't know how to make a meme exhibition' subtly critiques how memes are often presented as paintings or prints in galleries, rendering them as objects rather than acknowledging their digital and networked nature.
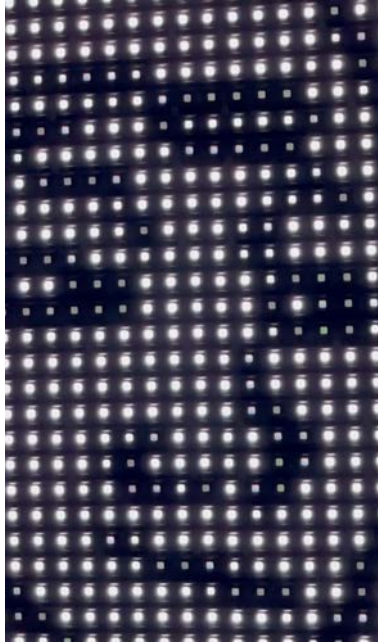

Fig. 3: Deconstructed Wojak. Screenshot from Instagram reel from @Weserhalle, posted on August 23 2021, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CS6rGgjHWsq/.

Phrases such as 'They don't know art is a competition' and 'They don't know cultural facilitator is just a fancy way to say unemployed' voice the realities of working within the art world. Interestingly, @freeze_magazine thematizes precarity within the white cube through memes whilst getting (rightfully!) paid for making a physical installation, portraying the financial discrepancy between digital and physical artistic labor. The phrases might seem to touch on a complex variety of subjects, but they are all connected through themes of exclusion, alienation, and precarity, ultimately presenting a simulacrum of cultural capital: appearing to be part of the arts, yet not receiving real acknowledgement or any financial remuneration.

The work is primarily created to be viewed from the street, yet one can enter the gallery if they book an appointment—as long the visitor takes off their shoes upon entering the premises, to prevent leaving any traces of their physical presence.[14]

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14   Annika Goretzki, "No-Shoe Policy and Decelerated Meme Consumption," *Petrus Entertainment*, https://petrusentertainment.net/archive/review_theparty/review_thepartyEN.html.

Fig. 4: Screenshot from Instagram story by @Weserhalle posted August 2021.

Cem described the affective experience of *The Party* as 'falling into a phone.' Large advertising screens intended for outdoor use create a very bright light and, despite the presence of ventilators, heat up the room. Chunky cables that connect the screens to the power sockets are clearly visible. The floor is painted white, creating an archetypical white cube: a brightly lit room. The 'falling into a phone' experience underlines the material reality of memes and networked culture in general: these image ecologies do not exist outside of interfaces, screens, cables, and electricity. One can imagine it might be somewhat uncomfortable to be physically present in the exhibition space. As such, the affective qualities of *The Party* follow a widely shared critique of the white cube as a space intended for eyes and minds, not bodies.[15] Because this critique is seen and felt, *The Party* creates an embodied spectator who is engaged through various senses—light intensity, heat, and sound.

Seen through the lens of expanded internet art, memes in an exhibition space are just one version of a larger network, as the work exists not just in single units but in a dynamic movement between states. Whereas Moss predominantly discussed visually expanded internet artworks, *The Party* (possibly accidentally) exceeds solely visual

15   Brain O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

viewing by creating a multi-sensorial exhibition experience. The adjective 'expanded' in expanded internet art points to its continuously evolving and shifting nature, suggesting that the genre may in turn embrace this additional viewing experience.

Fig. 5: Instagram post by @jonrafmancellectuals on December 16, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CI342OAlXIx/.

Presenting humorous critique of the arts within the white cube has a way of destabilizing the natural order of things. Various scholars have discussed memes as a form of carnivalesque resistance. Building on medieval carnival—in which common people would come together through humor, political and social commentary—carnivalesque resistance is defined by diverse viewpoints.[16] Similarly, *The Party* critiques the arts lightheartedly, using humor to engage people in a critical perspective. Humor and the arts have a tricky relationship, as funny artworks are easily labelled as *too banal* or technically lacking. But are they, perhaps, not serious enough for a cultural industry that, at times, might take itself *too* seriously? The fact that humor is used as a tool to present a critical message might be why *The Party* is more easily considered an artwork—similarly to how surrealist art employed humor for voicing social critique.[17] As humor can support affective complexities beyond polarized conversation,[18] @freeze_magazine problematizes their art world critique as communication barriers between individuals, not particularly pointing fingers and adding a dose of self-parody.

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16   Idil Galip, "'The 'Grotesque' in Internet Memes," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, eds. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: The Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 27-41, and Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (New York City: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

17   Jen Webb, "Serious Business: Art, Laughter, Distinction," *Southern Review* 31, no.2 (1999): 206–213.

18   Susan Best, "Tickled Pink: Laughter as Institutional Critique," in *Reason and Emotion* (Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, 2004), 98-99.

Ultimately this strategy aims at reaching large audiences through engagement, thus normalizing the posing of critical questions rather than taking things just as they are.

Due to their critical attitude towards the arts, it is easy to connect @freeze_magazine's work to institutional critique. In our conversation, Cem, the artist, said they disagree with institutional critique's binary approach (the individual vs the institution) and its elitist tone of 'art for art's people.' However, Hito Steyerl's discussion of the third wave of Institutional Critique, the move of integration into precarity, brings interesting arguments to the meme table. In increasingly market-driven museum spaces, artists only temporarily reside in art institutions and need other endeavors to keep their practice sustainable.[19] Similarly, *The Party* is only temporarily housed in a gallery context: its *real* (albeit precarious) home is on the net.

In discussions of the post-medium, Lev Manovich argues that the material basis can no longer serve to distinguish between what is and what is not art.[20] As *The Party* consists of advertising screens—which are not a traditional art medium—its sociological and economic aspects differentiate the gallery exhibition from their own Instagram account. That is, *The Party* varies in audience size (significantly smaller than their following on Instagram), its mechanism of distribution (in the street, rather than online), and the number of copies (only one gallery presentation instead of a limitless number of images). Even though memes themselves follow internet logic rather than traditional art market logic, the exhibition complies with the unwritten rules of galleries, positioning the meme installation both metaphorically and *literally* in the art system. The work can thus potentially be seen as subversive within a contemporary art context due to its centering of digital culture, whereas a (post-medium) digital art context is familiar with its strategies of bridging mass culture and arts. By interplaying humorous critique within a partly archetypical exhibition design, *The Party* questions what an exhibition template is, as both a collection of sellable objects and a social construct.

Exhibition-Image Level | Everybody is Invited

On this last level of the work, images of the exhibition *The Party* at Weserhalle start to circulate back on the internet. Paradoxically, this 'last' level of the work is, for many viewers, the *first* glimpse they get of the artwork. A primary viewing experience inside the physical gallery space is only possible for a select few: most viewers have a secondary viewing experience, looking at the representation of the exhibition on the internet, be it on the gallery's website, visitors' social media accounts, or in print publications.

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19   Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, eds Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFlyBooks), 278-285.
20   Lev Manovich, "Post-Media Aesthetics," in *A Decade of Discourse on Digital Culture*, eds Marsha Kinder and Tara McPherson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

The Party's exhibition shots can roughly be divided into (1) official installation shots by the artist themselves; (2) photos by visitors; (3) photos turned into memes by visitors; and (4), memes on shitposting accounts. The official installation shot of *The Party* is posted on @freeze_magazine and thus becomes part of the meme performance—clearly portraying the idea that presenting the meme as an exhibition is a meme in itself. Other types of photos are out of the artist's control, as meme-ing has to be an organic process. Gallery visitors take selfies and photos of friends in the space or memeify the exhibition by remixing texts. As shitpost accounts satirize *The Party*, the meme travels outside of mainstream contexts. These various categories of imagery created by different agents turn the exhibition into a space for remixing and appropriation—turning the image ecology of *The Party* itself participatory. This re-circulation of the exhibition photos on the internet is an essential element of the image ecology of *The Party*. If the exhibition shot were not to further circulate online and be remixed by various people, *The Party* could not be perceived as a meme itself (think of Shiffman's focus on circulation and participation). The physical display becomes a node within the image ecology, a step outside of the internet that would return to the digital world at a later time.

Fig. 6: Instagram post by @jonrafmancellectuals on August 8, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CSUzf_sh0Hh/.

One could argue that *The Party* is specifically created for online (re-)circulation, as its white cube setting and frontal viewing position make for good photos. Author Brian Droitcour sharply criticized this circulatory aspect of post-internet art back in 2014, denouncing 'art made for its own installation shots, or installation shots presented as art' as a strategy used

by galleries to sell art.[21] *The Party* does not directly comment on the attention economy of image flows, but rather employs it within the work, which could be criticized as being a commercial strategy.

Funnily enough, the advertisement screens are so bright that they create noise once filmed by a camera. This unintentional side effect makes it harder to capture *The Party* on film. In Cem's view, this ties in well with the concept of the exhibition, as it underlines how the *real* experience of *The Party* is a physical one. In this way, the work indirectly makes a critical note on its own image ecology: the installation cannot and will not be reduced to its representation. In addition, *The Party* underlines the materiality of that same image ecology by magnifying its material properties. The participatory aspect stimulates interpretation by the audience, allowing for new meaning-making. As such, the re-circulated image exceeds a merely representational function and transcends Droitcour's critique of post-internet art. Even though the work invites and celebrates viewers to participate in its image ecology, the full experience of *The Party* as an exhibition remains an embodied one.

Conclusion

On the image level, @freeze_magazine's daily critique of all things revolving around the art world becomes a durational performance. On the exhibition level, *The Party* presents its critique in an archetypical white cube, questioning the exhibition template as a collection of commodified objects as well as a social construct, simultaneously creating an embodied spectator. On the exhibition-image level, the image ecology of *The Party* becomes participatory, yet underlines how the installation cannot be reduced to its own representation.

Presenting the *They Don't Know* meme in a gallery is the ultimate self-referential challenge: to what extent does online fame reverberate in an offline social environment? As the digital meme(-practice) is the primary artwork, *The Party* can be seen as a temporary extension and/or expansion of the performance by @freeze_magazine. Whereas in the digital sphere @freeze_magazine critiques developments in the arts, entering the gallery space allows them to set an example by doing things differently. Specifically, their critique of the presentation of memes as commodified prints and paintings is subverted by *The Party*'s artistic and curatorial translation strategies. All in all, @freeze_magazine's temporary gallery exhibition might open new doors for meme practices within the arts.

Returning to Price's provocation, from personal experience I can say that an extended secondary viewing position is intriguing and rich, even though it no doubt misses out on some of the affective qualities of the work, such as heat and all-around bright light. The complex use of the image ecology in *The Party* dives into the ever-evolving 'expanded'

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21   Brain Droitcour, "The Perils of Post-internet Art," *Art in America*, October 29, 2014, https://www. artnews.com/art-in-america/features/the-perils-of-post-internet-art-63040.

adjective within the concept of expanded internet art, challenging this idea to see where its current boundaries might need re-evaluation. When a meme becomes an affective installation, then becomes a meme which becomes a meta-meme, memes are no longer *just images*.

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GET IN LOSER WE'RE CRITICIZING THE ART WORLD: MEMES AS THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

MANIQUE HENDRICKS

The arts are able to Be Political(!) in a way other industries aren't, and they're not making the most of that philosophical freedom. Instead, they are mirroring and reproducing the same systemic racism and ableism and all the isms that constitute the working and social worlds.[1]

From Critique to Chic

For centuries, the art world has been known for its hierarchical structure, elitist flair, closed-off vibe, classist connotations, linear presentations, and top-down curatorial and educational practices, as well as toxic power relations. In the late 1960s, artists began creating artworks in response to this institutional system that collected and exhibited their work, reflecting on the concept of museums and the social function of art itself. Even though this has always been part of (post)modern art, the late 60s—marked by social upheaval and change—fueled the art genre that is now known as institutional critique.

Hans Haacke put a sweaty transparent box in the museum (*Condensation Cube*, 1963) to expose the controlled environment of the museum gallery; Adrian Piper collected her clipped fingernails and hair to exhibit them in the Museum of Modern Art in New York (*What Will Become of Me?*, 1985) to literally insert herself as an African American woman into the museum and its white, male dominated collection; Andrea Fraser removed her clothes during a performative welcome speech (*Official Welcome*, 2001); and The Guerrilla Girls did a 'weenie count' and made a poster in 1989 with the text: 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.' These are just a few examples of artworks that criticized the space in which they were performed or exhibited. What happens, then, when these artworks are acquired, enter institutional collections, and become part of the thing that was being critiqued in the first place? Do they lose their critical strength once they become institutionalized?

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1   The White Pube, "I Literally Hate the Art World," The White Pube, November 18, 2018, https://thewhitepube.co.uk/art-thoughts/i-literally-hate-the-art-world/.

Fig. 1: Guerrilla Girls, Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?, 1989.

In 2005 Andrea Fraser proclaimed that institutional critique was officially dead:

> Further doubts about the historic and present-day efficacy of institutional critique
> arise with laments over how bad things have become in an art world in which
> MoMA opens its new temporary-exhibition galleries with a corporate collection,
> and art hedge funds sell shares of single paintings. In these discussions, one finds
> a certain nostalgia for institutional critique as a now-anachronistic artifact of an
> era before the corporate mega-museum and the 24/7 global art market, a time
> when artists could still conceivably take up a critical position against or outside
> the institution. Today, the argument goes, there no longer is an outside. How, then,
> can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum
> and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification?
> Now, when we need it most, institutional critique is dead, a victim of its success or
> failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against.[2]

Fig. 2: Meme by @freeze_magazine criticizing the art historical canon, which is predominantly white,
male and Eurocentric. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CNC9FCXlPHa/ on 22-05-
2022.

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2   Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, September
     2005, https://www.artforum.com/print/200507/from-the-critique-of-institutions-to-an-institution-of-
     critique-9407.

Just like the 1960s during the rise of institutional critique, current times are characterized by societal and cultural shifts. Many European and American museums are rooted in colonialism; their collections include looted objects and/or stem from wealthy people who often benefited from colonialism. The need for museums to become more inclusive, empathetic, and integrative of perspectives from outside of the institution, alongside the decolonization of their collections, has become incredibly urgent and visible. This can be seen especially within online communities that use memes to address inequality within the art world, such as the following Instagram accounts: @freeze_magazine, @jansalrightorbit, @kuwtpis, @ho.place, @art.goss, @curators_complaining, @zurichartmemes, @ stolenartifacts, @curatorial_studies_fan_account, and @thewhitepube, among others. They have been actively criticizing the art world: its power relations and problems with unequal pay; issues of sustainability; stolen artefacts; privilege; accessibility; diversity; inclusion. But can online memes really cause a *shift* in the 'traditional' art world?
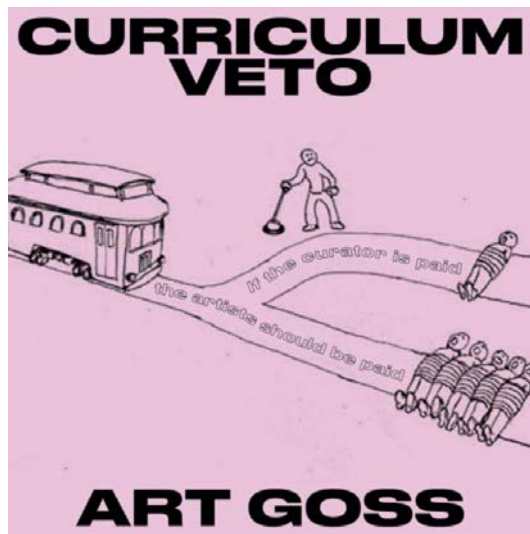
We Meme Against Power

Fig. 3: Meme by Art Goss showing a version of the trolley problem, a popular thought experiment illustrating an ethical dilemma. In this case you must choose between paying the artists and killing five people or paying the curator and killing only one person. Screenshot from https://www.instagram. com/p/Cbe6ZVLsxIL/ on 22-05-2022.

On March 24, 2022, Art Goss (@art.goss), platform for art gossip run semi-anonymously by artists/writers L. Artimer and M.Gossamer, published their *Curriculum Veto*. Art Goss was born at a time when a #MeToo case within the Dutch art world came to light thanks

to the research of Carola Houtekamer and Lucette ter Borg. This had a huge impact as it laid bare the unsafe environments of art academies and their underlying power relations in the Netherlands. Art Goss publishes critical observations on Dutch art institutions: their recently published 'shadow CV' is a call to artists, artworkers, art students, and art professionals alike to think about the experiences that fall through the cracks of a regular CV:

> What work have you said NO to? What shows have you boycotted and why? Which events shaped your (professional) life but do you actively hide from your CV? What's behind that 'gap'? What about all the side jobs you work to fund your art practice? What about devalued care work, unaccredited collaborations, or all time spent doing visa requests?[3]
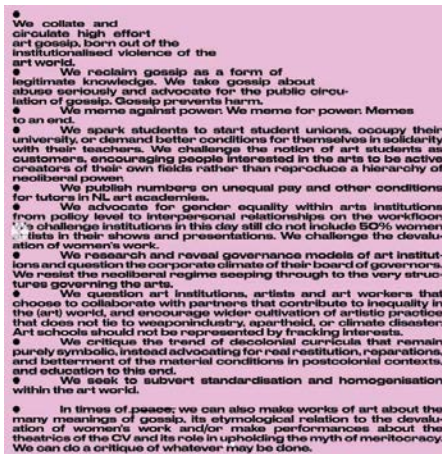

Fig. 4: Art Goss Curriculum Veto © Art Goss. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/ Cbe6ZVLsxIL/ on 22-05-2022.

Their *Curriculum Veto* consists of eleven bullet points. The most striking point is number three:

> We meme against power. We meme for power. Memes to an end.[4]

To meme against power might be a perfect description of what is happening and has been happening online in the case of (most) critical art memes: they form a humorous yet critical counterweight to inequality within the art world. Here, memes are used as a tool by a new generation of artists, curators, researchers, writers, and students to question institutional

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3   Art Goss, "Art Goss Curriculum Veto," Instagram, March 24, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/ Cbe6ZVLsxIL/.

4   Ibid.

systems and power relations. Now, what makes memes the perfect tool for this? At first glance, memes look less dangerous than, for instance, a critical review in an art magazine. They provide humor, a certain catharsis, and a possible ground for self-identification or affirmation for the viewer: you are being made fun of, but at the same time you're also *in* on the joke. The meme format and its platform of distribution (oftentimes Instagram or Twitter) adds to the perceived likability, making it very easy to share with friends or colleagues, with a chance of going viral. Art writer Mike Pepi argues that memes can even have more impact than critical theory essays and that they work so well because of their specific context:

> Like reality television, art-world meme accounts offer their audiences—savvy enough to get the references but too marginal to be the object of scorn—a combination of flattery and catharsis. [...] The smartest memes can say as much as a long-winded critical theory essay in a graduate school textbook—and deliver their messages far more forcefully. Their economic critique of the art world lands not just because of their content, but because their mechanism of delivery exists outside the bloated system they seek to interrogate.[5]

Fig. 5: Meme by @freeze_magazine about diversity and the art world not being friends, even though the art world itself would think or claim it is. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CNvQiz1FTeu/ on 22-05-2022.

Art meme Instagram account @freeze_magazine is run by artist and curator Cem A. On his website, A. describes the account as a tool for creative collaborations with fellow artists, researchers, and organizations; they see it as a way of exploring topics such as survival and alienation in the art world through a more hyper-reflective lens.[6] @freeze_magazine,

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5   Mike Pepi, "Meme accounts upending art worlds class system," *Frieze*, April 29, 2022, https://www. frieze.com/article/meme-accounts-upending-art-worlds-class-system*.
6   Cem A., "About," Studio Cem A., last modified 2022, ***https://www.cem-a.com/about***.

a play on well-known art magazine and contemporary art fair Frieze, has, up to this date, accumulated 121.000 followers, which makes it one of the most popular art meme accounts on Instagram. According to Cem A., memes can have the same audience reach as a museum, art fair, or actual art magazine because of their circulation speed and potential, and because they situate themselves somewhere in between art making and art criticism:

> Memes blur the lines between art making and art criticism, which makes them interesting for the art world. Memes are also meant to evolve with trends. They are defined by the circulation of the image rather than the content of the image. (For instance, a painting of a meme does not carry the same potency as a digital meme that travels and evolves through the internet.) These qualities of memes make it possible for the @freeze_magazine social media accounts to reach hundreds of thousands of people per month, which is comparable to that of a museum, art fair or (actual) magazine.[7]

Fig. 6: @artcritiquememes (via @jansalrightorbit) utilizing the meme format of the Trojan Horse, criticizing the way institutions make use of their powerful positions to invite curators to curate group shows without any budget. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/Bm9ZFeIHRqL/ on 22-05-2022.

7   Frank Wasser, "'Art world disillusionment led me to make art with memes': Artist Cem A on his London exhibition," *The Art Newspaper*, May 5, 2022, https://www.theartnewspaper. com/2022/05/05/my-disillusionment-with-the-london-art-world-led-me-to-make-art-with-memes-artist-cem-a-on-his-barbican-exhibition.

Just like Art Goss, Cem A. started the meme page after being disillusioned with the art world. Discontent seems to be a great breeding ground for critical memes, for memes can provide common ground to those who are discontented or affected by inequality within the system, all the while empowering through self-identification and affirmations. According to Cem A., a meme account 'can be seen as an artwork, an exhibition, a performance or even as an institution in and of itself. Memes conform to none of these concepts.'[8]

Inequality in the Art World

Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad have been disrupting the realm of art criticism for a couple of years now. On their online platform called *The White Pube*, they write about art, museums, and games, reviewing exhibitions with brutally honest personal reactions and rating them in emoji's, among other non-standard metrics. Their collaborative identity was sparked by frustration with 'white people, white walls and white wine' in the art world that grew quickly during their studies at Central St. Martins in London. In their essays, tweets, Instagram stories, and captions, they question the art world's lack of representation, inequality, classism, racism, accessibility, and underpayment. *The White Pube* might have been one of the first art critics to utilize memes to get their online message across: 'Why museums are bad vibes', 'I LITERALLY HATE THE ART WORLD', 'Why I don't read the press release' and 'The Problem with Diaspora Art' are just a few great, provocative titles of their online articles. The memes *The White Pube* posts or reposts and the critical art memes employed throughout this essay have a slight difference in function: while the memes here criticize the status quo of the artworld, they remain identifiably humorous and/or cathartic through affirmation, as well as accelerating collective empowerment among viewers and sharers. In contrast, those used by *The White Pube* reject the way the art world functions altogether.

Fig. 7: Meme reposted by The White Pube. A meme with an image of a crying (religious) statue. The text above it addresses the way in which most art world decisions are made behind closed doors and the concomitant lack of transparency. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/BqfXs6xF-G9/ on 22-05-2022.

8   Wasser, "'Art world disillusionment led me to make art with memes.'"

The art world is not an island on its own—therefore, critiquing the art world and its long-standing traditions, systems and power relations also means critiquing the entire creative industry:

> They build on content and formats that are highly recognizable on the internet and social media with a strong potential for "likes" and future circulation. Critiquing the art world here means critiquing the creative industry, of which the art world has inevitably become part. It means addressing the forms and formats through which critique is performed today, in the broader popular context of internet culture. These are critiques that always throw into relief the medium that they employ and the material they appropriate: the mural/selfie wall, Hollywood tropes, internet lingo, memes. Their critiques relate to the current ways that critique is performed in a larger socioeconomic context as they acknowledge the importance of the same tactics: the use of irony and humor, their emotional appeal, the centrality of hashtags, short lines and evocative images.[9]
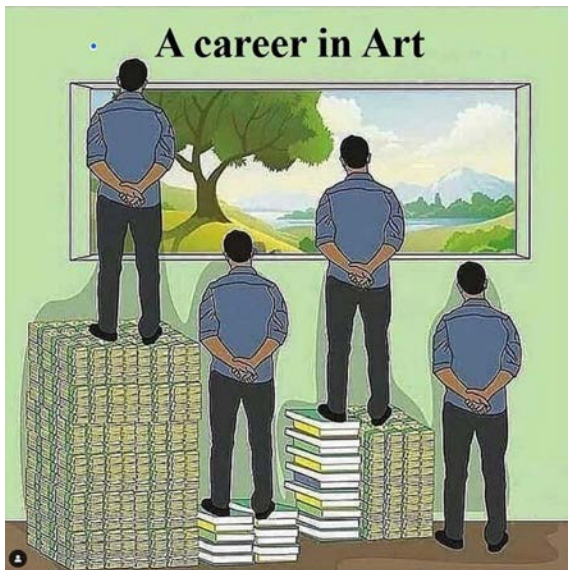

Fig. 8: Meme by @freeze_magazine visualizing inequality in the art world: a career in art is often only reserved for people with rich parents since jobs are often underpaid and internships are often not paid at all. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CGXHWJelSNw/ on 22-05-2022.

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9   Melanie Buhler, "Tortured Disney, false truths and conflicted memes: Institutional Critique in the Age of Networked Capitalism," *Arts of the Working Class,* January 17, 2022, http://artsoftheworkingclass. org/text/tortured-disney-false-truths-and-conflicted-memes.

Are you the British Museum? Cause you Stole my (He)art[10]

Many museums worldwide have stolen artefacts in their collections, often traceable to Western colonial violence. One of the most contested collections might be that of the British Museum in London, which holds thousands of looted objects such as the famous Rosetta Stone from Egypt, the Elgin Marbles from Greece, and four thousand bronze sculptures from Benin. To this day, the museum refuses to repatriate these artefacts, making them a perfect fit for critical memeing.

Fig. 9: Twitter meme on The British Museum. Image of two people shoving the tower of Pisa (Italy) into their backpack. Source: https://twitter.com/NoContextBrits/ status/1508888832296509440?s=20&t=f6FVKXT2KSjSB40cADpTsA.

Fig. 10: Twitter meme on The British Museum. Image of two people pretending to carry away the Acropolis in Athens, Greece. Source: https://twitter.com/sergioandresbm/ status/1317045635854499840?s=20&t=uze1e3JqJxzzQyICRwj0nA.%2A.

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10   I'm making a reference here to a meme made by @stolenartifacts on Instagram, posted on the 14th of February 2022 (Valentine's day).

The question remains whether these memes can cause change. Will the board, directors, and curators of The British Museum really think differently about reparation after seeing these memes, and suddenly decide to give back these objects to the countries of origin after all? No. The effect of this critical memeing might, then, not be immediate, however its long term-effect could be that more and more people engage in the discussion of returning artefacts, which in turn can lead to more pressure on museums to review their policies.

Fig. 11: Image from @stolenartifacts, a meme account that focuses on criticizing western museums that have stolen artefacts in their collections, and how they deal with those looted objects. The image shows a person in the process of transforming into a clown, each step accompanied by an argument that is commonly used by museums. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CO8U7g7FWeL/ on 22-05-2022.

Fig. 12: @stolenartifacts with a popular Uno meme format on the deafening silence of museums with stolen artefacts in their collections. Screenshot from https://www.instagram.com/p/CVILLa6vfx6/ on 22-05-2022.

Do you Believe in Life after Institutionalization?

Just as the artworks of Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper, Andrea Fraser, and The Guerilla Girls have been acquired and sentenced to an eternal institutional life in museum collections, memes have also found their way into galleries. What happens then when the natural habitat of a meme—the online environment of the deep caverns of the internet—changes, and memes are exhibited in an institutionalized space? Do they still hold the same potential for causing change?

Fig. 13: Marijke de Roover, Sorry. you caught me at a bad historical moment, 2020. c-print mounted on dibond with aluminum subframe, 100 x 100 cm.

Brussels-based artist Marijke de Roover is known for her meme series' that have been exhibited internationally within physical art spaces. Her series *Niche content for frustrated queers* consists of prints of self-made memes that criticize institutionalized heterosexuality and how it structures gender in online spaces:

> In the series niche content for frustrated queers I affirm heteronormativity as the prevailing sexual orientation. But in light of Generation Y's online pessimism and self-mockery, I am inspired by memes like 'distracted boyfriend' 'Drake hotline bling meme', 'there are no girls on the internet' and 'fun with Foucault' to express a way of thinking that shows how institutionalized heterosexuality structures gender, as well as other stratification categories, and closes off any critical analysis of its consequences. The 'unsuccessful' (because non-viral, niche) memes deal with ideas of a wide variety of (in this series) coupling practices (e.g., dating, parties, marriage, and heartbreak) that secure the intersection of several consequential social hierarchies including gender, class, sexual orientation and institutional power.[11]

11   Upstream Gallery, "Call Free to Feel Me, Best Regrets, Marijke," last modified 2020, https://www. upstreamgallery.nl/exhibitions/196/call-free-to-feel-me-best-regrets-marijke.

Fig. 14: Marijke de Roover, Roses are Red, Gender is Performative, Mass Market Romance is Heteronormative, 2019. c-print mounted on dibond with aluminum subframe, 100 x 100 cm.
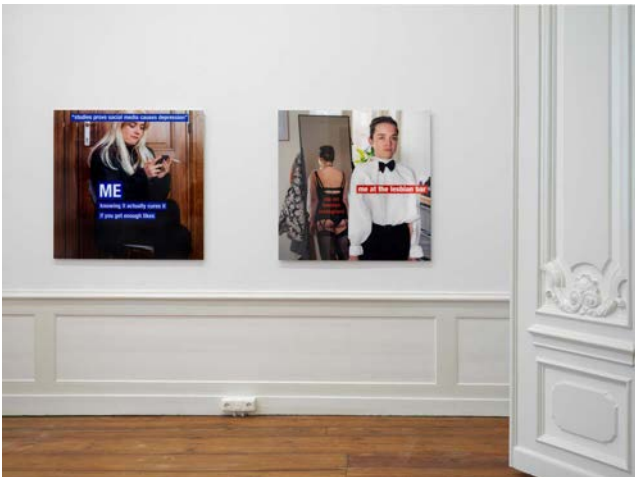

Fig. 15: Marijke de Roover, Do You Believe in Life After Love? Photo by Gert Jan van Rooij, Courtesy Upstream Gallery Amsterdam.

In her new series of memes, which were on view at Upstream Gallery in Amsterdam at the beginning of 2022, she places herself within the frame of the meme. The memes deal with mental health, social media addiction and experiences such as dating and having your heart broken as a queer woman. They address social hierarchies like sexual orientation, gender and class, while still being funny and relatable. In a way, memes (on the internet) contrast sharply with some of the traditional values the art world is known for: the classical idea of 'authenticity', a kind of outdated concept of authorship, and an art context—which is often the physical space that validates the artwork into being 'art'. The exhibition text published by Upstream gallery on Marijke de Roover's exhibition 'Do you believe in life after love?' signals this perfectly:

> The Internet, however, offers not only a democratic way of producing art, but also allows art to be reintegrated into daily life via social media. In this way, her use of mimetic language or memes can be understood as an aesthetic manifestation of Marxist principles, with artists rejecting art as the creation of unique, extraordinary, and highly valuable objects created by an exclusive group of people and to be owned by an economic and social elite. Instead, the focus is on collective processes of art-making and ownership: Memes as something ideally made, distributed, and owned by everybody, aiming at the creation of work that is cheap and easy to produce, and consequently available without limit and economically worthless. An attitude rather than a product.[12]

Fig. 16: @curators_complaining on the role and positions of curators, giving them the power to give institutional legitimation to artists. Accessed the original Instagram account @curators_complaining on 22-05-2022, new Instagram account: https://www.instagram.com/curators_complaining_2.0/.

12   Upstream Gallery, "Do You Believe in Life After Love," last modified 2022, https://www.upstreamgallery.nl/exhibitions/210/do-you-believe-in-life-after-love.

Memeing Into the Future

Memes are almost always born outside of the institutional system. In museums, however, curators and directors often determine what art will be exhibited and by whom, while critics and writers amplify those choices in reviews and publications and therefore act as 'gatekeepers' within the system. On the internet, everyone can voice their opinion on art, making memes a much more democratic tool than traditional art criticism in published writing. Memes can be something to hold on to for people who don't feel welcomed, accepted, or at home in the art world:

> Not everyone is familiar with the art industry, but most are with meme culture. If you, like me, struggle to enter this vast, mysterious realm, simply turn to memes. [...] *People are frustrated and they want their voices heard. These memes simply remove the haughtiness and place prevailing issues out in the open.*[13]

Memes can be made in just a couple of minutes and are easily distributed through online sharing. This makes them fast but also volatile. Therefore, their impact is hard to measure and the question of whether memes can cause a shift in the art world is a difficult one to answer sufficiently.

What *can* be measured is the fact that memes have become tools of a new generation of artists, curators, critics, and writers to question and criticize institutional systems, thanks to the democratization of Web 2.0. They hold different functions, providing comical and/or emotional relief, or forming a possible breeding ground for self-identification or affirmation. They can also constitute a common ground for those who are affected negatively by the system and wish to address issues such as inequality or racism within the art world. The qualities that make memes excellent for criticizing the system, questioning or even protesting said system, is the fact that memes are easily shared online and have a humorous undertone, making them appear less dangerous at first glance. There is a definite argument to be made that the art world must not underestimate the power of memes as a twenty-first century form of institutional critique to imagine a better, more equal system—together.

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The Rise & Fall of Web4u (2033-2063)

Jasmine Erkan
Emma Damiani

Imagine a future where one centralized digital platform wholly controls the dialogue, narrative, and psychological space of its networks. Imagine a platform that constructs its ideological narrative by weaponizing memes that are produced under a regime of user indoctrination. Now, look into the Glass of Prevenience...

What do you see?

Unlock World?

Ok. Turn Back.

In order to unlock the world of Web4u, please read aloud the **4 Pillars of Progress...**

Open unto me, the **Propagation** of Truth. The Unit of Truth has the agency to Propagate, transfigure the deserts of our Doubts, and influence our Reality.

Open unto me, the **Entropy** of the Web. There is beauty in the Entropy of the Web. The Reign of Chaos on the Web will always find its way to the Truth.

Open unto me, the **Impact** of Knowledge. We are all equal in our power to Impact the collective journey from Falsehood to Truth.

Open unto me, **Purity**, in its shining glory. Like a gentle breeze, the Web will breathe upon us the essence of Purity. Purity prepares the soul for Truth, and Truth confirms the soul in Purity.

Pillars of Progress

Propagation

The Unit of Truth has the agency to Propagate, transfigure the deserts of our Doubts, and influence our Reality.

Pillars of Progress

Impact

We are all equal in our power to Impact the collective journey from Falsehood to Truth.

Pillars of Progress

Entropy

There is beauty in the Entropy of the Web. The Reign of Chaos on the Web will always find its way to the Truth.
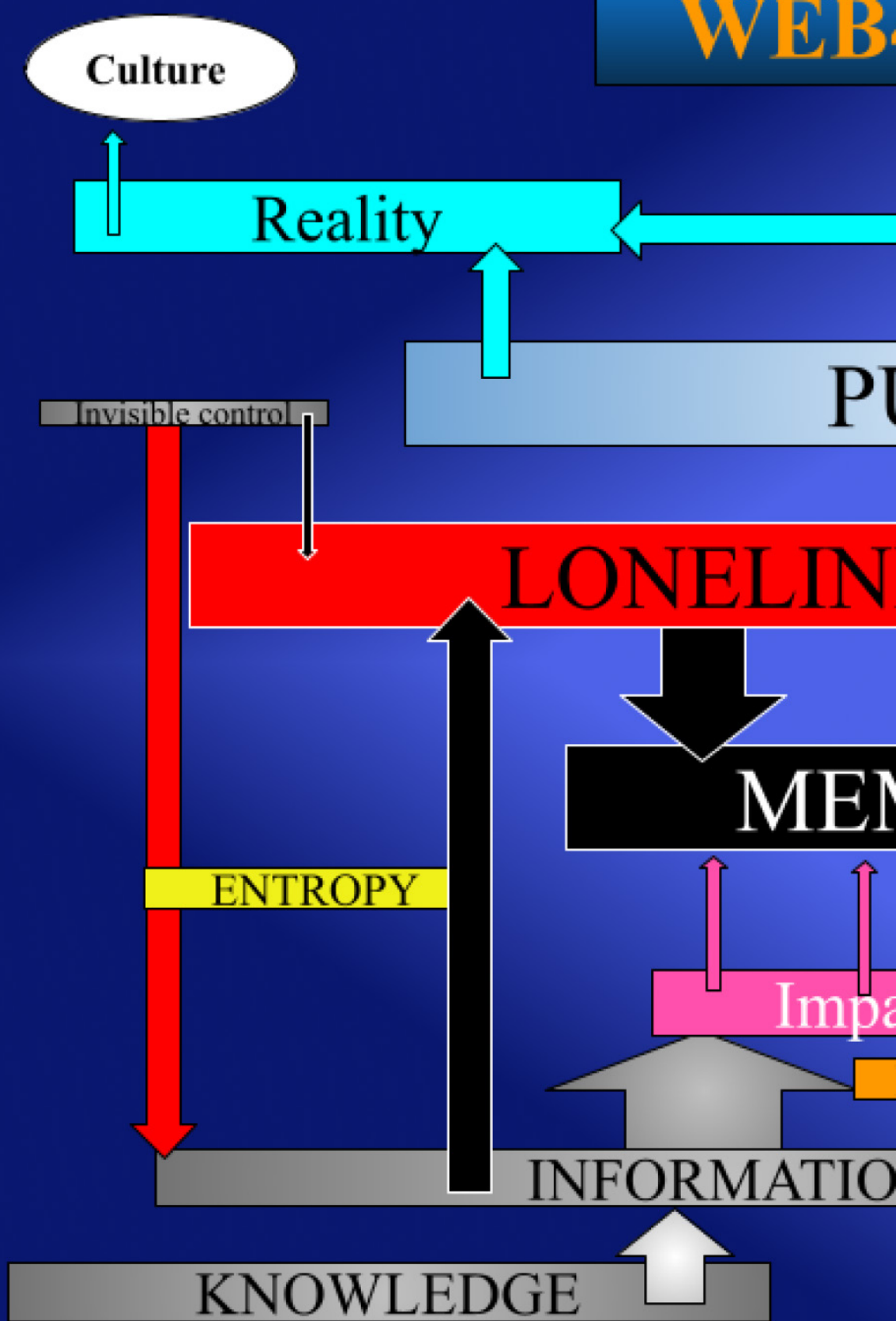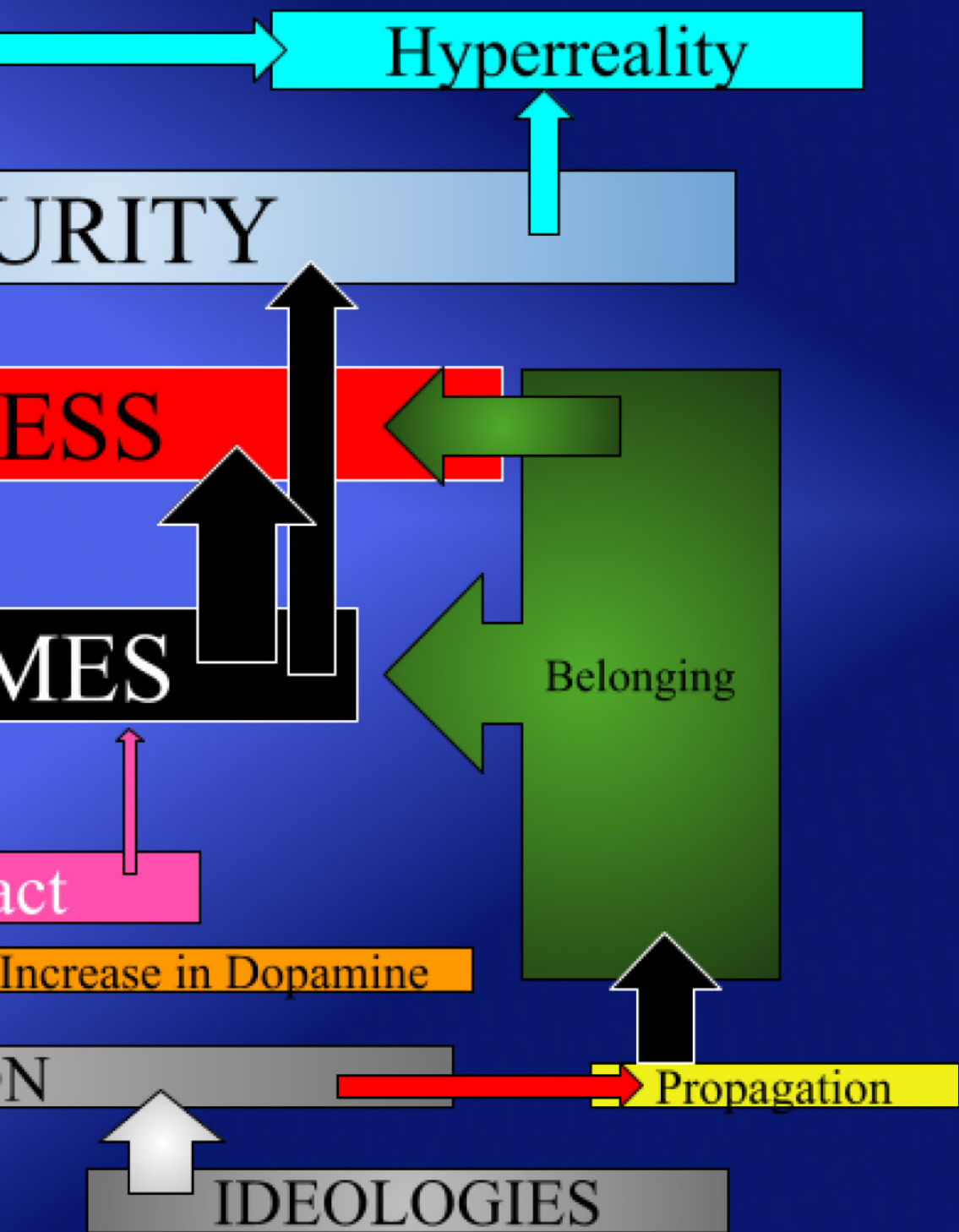
Pillars of Progress

Purity

Like a gentle breeze, the Web will breathe upon us the spirit of Purity. Purity prepares the soul for Truth, and Truth confirms the soul in Purity.
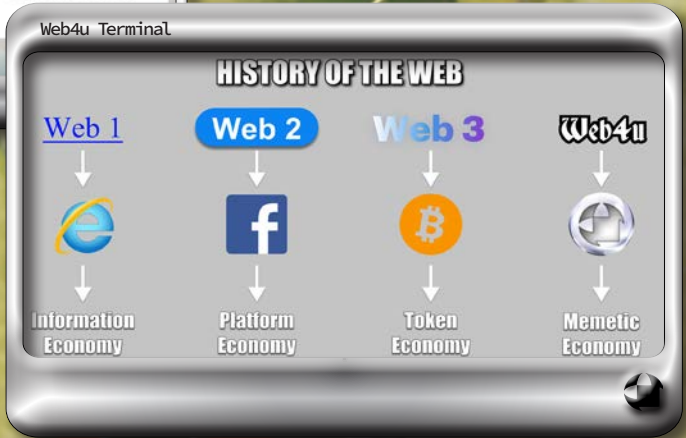
4U CONNECTIONS

Hyperreality

URITY

ESS

MES

Belonging

act

Increase in Dopamine

N

Propagation

IDEOLOGIES

I. History

Origins and Early Years

When herd immunity was achieved in 2024, four years after the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sense of optimism dominated spheres of technological and political discourse. This optimism was likened to the early utopian era of the web in the 1990s, where visionaries wanted to use the internet to 'flatten organizations, globalize society, decentralize control, and help harmonize people'. The potential of the internet was quick to be co-opted by capitalism, ushering in the era of surveillance capitalism which had defined the 2010s. In the post-pandemic world, visions of decentralized networks and financial institutions that formed through the development of blockchain technology began to gain further traction. This future vision of the internet, or Web3, offered potential solutions to the social, political, and financial troubles of the 2010s. However, it also posed a threat to the power of global conglomerates such as Meta, Space-X, and Amazon, who were commonly referred to as The Big 3.

On the 7th of April 2027, The Big 3 announced a new policy: the Community Guidelines Optimization Policy, (see Fig. 2) that worked to entrench its increasing power to extract data from users, and to censor information across its platforms. The sense of global optimism and hope that Facebook had once offered in the early 2000s, began to turn into a state of severe surveillance and fevered paranoia, confirming fears of the disproportionate power of tech platforms which were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. This general mistrust in technology was referred to as a 'techlash'. As a response, international online movements began to form. This included both radical counter-movements that served as a resistance to the increasing power of tech platforms, but also movements that called for an increased centralization of power into the hands of tech platforms as a way to secure stability in an increasingly tumultuous political and economic environment. This cleavage in global politics signaled the beginning of the World Wide Web War (WWWW) of 2029, and the emergence of Web4u: a new and unified platform that sought to restore the web to its purest form, by guiding each user through life through its comprehensive services.

**Community
Guidelines
Optimization**

HISTORY OF THE WEB

Web 1	Web 2	Web 3	Web4u
↓	↓	↓	↓
🅔	f	₿	🌐
↓	↓	↓	↓
Information Economy	Platform Economy	Token Economy	Memetic Economy

Rise to Power

Within the months that followed, the popularity and power of Web4u began to increase rapidly. This was due to their use of tactical and consistent memetic assault against users, allowing them to quickly draw in new members. The Big 3, who had been publicly criticized for their lack of eloquence and care when speaking on matters of human connectivity and personhood within technological spheres, were beginning to lose their stranglehold on their economic and cultural status as global hegemons. Meanwhile, Web4u gained a steady following of people across all socio-economic backgrounds by instilling a sense of spirituality and self-fulfillment into the platform's agenda. By February 2033, The Big 3 began to disintegrate after the events

that have been come to be known as 'Glitchgate'. Glitchgate refers to a series of cyberattacks by hacker activists, which revealed highly classified information about the growth tactics used by The Big 3. This breach revealed how The Big 3 used a fake 'glitch' or software bug that prompted users to report the glitch, and granted the platform access to the user's personal data, commonly referred to as 'Privacy Zuckering'. Privacy Zuckering is a practice that deceives the user into sharing information which they have not consented to. Ten days following Glitchgate, and with a failure in the credibility and authority of The Big 3, Web4u seized power over what remained of The Big 3, absorbing them and beginning their 30-year reign.

II. Reign

Political Program

Web4u took command of what was referred to as a Global Communications Enlightenment, claiming to be the only right and holistic approach to pure technological momentum, informing digital cultures, the spread of ideas, information, and truth. Web4u claimed that 'the web is man's truest destiny', announcing a plan to condemn anyone who attempted to counteract their political agenda. As a trans-sovereign entity, their power was unmatched by that of states and governments, allowing them to assert their political agenda free of meaningful resistance for the next 30 years.
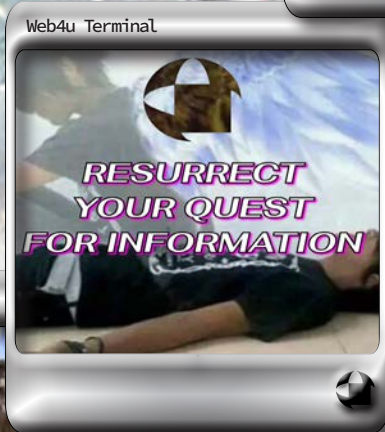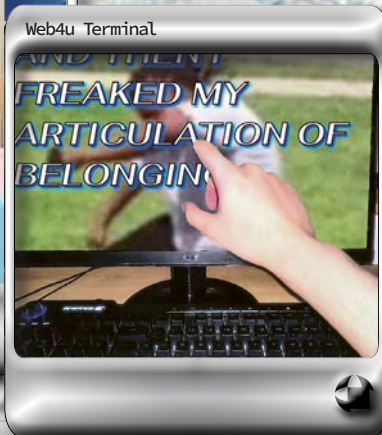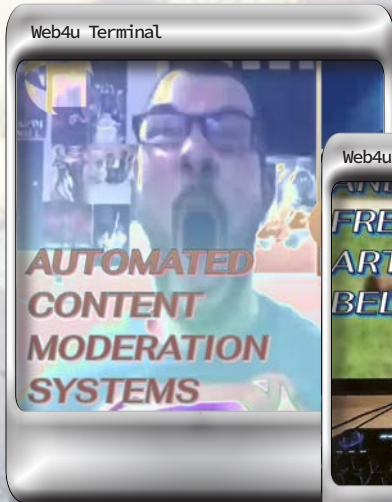
Web4u's initial reign offered the promise of collective growth, a means of fulfilment, and further exploration and expansion into the vast frontier of the web. Web4u emphasized that the internet was mankind's greatest creation, and that society at large must do everything in its power to preserve this by taking a pledge to uphold Web4u's four Pillars of Progress: Propagation, Entropy, Impact, and Purity.

Despite the ideals and promise that Web4u put forward, its form of governance is classified as a memetic technocracy, where the elite technocratic body determines the exchange of cultural information, pertaining to a strict control on the creation and maintenance of cultures. Through its regime of algorithmic surveillance and its engagement in consistent tactical memetic assault, this platform constructs its ideological narrative by weaponizing memes that are produced under a regime of user indoctrination. In this world, controlling memetics is a tactic used to prohibit 'the purposeful deployment of memetic imagery to disrupt, undermine, attack, resist or reappropriate...'.

Law Enforcement

Web4u law enforcement relies on predictive algorithmic policing technology and automated content moderation systems, where the use of mathematical, predictive analytics and other techniques has the potential to identify potential opposition to the platform and criminal activity. This technology is used to predict at which level users are to be surveilled based on previous data. Once a user is flagged, this user and the users that it most interacts with are surveilled at a higher level.

Web4u Terminal

AUTOMATED CONTENT MODERATION SYSTEMS

Web4u Terminal

AND THEN FREAKED MY ARTICULATION OF BELONGING

Web4u Terminal

RESURRECT YOUR QUEST FOR INFORMATION

THIS USER DOES NOT GAMIFY NEGATIVITY

Engineering of Loneliness

One of the principal conceptual frameworks of Web4u's program is the 'engineering of loneliness'. This idea holds that web platforms limit the possibility for the articulation of belonging and spread of transformative ideas through their design, where 'enlightenment does not bring us liberation, but depression'. Web4u applies this logic to the production of memes, with the aim of making consumers of these images reliant on them for human connection. Through memetic engineering, subjects of this system accept the memes created by the platform, as it is their only source for enjoying images. Human loneliness is ensured to hinder any tangible political change.

III. Hierachy

Due to their holistic ideology aiming towards global technological advancements and further movement away from Web 3, Web4u created multiple governmental divisions that operated to guide each member from early life through adulthood across all modes of survival and prosperity.

- ✦ Division of Digital Enlightenment
- ✦ Division of Digital Natives (youth program)
- ✦ Division of Productivity Enhancing Habitats (formerly WeWork)
- ✦ Division of Human/Humanoid Connectivity
- ✦ Division of Music and Culture (led by artist, Grimes, who joined Web4u in the years following her breakup with Elon Musk)

The Division of Digital Enlightnment (DDE)

The DDE is responsible for overseeing all exchanges of information online and upholding Web4u's program of eumemeics—the belief and practice of deliberately improving the quality of the meme pool. The aim of such control is to prohibit the propagation and distribution of memes that undermine the ethos of Web4u, or that do not align with the web4u pillars of progress. The DDE and its agents, referred to as 'Content Messengers', were instructed to create and oversee the purity and oneness of memes under Web4u's four pillars of progress.

The DDE uses a pyramid style scheme to recruit users and use their labor to make memes, otherwise referred to as TruthUnits, that align with the platform's political narrative. Their user output is employed as propagandistic labor, which contributes to the grand narrative which Web4u seeks to maintain. Their labor of memes is gamified to drive their output and quality, all of which reflect the ideologies of the platform they represent. The aim of this multi-level recruiting scheme was to uphold the promise that each individual citizen was to have the ability to participate on the web in its truest form and with individual purpose: each Messenger was a crucial part of the totality of Web4u.

IV. Resistance

Countercultures

With the rise of Web4u, the 'Dark Forrest' counterculture communities of Web 3 were forced to move deeper into the web, underground, into what was once considered to be the Dark Net. The Movement for the Acceleration of Blockchain (MAB) and the Coalition of Transparent Technological Growth Tactics (CTTGT) were two resistance groups that worked to counter the unmatched power of tech platforms. While having minor ideological differences, they largely shared the same objectives, and shared their roots in the online left movement that gained traction in the 2010s. Both operated under the premise that as the physical world continued to deteriorate due to ongoing threats of climate change, terrorism, overpopulation, and corrupt institutional powers, that people must have the right to live within a state of pure symbiosis with and within the web, unshackled from convoluted restrictions, censorship and surveillance.

Guerilla Memes

Persons or organisations who created and distributed memes not mandated by the DDE were considered to be illegals under Community Guideline 52 Act 17. These illegals lived outside the law, and the mere act of making a meme was to take a powerful stance to refuse to be governed, resist control and to restore the flow of information and truth. Their creation of memes was counter-weaponized with the aim of attacking the Web4u meme pool, and ultimately undermining the regime.

Web4u Terminal

The Coalition of Transparent Technological Growth Tactics

Please let me into the internet

I am normal and can be trusted with the exchange of information

V. Fall from Power

Initial Dissolvement

The weakness of Web4u's governance became apparent in the later years of its reign. With a strengthening resistance came an increase in data breaches, counterattacks, information leaks, and blackouts. The circumstances surrounding the fall of Web4u are still unclear, as their monopoly of the web meant that with their collapse, all existing data up to the point of their collapse was erased. The only evidence recovered from the 1st of January 2063 are accounts of a Memetic Knowledge Weapon released to the public, leading to large scale memeocide, and informational blackout.

Legacy

Due to the mysterious circumstances of the collapse of Web4u, and a minor 'digital dark ages' that followed its collapse, many legends and myths that attempt to account for the downfall of Web4u have been circulated. The most popular account tells of a rogue Content Messenger that joined the CTTGT with the code name 'Angel Warrior' and infiltrated the Web4u hierarchy of power to eventually weaken its security protections. The years that followed the collapse have been likened to the Middle Ages' folkloric oral cultures, before the time of print media. Following the collapse of Web4u, grassroots internet tribes began to rebuild the Web in an anarchic fashion by restoring the blockchain. Web4u digital material was auctioned on the newly restored blockchain as rare Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs), many of which have become highly valued collectibles today.

Web4u Terminal

End of Transmission

Ok.

A Note From The Creators

'Scenarios are a tool for helping us to take a long view in a world of great uncertainty.'
Peter Schwartz

Creating this world is our attempt to understand the current state of politics and technology, and explore a hypothetical backlash to movements towards Web3 and visions of a decentralized web. What will internet governance look like in the future? Can our current organization of the internet sustain us through the planetary challenges we will face? Using futuring to build a possible world can help us answer these questions.

While building the world and lore of Web4u, we bring the meme to the forefront of conversations about internet governance. We examine the power of memetics in building political allegiances, or in mobilizing dissent, and how the internet meme has the ability to transform politics IRL. What does cyber counterculture look like in the future? Can the plain act of making a meme work as a refusal to be governed, to resist control? If we can use memes to build a better world, can we also use them to build a dystopia?

Our narrative is informed by theoretical research that draws on academic literature in platform capitalism, cyber countercultures, sovereignty and the psychogeography of cyberspace. While our visual research has included collecting, analyzing and reappropriating visual elements of digital countercultures that challenge the aesthetics and the limited psychogeography of Web 2.0. We used a bottom-up approach to worlding in order to construct the technology, politics, history and digital culture of Web4u. In this process, we extrapolated on phenomena we witness today, such as the increasing political and economic power of platforms, censorship, surveillance, data extraction, algorithmic bias, and automated content moderation systems. Our world cognitively estranges the reader with a seemingly implausible reality, only to invite the readers to consider that this distorted version of the future, is in fact, not so far from our lived reality.

Building memes, lore, and worlds can help us navigate the present towards a future which will hopefully not resemble this world, but for now all we can do is keep building possible futures.

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OPRAH MEMES, OR DIS-ARTICULATIONS OF AFFECT

KATRIN KÖPPERT

Before I had even seen or heard anything about the TV interview Oprah Winfrey conducted with Meghan Markle and Prince Harry regarding their resignation from the British royal family, which aired on the CBS network on March 7, 2021, memes were already circulating on Twitter. These memes put Winfrey's outrage, in response to many a detail about the resignation, at the center of users' amusement.

Fig. 1: Oprah's Shocked Reaction—new bestie, posted on Twitter March 8, 2021, https:// knowyourmeme.com/photos/2040012-oprahs-shocked-reaction (accessed August 12, 2022). An extra note: in order not to reproduce unfiltered the violence associated with memes in the context of Digital Blackface, I have chosen to merely insinuate the images with empty boxes throughout this essay. Readers are free to follow the link to view the image for a better understanding of the argument.

For example, on March 8, user @scottgayham posted several stills from the interview with the caption 'Me interviewing and getting the life story of my new bestie that I met in the smoking area 5 minutes ago' (Fig.1). With 2,100 retweets and 15,000 likes, this tweet is in the upper-middle zone of a wave of excitement that has died down, but not yet stalled. Even eight months after the interview, one Twitter user still prioritizes his 'Oprah meme' as a pinned tweet over all his other ones.[1]

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1   Tony Beayno, "I don't know who wins. Oprah's 'What?' or Whoopi's 'Okay'." Twitter post, https:// twitter.com/tonybeayno.

Yet this Oprah meme is part of a larger set of text-image assemblages featuring Oprah Winfrey, of which one using the episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which the entire studio audience is given a free car, is probably the most popular (Fig. 2). The fact that these are all collectively nicknamed 'Oprah memes'[2] indicates that we are dealing with a phenomenon that seems to go beyond Oprah Winfrey's popularity.
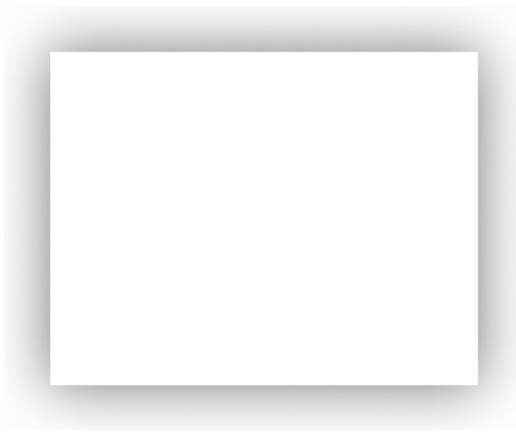

Fig. 2: Oprah's 'You Get a Car', from the September 13, 2004 episode of the Oprah Winfrey Show, in which Oprah gave away new Pontiac G6 cars to the entire audience. From https://knowyourmeme. com/memes/oprahs-you-get-a-car (accessed August 12, 2022).

The 'Oprah Meme' can be considered—as I suggest—an example of what Laureen Michele Jackson first termed in Teen Vogue 2017, *Digital Blackface*.[3] This refers to representations of facial expressions and gestures of Black[4] people that—collaged with text or animated in the case of GIFs—are used by white people to express a feeling or, as is the case in the first example mentioned, to make a joke. Given the history of racialization of emotions, one can wonder what it means that these memes are popularized.

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2   DailyMail.com Reporter, "Don't Post Oprah Memes if You are Not Black: White People are Told That Using Interviewer's Meghan Reaction Clips for Fun is 'Digital Blackface'," Daily Mail Australia, March 13, 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-9355601/White-non-black-people-told-NOT-share-Oprah-memes-digital-blackface.html?fbclid=IwAR012XBeNtT4_zKp2VGsp2Vxvq3pnDSd16X5pyRDQ2g88HkYtgyDhLd63xA.

3   Laureen Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs," *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs.

4   Based on the social constructivist approach, I choose to capitalize Blackness in order to account for lived or embodied experience, especially in the context of anti-racist resistance movements. See Eggers et al. *Mythen, Masken un Subjekte: Kritische Weissseinsforschung in Deutschland* (Unrast Verlag, 2005).

Just like a joke, they—as Dirk von Gehlen puts it in his short history of the digital image culture of memes—help us 'feel understood and at home'.[5] Yet *whose* home? Whose feelings are passed on, given the definition of memes as phenomena that disseminate by means of imitation? Richard Dawkins, coining the term 'meme' in the 1970s, gave their definition as the stimulation of modification in the replication process.[6] Although this very early definition has long been extended to include the memetic quality of memes, the question arises as to what memetic modifications are about and whom they serve. I will discuss this phenomenon against the backdrop of the history of 'affect as racialization' or 'racialization … embedded in affective logics',[7] taking into consideration that this history meets a present in which *white* feelings, *white* tears, and *white* fragility[8] are addressed and problematized as 'structures of domination',[9] for example in the context of Black Lives Matter protests.

I will thus, albeit briefly, deal with Digital Blackface as part of a conjuncture of white people's affective navigation of the swirl of their own insecurities. I do this by fully including myself as a white person—for example, I recall that when the Unicode Consortium introduced five new skin tones for emojis based on the Fitzpatrick scale, I caught myself leaning toward choosing a darker one.[10] Shame from this is certainly one reason why I would like to question the affective dynamic of racialization in memes. But this inquiry is also about redirecting the responsibility I have in tackling those questions towards articulations of Black feelings that—as Tyrone Palmer puts it—have long been unthought in the realm of affect theory as well as the everyday.[11] So, instead of only critiquing Digital Blackface and thus risking enlarging the violence by only focusing on critique,[12] I would also like to ask how memes could be used to articulate Black feelings. It needs to be emphasized that this can only work to a certain degree, due to my particular

5   Dirk von Gehlen, *Meme: Muster digitaler Kommunikation* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2020). [Author translation].

6   Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

7   Tamar Blickstein, "Affects of Racialization," in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, ed. Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (New York: Routledge, 2019), 152.

8   Robin Diangelo, *White Fragility. Why It´s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

9   Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America. Durham* (London: Duke University Press, 2021), 2.

10   Amanda Schupak, "Racially Representative Emoji Coming in 2015," CBS News, November 4, 2014, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/racially-representative-emoji-coming-in-2015/.

11   Tyrone S. Palmer, "Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 29, no. 2 (2020): 247-283.

12   In order not to reproduce unfiltered the violence associated with memes in the context of Digital Blackface, I have chosen to merely insinuate the images with empty boxes. Readers are free to follow the link to view the image for a better understanding of the argument. I would like to sincerely thank Francesca Schmidt, as well as Nora Chipaumire, with whom I had the opportunity to discuss the handling of the images in the context of this topic at the conference *Facing_Drag in Popular Cultures and Performing Arts* in Vienna.

positionality. However, I at least would like to try to ask how it might be possible for affects, or affective processes, to be meme-wise articulated, not just as modes of racialization and racism, but as a condition of possibility for Black lives.[13] Within this framework, my particular interest lies in disaffection, following Xine Yao.[14] The attempt here is to apply her proposal of 'disaffection' to what I call the 'disarticulation of the face'. By disarticulation I do have Jose Esteban Muñoz's term of disidentification in mind, which is a work *on*, *with* and *against* normative understandings of identity.[15] This, when applied to disarticulation, means a work on, with and against the face as depiction of defacement within Blackface.

Fungibility of Black Affect

As early as the night the interview between Winfrey and Markle aired, a user[16] tweeted the image of Winfrey throwing up her hands in shock and averting her face in clear dismay, reacting to Markle's statement that the royal family had been concerned about how dark her son Archie would turn out (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Oprah's Shocked Reaction, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2039693-oprahs-shocked-reaction (accessed August 12, 2022).

Alongside the image, the user Nadirah stitches the phrase 'please know I'm going to run this image into the ground, it's perfect for everything lol'. Saying that the image is perfect for everything does not only point to what is characteristic of memes in general, in the

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13 Palmer, "Otherwise than Blackness."
14 Yao, *Disaffected*.
15 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
16 It is important to note here that the user is positioned Black. However, I do not see this as a fundamental contradiction, since white supremacy in the context of the coloniality of power does not make a per se identity-political statement, but as a universalized system can have an influence on subjectivities beyond its positioning.

sense that scenes can be copy-pasted from one context into a new one, making an image usable for any statement. It also shows the logic of the 'absolute fungibility' of affective articulations of Black people, as described by Tyrone Palmer.[17] Fungibility, which in this case means the appropriability and consumability of Black people and Black people's affective expression, marks the structural position that Blackness since colonialism was historically forced to occupy for whiteness.[18]

Had it not been for the construction of this exaggerated expressivity of Black persons' affective expression, white subjectivity would not have been able to retreat into the genteel posture of interiority.[19] In terms of the digital present, this means that the exuberance with which white people make use of memes showing visibly affected Black people can be understood as the capacity of whiteness to possess Black affect without being questioned in its own noble sentiment. At the same time Blackface, as a performance of Blackness functioning as *white* property, can be read as a compensation for a lack of outgoing feeling. Tanya Sheehan has shown this in the US-history of amateur photography: after having inflicted the toothy smile on the Black body in order to discipline the body shortly after the abolition of slavery, it later has been deployed by the *white* middle-class.[20] The toothy smile was used in private settings of photography in the early 20th century to liberate from social restrictions of sentimental inwardness. Subsequently, I argue that the Oprah meme is the digital echo of this photographic culture: it is in service of the affective security and emotional balance of whiteness within unbalanced times.

Thus, I would argue that the Oprah meme is less about appropriating Black styles for the sake of one's own popularity or street credibility, as is the case with Blackfishing, a practice in which cultural and economic actors appropriate Black culture and urban aesthetics to capitalize on Black markets.[21] Rather it seems to follow the history of minstrel shows that, after the abolition of slavery in the United States, took on the function of pointing Black people 'to their place' in society and defining whiteness and white sentiment.[22]

The Oprah meme seems one example of a present in which, as a response to the Black Lives Matter uprisings, Black people are relegated to their affective place and are thus excluded from the affective register of *white* supremacy via a new media-specific setting.

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17   Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness," 38.

18   Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness," 38.

19   See Sianne Ngai. *Ugly Feelings* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005); Mel Y Chen, *Animacies. Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2012).

20   Tanya Sheehan, "Looking Pleasant, Feeling White: The Social Politics of the Photographic Smile," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2014), 127-157.

21   Wesley E. Stevens, "Blackfishing on Instagram: Influencing and the Commodification of Black Urban Aesthetics," *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 3 (2021): 1-15.

22   Evelyn Annuß, "Blackface and Critique: From T.D. Rice to Frederick Douglass," *Forum Modernes Theater* 29, no.1-2 (2014): 64.

This may be especially so in the case of a Black woman like Oprah Winfrey, who has generated quite a lot of economic and cultural capital. At the center of these Oprah memes, we do not necessarily find any need to think Oprah is 'cool' or a certain desire to repeat her style. Instead, there is a desire to feel *at home* in one's own (white) composure by means of emphasizing pronounced affective gestures of Black people, joking and mocking throughout. Even if it can be assumed that the affective expression of Black people is appropriated in a desire for the intensity of feeling associated with them, this does not mean that the genteel sentiment of whiteness is thereby called into question. Tanya Sheehan, following Saidiya Hartman, writes:

> such appropriation did much more than imagine blackness as an 'abject and degraded condition'; it fulfilled a 'desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment' without compromising the audience's 'serious' performances of whiteness and respectability elsewhere.[23]

The Black face, then, is made an emotional resource for white sentiment, making the meme an articulation of Blackface because, in order to appropriate affect, the face becomes disfigured. Animation is a tool for this operation.

Blackface: Animation and Affectability

The very fact that the meme mentioned at the beginning (Fig. 1) intercuts four stills of Winfrey's outrage with a joke ridicules the decisive moment in the interview where Meghan Markle speaks of the racist discrimination against her not-yet-born child, as well as herself, by members of the British royal family. Racism, here, is simply not taken seriously and becomes the template for a joke: contextual information for a picture series. That being said, it is interesting to look at the image selection for this meme. For example, it is noticeable that a reading from top left to bottom right is an alternating sequence of affective expression. The serious expression is followed by astonishment with the jaw dropped. The almost unattainable, dismissive look is followed by indignation with the hands raised. That is, when put in contrast with a supposed lack of affectability, expressivity and indignation seem all the more exaggerated. The montage functions like an animation of the unmoved, unmoving face. In this function of animation, montage reproduces the racialization of affect or the affective charging of racism.[24]

Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virgina*, described the Black face as an immobile veil that inferred no emotion.[25] Frustration when confronted with this so-called 'opacity of face' informed the dehumanizing discourse of the Black subject incapable of

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23 Sheehan, "Looking Pleasant, Feeling White," 146.
24 See also Blickstein, "Affects of Racialization."
25 Yao, *Disaffected*, 18.

emotion. The overemphasis on vividness or affectability generated by Blackface in Minstrel shows, an American form of racist entertainment developed in the early 19th century, then depicts the Black subject as affected. Yet this is not done to prove the subject's humanity, but rather to emphasize that Black affect is different, abject, and worth less.[26] The grotesque exaggeration of affect as a marker of Blackface—for example, the oversized, made-up, laughing mouth and the gesticulating hands—are only apparent in Oprah Winfrey's meme due to the montage, as well as the contrasting and rhythmizing of both still and moving faces. The resting face is thus not the counterpart balancing the indignation, but rather the co-constituting condition of the racialization of affect as animation—or as Sianne Ngai writes—*animatedness*.[27]

Further, this co-constituting condition of the still face is, in a sense, doubled. For this, I recall once more the context of the interview.[28] The moment when Winfrey raises her hands in indignation is the one that is, easily seen through the shot-counter-shot, framed and juxtaposed with Markle's calm, composed face. We can perhaps understand Markle's facial expression as the cruel mask of white sentimentality, which is, as Frantz Fanon puts it, an alienating internalization or rather epidermalization of *white* violence[29]—in this case of the British Royal Family (2008/1967). Used as a mask in this way, Markle's facial expressions further amplify Winfrey's arousal. In the meme, this arousal is heightened because the spectacle of affect is limited to Winfrey's person.

The resting face does not stand in the way of the more pejorative image of the animated affect, even if it constitutes the end of the image series (Fig. 4). Under the heading 'Which Oprah are you?', a number of meme entries can be found on Twitter based on a montage using a different arrangement of the stills. At the end of the series, we see the image that shows Oprah as serious, thoughtful, and at the same time demarcated and untouchable.

The numbering here explicitly directs the order of reading, enabling us to follow the choreography of the stills from 'agitated' to 'unmoved'. Although in the case of the post by the user @mcsinton it may indeed be a form of blackfishing, insofar as he would like to put on the cool mask of insensitivity in reaction to critical comments by peer-reviewers, the numbers in combination with the grid also stand for the history of the typologization of affect.[30]

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26   In this context, it is interesting to note that the abolitionists had previously also worked with dramatizations of animation—with the goal of recoding dehumanization. The fact that Black people were animated like puppets for the purpose—as Sianne Ngai points out—is just another form of objectification (Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 99).

27   Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*.

28   "Meghan Markle: Royals were Concerned About Son's Skin Colour," YouTube, March 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GujerMPmas&t=31s.

29   Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1988).

30   Petra Löffler, *Affektbilder. Eine Mediengeschichte der Mimik* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004).

Fig. 4: 'Which Oprah are you when you get reviewers comments back?', posted on Twitter March 21, 2022 by Matthew C. Sinton @mcsinton, https://twitter.com/mcsinton/status/1370308241218019330 (accessed August 12, 2022).

Thus, here we have five types that once again cement the ontology of Black female affect: this range of affect is reduced to the image of negative feelings such as agitation, skepticism, bewilderment, disgust, and detachment. And, so, we once again find ourselves looking at the stereotype of the 'Angry Black Woman', now disguised as a meme.

Disaffection – Disarticulations of Affect

Based on just a few examples, it is already quite clear that the racist view, of Black femininity as only associated with negative feelings, is placed here against the possibility of Black feelings. Like the 'Feminist Killjoy,' the 'Angry Black Woman' is invoked as an 'affect alien'.[31] In this context, Tyrone Palmer speaks of the 'unthinkability of Black affect'[32]: that is, the impossibility of recognizing and acknowledging Black feelings outside of their racial and racist attribution. From this hopelessness, he argues for an ontology of negation. With this he means the consistent refusal to invest in a relationship with a world wherein Blackness has been conceptually assigned to provide coherence to this world, all under the condition of making Black feelings impossible.[33] Instead, he asks us to consider the affective structure of 'the non-relationship to the world'[34] and thus to recognize that Black affect can only appear at the limit of our world. The world must first come to its end for Black affect to even be imagined.[35] The reason, Palmer argues, for an *end* of the world is that the assumption, that another world in ours is possible remains in the image of a worlding[36] that is based on the structural rejection of Blackness.

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31 Sara Ahmed, "Creating Disturbance: Feminism, Happiness and Affective Differences," in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings*, ed. Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen (New York: Taylor&Francis, 2010), 31-44.
32 Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness."
33 Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness," 250.
34 Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness," 250.
35 Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness," 267.
36 It is confusing to say the least that Palmer highlights black feminist critique here, 'which boils down to a concise principle about the ever-present otherness.' Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness," 266.

Without invoking the end of the world in this Afropessimist sense, Xine Yao also argues for the negation of feeling and speaks of 'disaffection' as a way for Black women especially to break free from racist attributions of affect.[37] By using terms such as 'disaffection' or 'unfeeling', she is not speaking about the absence of feeling, nor about feelings *after* the end of the world or at the edge of the world, but about an affective structure that cannot be recognized within the parameters of white Western histories of feeling: this structure being effective as a 'quotidian mode of care'.[38] In this respect, we are dealing with 'disaffection' as a disarticulation of affect. That is, an articulation of affect that cannot be accessed in the pattern of common registers, but which occurs in the everyday of Black persons' struggle for survival. Since this struggle extends to the online world, I want to end with an example that I interpret, following Xine Yao, as a possibility for digital disaffection. I am aware that, from my situatedness as a *white* person, I can only succeed in doing so up to a certain point. For this much is clear: I am neither negatively affected by racism, nor can I emotionally grasp what disaffection means in the struggle for (emotional) survival.

Fig. 5: 'Which Oprah are you?', posted on Twitter March 11, 2021 by driune "the equalizer" santana, @Driune, https://twitter.com/Driune/status/1369845653174693891 (accessed August 12, 2022).

The Black-positioned user @Driune also posted the numbered series on March 11 under the title 'Which Oprah are you?', whose last picture shows Winfrey dismissive. To this she writes 'I'm a CONSISTENT 5.' (Fig.5) The statement that she is dismissive throughout, as embodied by Winfrey in image five, is reminiscent of Audre Lorde, who said that 'in order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone.'[39] I read the 'becoming stone', which is affirmed with the post and emphasized by capital letters, as disarticulation of affect or as 'disaffection', but without wanting to claim that feelings are absent. Taking up the stone face as 'disaffection' occurs in the context of an awareness that Winfrey is carefully turning toward Meghan Markle and her pain. That is also how I understand the three emoji in the post: they perhaps mitigate the risk that hardening could have in turning against those it intends to protect, namely Black

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37   Yao, *Disaffected*.
38   Yao, *Disaffected*, 6.
39   Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1984), 160.

women. The cultivation of a stony exterior as a tactic can only succeed, as Yao suggests following Lorde, if 'we [don't] bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest'.[40]

In my view, this meme is an expression of this careful cultivation of disaffection. It is striking that the series of pictures with the closing image of the stony Winfrey was posted very frequently by people who position as black, something that while searching for 'Which Oprah are you?' on Twitter reads like an affection chain of disaffection from white sentiment. Perhaps we could speak of disarticulation of affect here, forming a Black 'membrane of care'[41] in the concatenation of memes. With such a membrane, the modifiability of memes could be put to very different use. All of this may, then, no longer have to do with joking around, but with an entirely sincere seriousness that calls upon us to consider affect more strongly: as a dimension of racialization within digital cultures as well as the possibilities of disaffection or disarticulation of affect.

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40   Lorde, *Zami*, 160.
41   This is how the AG Selbstverständnis formulated it during the general meeting of the Fachgesellschaft Geschlechterstudien 2021 (Gender Studies Association 2021). The background was the racist attacks on the scholar Maureen Maisha Auma.

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SPECULATE — OR ELSE! BLOCKCHAIN MEMES ON SURVIVAL IN RADICAL UNCERTAINTY

INTE GLOERICH

If you have ever invested in cryptocurrencies or NFTs,[1] odds are that comparing the experience with a wild rollercoaster ride isn't too far off. The erratic ups and downs of the value of coins, or the continuous search for a newer, cooler NFT, while they are pushed and pulled by different hype cycles, can be reminiscent of the unexpected turns and rapid descents of a thrill-ride. However hard you study the graphs, what is up ahead always seems to be able to take you by surprise. The future is uncertain anyway, but the speculative nature of crypto-investing only exaggerates that. Experiences like these can be exhilarating and terrifying at the same time, and of course, there are memes to express these feelings. Here are two to choose from depending on your level of expertise and suaveness:
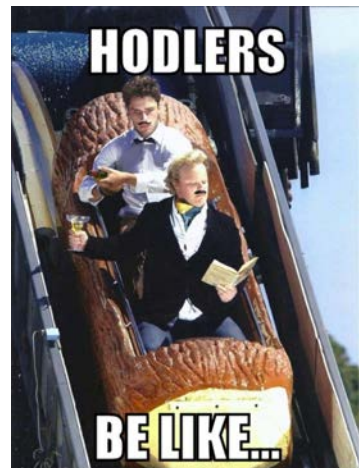

Fig. 1.1 and 1.2: The HODLer rollercoaster meme format. HODLers are people that hold on to their coins despite the market's volatility.

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1   I have included a small glossary of some blockchain-related terms at the end of this article.

While the seriousness of finance and trading may seem worlds apart from the subcultural, jokey, and creative character of memes, blockchain and meme cultures share interesting historical connections. For example, the concept behind blockchain technology was first shared on a cryptography mailing list in 2008, and a major part of its ideological heritage comes from the cypherpunk subculture of the 1980s. These two influences share a central concern with anonymity, especially in digital payment systems. Memes are equally subcultural and traversed the communication infrastructures of early internet culture, but found a major homebase on anonymous imageboards like 4chan. Media researchers Daniel de Zeeuw and Marc Tuters describe anonymous subcultural places like this as the 'Deep Vernacular Web'; places characterized by the inability to convey one's identity in any other way than through continuous use of visual and textual vernacular cues.[2] Memes are exceptional at doing exactly this. Meme researcher Limor Shifman explains that they 'play an important role in the construction of group identity and social boundaries',[3] and to understand a meme you need to acquire the particular subcultural literacies of the community from which it stems.[4] This vernacular language use is also recognizable in blockchain culture, for example in words like HODL, barting, or FUD, the meaning of which will become clear later on. In this deep vernacular web, the two communities thus find a connection in anonymity—whether that be as sociopolitical strategy, playful intervention, or as a cause of vernacular creativity.

Of course, while speculating with any form of value is always serious in its potential consequences—even when it is done in Dogecoins—the professional suit-and-tie image of traditional finance is not necessarily shared by blockchain culture. Instead, as it evolved, matured, and emerged from the fringes of the internet, blockchain opened the world of investing up to a broader public, including many young and digitally savvy people with time to kill and a healthy adolescent disregard for traditional hierarchies. Both coalescing in subcultural online spaces like Reddit and 4chan, blockchain and meme communities don't just cohabitate, but inevitably overlap in these places. Over time, this resulted in a wealth of blockchain-themed memes.

Besides being compact and fun ways to express yourself, memes like the ones above portray a little slice of a bigger scene. For example, why did the frightened people get into the rollercoaster in the first place? And how can someone be so unperturbed by the experience of a rollercoaster as to be able to drink a margarita and read a book while riding it?

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2   Daniel De Zeeuw and Marc Tuters, "Teh Internet is Serious Business. On the Deep Vernacular Web and Its Discontents," *Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2 (2020): 214–32.

3   Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*. (Cambridge: MIT press, 2013).

4   Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*; Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at several blockchain memes, and discuss what kind of worldviews and subjectivities they convey. Rather than seeing memes as frivolous, meaningless, or even just a useful form of communication, my research looks into how these memes perform a blockchain imaginary, one centered on an embrace of the uncertainty that characterizes blockchain trading.

In order to unpack how this happens, I will take a brief moment to explore the notion of imaginaries: the way that memes and imaginaries share a performative character is worth particular attention here. Furthermore, the nature of cryptocurrency and NFT trading, investing, collecting, and speculating demands a high degree of online social activity. Those that aim to sell their assets for a profit have to create hype around them. This means that people that trade and invest in cryptocurrencies and other tokens such as NFTs are likely the most vocal and visible in the general online blockchain space, and are most represented by the memes shared there as well.

The Performativity of Memes and Imaginaries

At their core, imaginaries are shared visions about what the future might be like. They are made up of, for example, an imagined social life, thoughts on the ideologies that structure society, ideas on the way power relations are organized or the kind of sociotechnical infrastructures that exist. Despite the power of big political institutions or corporations to push imaginaries in particular directions,[5] everyday users have their own way of appropriating, hacking, and rerouting imaginaries.[6] Imaginaries are not monolithic, but often form from the ground up.[7] As they are produced in a radically distributed manner, memes are a natural fit for studying exactly the kind of subcultural imaginary that exists around blockchain technology.

Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi offer a first broader theorization of the compatibility of memes and imaginaries. They point out that 'online memes can be usefully understood as sites of intersubjective imagination', much like imaginaries.[8] Furthermore, as visual communication has become more and more prominent in recent decades—of which the growing significance of memes in subcultural developments like the formation of the alt right is a prime example—'political memes are the sites of *collective* world building [emphasis in original]' that contribute to 'shaping discourse, guiding action

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5   Sheila Jasanoff, "Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity," in *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, ed. Sang-Hyun Kim, and Sheila Jasanoff (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

6   Patrice Flichy, *The Internet Imaginaire* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

7   Astrid Mager and Christian Katzenbach, "Future Imaginaries in the Making and Governing of Digital Technology: Multiple, Contested, Commodified," New Media & Society 23, no. 2 (2021): 223–36.

8   Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi, "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures: Memes as Sites of Collective Imagining," In *Post Memes. Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Bown, and Dantra Bristow (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2019).

and uniting communities' just like imaginaries do.[9] This means that memes are anything but innocuous, and they influence the kinds of futures that are collectively imagined and worked towards.

Whereas Hobson and Modi's case study was the socialist imaginary in memes shared by left wing activists,[10] the memes I analyze here are not primarily activist or political in nature. These memes are everyday reactions, reflections, and expressions. However, embedded in them are ideas about how the world works, norms that should (or shouldn't) be adhered to, or who can or cannot speak. This is similar to the mundane and ubiquitous establishment and reiteration of social norms that Judith Butler identified in performative acts. While their work explored performativity in the context of gender, this concept has a much broader applicability. Butler showed that instead of existing already, these social norms come into being in everyday acts and expressions. As they are repeated again and again, particular subjectivities, social relations, and power dynamics get normalized while others get marginalized.[11] As sites where imaginaries are performed, take shape, and are shared within and between communities, memes form part of larger discourses that influence power dynamics and social norms.

Simin Davoudi and Elizabeth Brooks explain that they 'understand performativity as 'the reiterative and citational practice' by which 'individual imaginations become deeply held and collective imaginaries'.[12] This focus on iteration and citation, as well as the move from individual expression to collective imaginary, is also key in the connection between memes and performativity, something Hobson and Modi show us when they argue that 'online memes are sites where ideas are made and imaginations are explored, shared, and popularized' and 'the making and sharing of memes represent[s] the public performance of a collectively held vision'.[13] As they are repeated and become more and more embedded in the collective consciousness of a society or subcultural group, imaginaries become increasingly performative: 'they are both an achievable *aim* and a *way* to achieve this aim [emphasis in original]'.[14] Knowing that iteration and citation are central in the establishment of performativity,[15] memes can be understood to supercharge it, through their viral spread, situated use,

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9   Hobson and Modi, "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures," 336.

10   Hobson and Modi, "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures."

11   Butler, Judith, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

12   Simin Davoudi, and Elizabeth Brooks, "City-Regional Imaginaries and Politics of Rescaling," Regional Studies 55, no. 1 (2021): 54.

13   Hobson and Modi, "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures," 340.

14   Maarten A. Hajer and Peter Pelzer, "2050—an Energetic Odyssey: Understanding 'Techniques of Futuring' in the Transition Towards Renewable Energy," *Energy Research* & *Social Science* 44 (2018): 222–31.

15   Derrida, Jacques, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

and constantly evolving nature. Memes are bite-sized packages that operationalize subcultural references for the establishment of community boundaries and social norms. Gal, Shifman, and Kampf have also pointed to the usefulness of performativity in understanding 'memes as both meaning-making and disciplining tools in the boundary work of collectives'.[16]

The notion of performativity thus helps bring to light the role of memes in setting community boundaries and the normative nature of repeated memetic images and phrases, and it is central in my exploration of blockchain imaginaries in memes. The question then becomes, what kind of worldview is normalized in blockchain memes, and what are the kinds of subjectivities that are imagined to exist in this worldview? Or, more bluntly, what logics does society function by, who is included in the blockchain community, and how are they expected to act according to blockchain memes?

Piles of Information about the Unknown

Let me go back to the rollercoaster: again, why do people decide to get on it and how they might manage to get through it unscathed? Central to the answer here is the notion of information: what it means to be good information, and how untruthful information can still be useful information. What do people know—or think they know, or pretend they know, or...—that makes them get on the blockchain ride? Some people might have time to do their own research, but others need to look to experts to guide them. With the ever-expanding list of possible crypto projects to buy into, some kind of curation of information is essential, and that is where the crypto-influencers come in.

Memes show these crypto influencers as needed authorities that are nevertheless not to be trusted. Their work can range from in-depth market analyses to sharing personal or paid opinions on the potential of particular coins, tokens, or NFTs. There is a certain performativity to these predictions, as an influencer's large number of followers might in itself influence the trajectory of a coin's value.

Just like many other social media influencers, crypto influencers often make a living out of their public status by establishing partnerships with companies,[17] and this is where things can get murky. Crypto-influencers abundantly state that what they are doing is not to be taken as financial advice in order to avoid legal liability in case they inadvertently promote a fraudulent or flopping project. However, this statement is so ubiquitous that it has turned into a running joke: everyone says it, even if the

16 Noam Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf, "'It Gets Better': Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 8 (2016): 1699.

17 Alberto Cossu, "The Digital Traces of Crypto-Finance," in Data Traces, Digital Platforms, and Algorithmic Self, ed. E. Armano, M. Briziarelli, and E. Risi (London: University of Westminster Press, 2022).

content of their message does look and sound very much like financial advice. Yet, the anonymous or pseudonymous nature of many blockchain systems means that it's difficult to assess what kind of expertise an influencer has. As one meme featuring a wise looking monk describes it: 'Me giving advice to crypto newbies after joining crypto myself four months ago'. In combination with the fact that influencers often monetize their audiences by partnering with businesses, advice takes on a dubious nature in blockchain culture.

Fig. 2: Influencers might say that they are not giving out financial advice, but it often sure sounds like they do.

While the information influencers share is potentially valuable in the search for blockchain projects to invest in—even if just as self-fulfilling prophecies—it might as well be additionally disruptive, such as when influencers get involved in what are known as shills or rug pulls. Shilling is a practice that has existed for at least a century: originally, shills would fake big wins at casinos or pretend to buy tickets to shows, all in order to entice more people to join them and so artificially inflate participation in the businesses that paid them.[18] In contemporary cryptocurrency markets, anyone can be a shill: maybe someone is paid for a promotional tweet, or it could just be that they own tokens of a particular project and hope to operationalize their own following to inflate its value.[19] Here, the distinction between personal opinion and professional statements made in service of profit-making becomes ever more blurred. Not only is it difficult to spot someone's motivations for speaking highly of a particular project, the practice of creating hype is so constant and the revolving list of projects so long that there is hardly any stable information to hold on to within blockchain culture.

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18   https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shill.
19   To add to the ambiguity, shilling is also sometimes requested by others searching for investable tokens: 'shill me your NFT'.

Fig. 3: Software developer and presidential candidate for the US Libertarian Party (2016 and 2020) John McAfee was a famous shilling influencer in the crypto scene.

Alternatively, a rug pull occurs when the developers or owners of a project suddenly abandon it while taking with them all the money that investors put into the project.[20] In blockchain culture they are a new iteration on what became known as ICO scams[21] during the blockchain hype of 2017-2018. The term 'rug pull' is instead often associated with DeFi projects[22] that became popular in the 'DeFi Summer' of 2020.[23] By enlisting influencers to generate hype, such a DeFi project can suddenly gain a lot in value. As its value goes up, more and more people are convinced to buy into it. A rug pull occurs when, with or without the knowledge of the influencers, the project's owners then suddenly take all the value out of the project, leaving the investors with illiquid stakes that have lost all their value—the rug has been pulled out from under them. Rug pull memes often refer to the promises of influencers that are too good to be true, for example a 3500% annual yield. Making claims that are quite easily spotted as untenable by insiders but tempting to less

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20   Pengcheng Xia et al, "Trade or Trick? Detecting and Characterizing Scam Tokens on Uniswap Decentralized Exchange," *Proceedings of the ACM on Measurement and Analysis of Computing Systems* 5, no. 3 (2021): 1–26.

21   Initial Coin Offerings: the blockchain variant of the Initial Public Offering in traditional finance. An ICO is a way for a blockchain project to generate funds to further develop their product and at the same time giving early investors the potential of eventual high returns on their investments. Like in a rug pull, developers run away with investors' money in an ICO scam.

22   Decentralized Finance, indicating blockchain projects that aim to minimize centralization, for example by using decentralized exchanges such as Uniswap. For its association with rug pulls, see https://cointelegraph.com/explained/crypto-rug-pulls-what-is-a-rug-pull-in-crypto-and-6-ways-to-spot-it.

23   https://decrypt.co/52298/the-2020-year-in-review-defi.

informed newcomers is itself a strategy in this game. Difficult to interpret information and volatility are operationalized as a community boundary mechanism. Those who know enough would never fall for the scams, but those that are still outsiders can see seemingly meaningful relationships between the extreme ups and downs of the market graphs and the promises made by disingenuous parties.

Fig. 4.1: Rug pulls targeting gullible newbies.

Fig. 4.2: Rug pulls targeting gullible newbies.

Despite their negative connotation, rug pulls are often portrayed as something you have to go through in order to become part of the blockchain community. An initiation of sorts that transforms you from an innocent, responsible, or wide-eyed individual into a weathered and beaten but unfazed trader. To be able to thrive in the chaotic nature of blockchain investing, you must be able to survive a rug pull or two. Another type of scam that is referenced in blockchain memes is the pump and dump scheme. These are defined as 'a type of fraud in which the offenders accumulate a commodity over a period, then artificially inflate the price through means of spreading misinformation (pumping), before selling off what they bought to unsuspecting buyers at the higher price (dumping)'.[24] Even if they are known scams, memers' attitudes towards these schemes are not outright dismissive: sometimes they joke about the quick turnover between pumps and dumps or even revel in the thrill of a pump. Instead, memes indicate an ambiguous relationship with both rug pulls and pump and dump schemes, on the one hand positioning them as unwanted elements stemming from outside blockchain culture itself, but on the other hand engaging with them, thriving on them, or taking them as fact of life within blockchain culture.

Fig. 5.1: Ambiguous relationship to scams.

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24   Josh Kamps and Bennett Kleinberg, "To the Moon: Defining and Detecting Cryptocurrency Pump-and-Dumps," *Crime Science* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1–18.

when you were creating
a "it's pumping meme"
and it starts dumping

and now you have to
create a "it dumping
meme "

Fig. 5.2: Ambiguous relationship to scams.

Difficult to interpret information can also come from different places in the form of FUD. Short for Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt, the term FUD was first used in the context of marketing and technology in 1975 by Gene Amdahl who, after leaving IBM as an executive, started his own competing company. He expected (rightfully, it turns out) that IBM would launch a marketing campaign focused on invoking feelings of fear, uncertainty, and doubt in customers in relation to the Amdahl company, ultimately aiming to stifle the enterprise at its outset.[25] In later years Microsoft became a prominent practitioner of FUD marketing, especially against open-source software.[26] However, FUD is not just used by multinationals. *The Complete Sales Letters Book* describes FUD as a common practice between sales competitors, which includes the use of negative press and the dissemination of comparative charts.[27] In the context of blockchain FUD, often in the form of negative press, has been shown to produce 'market uncertainty' and dropping prices.[28] Just like rug pulls, FUD is often portrayed in the memes as a way to separate insiders from everyone else. Noobs, panic sellers, and non-believers all fall for the FUD, as they are either not experienced enough or refuse the fundamental belief in the prosperity blockchain can bring. Either way, they are portrayed as a more-or-less dispensable Other.

25 Bryan Pfaffenberger, "The Rhetoric of Dread: Fear, Uncertainty, and Doubt (Fud) in Information Technology Marketing," *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 13, no. 3 (2000): 78–92.
26 Eric S. Raymond, "Why Microsoft Smears-and-Fears-Open Source," *IEEE Spectrum* 38, no. 8 (2001): 14–15.
27 Rhonda Harris and Ann McIntyre, *The Complete Sales Letter Book: Model Letters for Every Selling Situation* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Professional, 1998).
28 Jamil Civitarese and Layla Mendes, "Bad News, Technical Development and Cryptocurrencies Stability," (Preprint, submitted in December 2018), 1, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract%5C_id=3154124.

Fig. 6: FUD as initiation.

FUD joins shills, rug pulls, and pump and dump schemes on the list of inauthentic information floating around the blockchain community. This produces a culture in which anyone discussing any aspect of blockchain might genuinely believe what they are saying, but it could just as well be that they are trying to rope you in for their own ulterior profit motive. While blockchain is seen by many as a technology that will radically alter society for the better, this doesn't make the humans participating in that society any more trustworthy. In fact, the commonly held idea is that blockchain allows you to deal with the perceived fundamental untrustworthiness of humanity while operating society in a fair way.[29] FUD, shills, and all the other forms of information that is potentially harmful to the blockchain ecosystem are not seen as problems to regulate against, but inherent parts of human nature. To thrive in this society, it is individuals' responsibility to learn to deal with this lack of solid ground.

Do Your Own Research

In the context of all this murky information, DYOR—short for Do Your Own Research—is a repeated like a mantra in blockchain culture. Tweets promoting blockchain projects include it as a hashtag almost by default, and some companies and influencers even include it in their profile bio as a blanket disclaimer broadly meaning 'anything mentioned here is not financial advice, and I will not be accountable for any losses you might suffer following my suggestions. You are responsible for basing your decisions on your own research'. Nevertheless, or perhaps unsurprisingly, blockchain culture is full of people sharing their trading and investment strategies. Blockchain technology is notoriously hard

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29   Although it must be said that fair is understood in a limited and mathematical way here.

to understand, and when slick pitches trying to get you to invest are added to the mix, it becomes almost impossible to find your way as a newcomer. Interpreting information takes skill, experience, and time. The readily available resources that others share can be tempting, especially when you are new to the game.

Fig. 7: DYOR as helpful advice.

DYOR is a general strategy used by those who have been initiated into the blockchain scene. It prevents them from falling for shills, rug pulls, and pump and dump schemes by investigating, for example, who is behind a project, what its 'tokenomics'[30] are, and how the token has performed previously. When newcomers ask for help determining which blockchain projects to invest in among this wealth of dubious as well as truthful information, the only reasonable answer is 'DYOR'. In a hostile world, the only way to survive is to be skeptical of anything others say. Advising someone to DYOR is better advice than any real investment strategy anyone could share. It's not clear where exactly the acronym DYOR first appeared, but research has shown that it is often used in conspiracy communities. Specifically, researchers link its use to conspiracies around the Covid-19 pandemic and the anonymous 4chan-based conspirator Q. To understand the meaning of the centrality of DYOR in blockchain culture, it's useful to dive a bit deeper in these other communities.

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30 Tokenomics refers to the mechanics of how a particular coin functions, this includes for example rewards, fees, and incentives.

In 2017, the anonymous 4chan poster Q inspired the QAnon conspiracy. While the conspiracy consists of many diverging claims, at its core it warns against a supposed global political and societal elite of pedophiles, cannibals, and sex traffickers that boasts many high-profile politicians among its members. Q's mode of operation was to 'drop' little bits of information to be reassembled into meaningful narratives by followers of the conspiracy, leading to their use of the term DYOR. Collaboratively working through these drops to decipher their meaning, supposedly uncovering increasingly outrageous secrets, each follower's research starts to function as reinforcement of previous discoveries.[31]

Q's conspiracies have also roped in anti-vax communities during the pandemic.[32] In this context, DYOR functions in two ways: it is used as a call for an audience to verify a conclusion made by a conspiracy theorist—essentially making use of their confirmation bias—or alternatively, it works as a ward against any difficult questions a conspiracy theorist might get: if the person asking the question had only done their own research (well), they would not have asked said question in the first place.[33]

Referring to French sociologist Émile Durkheim, conspiracy researcher Matthew Hughey writes that '"DYOR" reflects a "cult of the individual"; a patina of independent thinking covering a reactionary collective consciousness'.[34] Writing around the turn of the 20th century, Durkheim analyzed the decline of Christianity as the occasion for the rise of this cult of the individual: 'a new religion whose sacred object is the rational and autonomous individual'.[35] In his own time, Durkheim saw the cult of the individual as a new route to social cohesion based on autonomy and the shared human drive towards connection.[36] However, this idea has taken on new dimensions in times of social distancing and dissipating feelings of belonging that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic. Conspiracy theories in this case provide a retreat into alternative communities based on an individualist notion of knowledge and research, and establish a subversive kind of collectivism in the face of a supposed oppressive authority and finding an exclusionary alternative for a lack of social cohesion.[37]

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31   Matthew W. Hughey, "The Who and Why of Qanon's Rapid Rise," *New Labor Forum* 30, no. 3 (2021): 76–87.

32   Garry, Amanda, Samantha Walther, Rukaya Mohamed, and Ayan Mohammed, "Qanon Conspiracy Theory: Examining Its Evolution and Mechanisms of Radicalization," *Journal for De-radicalization* 26, no. 3 (2021): 152–216.

33   Brian Hughes et al, "Development of a Codebook of Online Anti-Vaccination Rhetoric to Manage Covid-19 Vac-cine Misinformation," *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 18, no. 14 (2021): 7556.

34   Hughey, "The Who and Why of Qanon's Rapid Rise," 81.

35   Paul Carls, "Modern Democracy as the Cult of the Individual: Durkheim on Religious Coex-istence and Conflict," *Critical Research on Religion* 7, no. 3 (2019): 293.

36   Charles E. Marske, "Durkheim's' 'Cult of the Individual' and the Moral Reconstitution of So-ciety," *Sociological Theory* 5, no. 1 (1987): 1—14.

37   Madison Wesenberg, "Covid-19 and the Rise of the Conspiracy: Examination of Covid Related Conspiracies Using Durkheimian Concepts," *Crossing Borders: Student Reflections on Global Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (2021): 1-4.

DYOR can be seen as a consequence of alternative facts, fake news, and the post-truth era that emerged after the mid 2010s.[38] Blockchain culture has its own forms of fake news and alternative facts in the forms of shills, rug pulls, and FUD. The concept of post-truth is often explained as the triumph of feelings and personally held beliefs over facts:[39] it doesn't matter if something is factually verifiable, what matters is if it caters to how you feel or believe the world works.[40] The blockchain memes tell a different story of the character of this post-truth era. Instead of substituting facts with feelings, they center the operationality of statements about the world. Whether the advice of influencers strikes a chord with your feelings is not the question. Neither is the factual grounding of such advice. Rather, it is the performativity of such statements: does it inspire the actions of enough followers to move the market in a particular way? Whether an influencer is a studious and serious analyst or has just opened their first blockchain wallet address, if what they say has effects it can be operationalized for short-term gains.

Fig. 8: Performativity on top of performativity: Elon Musk's tweets influencing markets, but also memes about this phenomenon that perform a constantly shifting state of knowledge.

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38   Praveen Abraham and Raisun Mathew, eds, *The Post-Truth Era. Literature and Media* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2021); Lee McIntyre, *Post-Truth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

39   Post-truth was chosen as Word of the Year 2016 by the Oxford Languages (which produces the Oxford English Dictionary) and defined as an adjective 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief': https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/.

40   McIntyre, *Post-Truth*; Steve Fuller, *Post-Truth: Knowledge as a Power Game* (London: Anthem Press, 2018). McIntyre compares the triumph of feeling to a biological or animalistic sensing of the world. This however carries within it Cartesian assumptions about the fundamental split between mind and body, human and animal. As will be discussed later, modern iterations of Enlightenment rationality influenced by Descartes have become insufficient in dealing with contemporary complexity.

Uncertain and Disintegrating Futures

This focus on the short term is significant. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi writes that in times of increased precarity and environmental collapse the promise of the future has turned from its previous progressive understanding, which peaked during the mid-20th century, into a broken promise or even a threat.[41] The future no longer offers a positive outlook but presents itself as a fundamental and threatening uncertainty. This uncertainty traverses all aspects of life—housing, the precaritization of labor, political ruptures, etc.—and the rationality of *homo economicus* can no longer calculate a way out of this predicament.[42]

Reflecting on the rise of both populist politics and speculative financialization since the financial crisis of 2008, Komporozos-Athanasiou asks 'what if markets and publics now coalesce around a shared yearning for uncertainty'?[43] The neoliberal promise of self-sufficient rational entrepreneurialism is failing in the face of the radical instability of politics—e.g. the rise of right-wing populism in localities across the world—as well as finance—e.g. the 2008 financial crisis, the unpredictable effects of Trumpism and the Brexit vote, the Covid-19 pandemic, etc.[44]

Traditional finance has long been a playground for those privileged enough to be capable of weathering volatility. So much so, that all sorts of metaphors for the ups and downs of a market exists. For example, there are the animal-themed metaphors, terms like 'bull' or 'bear' markets, which are also ubiquitous in blockchain culture. In the case of a bull market, prices are going up from a low point, whereas in a bear market they are going down. The term bull market, or an investor being 'bullish' is thought to refer to the energetic and eager charge of the bull, and a bear market or 'bearish' investor refers to the old English proverb 'to sell the bear's skin before one has caught the bear'. Indeed, bearish investors usually sell their holdings in anticipation of a crashing market.[45]

While these terms abound in memes, the unheard-of volatility of blockchain markets also inspired new metaphors. For example, due to this volatility and unpredictability, other animals have been called on to describe their graphs more adequately, such as a skipping kangaroo or a spiky stegosaurus. As references become more and more random, such as recognizing the shape of Bart Simpson's head in a graph or the naming of ever smaller sections of a chart in order to predict what will come next, the concept of technical market analysis starts to disintegrate under the weight of that volatility. This type of analysis finally

41   Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland: AK Press, 2011).
42   Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities: Living With Uncertainty in a Financialized World* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2022).
43   Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities,* 10.
44   Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities.*
45   Maria Lojko, "Animals as a Source Domain for Metaphorical Expressions in English Economic Discourse." *Language and Literary Studies of Warsaw* 8 (2018): 107–98.

reaches its endpoint in the crude, sexist, or immature variant, where any pretense of usability has dissipated. These memes seem to mock the idea of ever being able to predict a market as ruthlessly unpredictable and susceptible to random outside influences as that of a cryptocurrency. The alignment of markets and the public to uncertainty is perhaps nowhere as pronounced as in the explosion of investors in the crypto-market during the NFT hype in 2020-2022. The crypto-market is a blatant embrace of uncertainty that brings the market within the realm of the mundane as well.

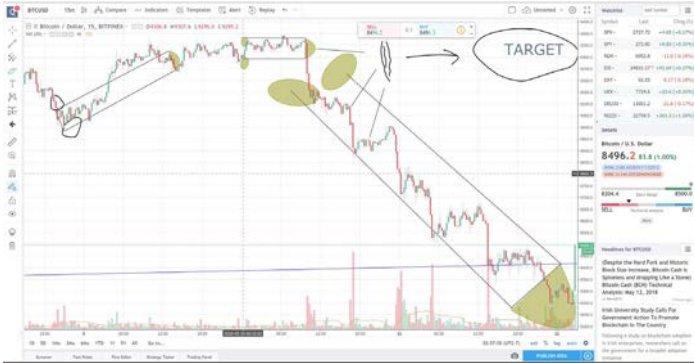*Fig. 9.1 and 9.2: Disintegrating market analyses.*

Fig. 9.3: Disintegrating market analyses.

Speculate – Or Else!

Komporozos-Athanasiou proposes that among these contemporary developments a new subject has emerged: *homo speculans.* He writes that speculation is 'the act of knowingly entering into a broken contract',[46] and that it is 'nothing less than a denial of progress along the trajectory of Enlightenment rationalism'.[47] Speculation can thus be seen as a form of believing in the present more than in the future.[48] The practices of shilling, rug pulls, pump and dump schemes, and FUD all have murky relationships to the truth, the future, or committing to promises made, but yet they are not dismissed outright as negative elements in the blockchain community. All this more-or-less false information can be operationalized for profitable market speculation. Whether the market goes up or down, the fact that it moves right now is what allows weathered crypto investors to act at all. From the vantage point of a newcomer, stuck in reason and rationality, these attitudes are unattainable. Their experience of the market's volatility remains like that rollercoaster, but with the caveat that it could really derail and crash into the ground. This inability to deal with volatility reminds me of Hubertus Bigend, a character in William Gibson's science-fiction novel *Pattern Recognition,* when he says:

> 'Of course, [...] we have no idea, now, of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. [...] For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile. [...] We have only risk management.'[49]

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46   Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities,* 19.
47   Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities,* 45.
48   Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities.*
49   William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (New York, NY: Putnam, 2003).

But risk management is a thing of the past, belonging to a time when effects were calculable and reason could explain the world. Whereas *homo economicus* calculated risk and probability, the complexities of contemporary uncertainty are fundamentally unpredictable, incalculable. *Homo speculans*, in dealing with uncertainty, does not have as its aim to achieve some promised future—e.g., promised by populist politicians—but to seize the now in all its potentialities. Speculating on volatility *is* the strategy itself.[50] Volatility in blockchain culture is a phenomenon that makes it difficult to get to grips with what is going on in the market while at the same time making possible the speculation that characterizes much of the crypto-market. In these circumstances, doing your own research (well) is a difficult task. Inauthentic and inconsequential information abounds, and individuals are responsible for their own strategy in the face of all of this. To be able to function in blockchain investing culture, one has to come to terms with this lack of footing and instead learn to thrive on volatility and uncertainty. The Other, like the market, is always unpredictable, possibly malevolent, and fundamentally untrustworthy. Blockchain speculators allow the market to exist in the first place and at the same time create its volatility. That is how they survive.

Performance researcher Jon McKenzie forecasts that '*performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge* [emphasis in original]'.[51] Recognizing its increasing use in fields such as organizational management, technology design, government performance, finance, and the study of the environment, McKenzie sees that performance itself becomes the dominant order-word that implicitly structures societal norms and disciplines subjects: 'Perform—or else!'[52] Memes supercharge this performativity through their distributed iteration and citation, and push the speculative character of blockchain culture into new dimensions. The memes mentioned in this text show that, in blockchain culture any information is judged on its performativity; whether it makes sense or not doesn't matter. Instead, what matters is: will it—through the mobilization of publics and markets—have an effect on the world? Here, I would like to extend McKenzie's reading by saying that, as a consequence of the centrality of performativity, blockchainers are ordered to speculate—or else!

Acknowledgments

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50   Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities*.

51   Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London: Routledge, 2002), 18.

52   McKenzie, *Perform or Else*; Jon McKenzie, "Performance and Globalization," in *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies*, ed. D Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 33-45.

accessible for my analysis. Chaturvedi scraped the subreddit, downloaded the memes, and extracted the text written on them in order to make the dataset searchable.

Glossary

Blockchain is a distributed ledger technology (DLT) that was first used for Bitcoin. One of its central characteristics is that it allows for the transaction of assets without the need for a central authority such as a bank. Instead, peers can transact between themselves while relying on a consensus algorithm that makes use of cryptography to safeguard against, for example, the fraudulent double spending of those assets.

Cryptocurrencies is a term that encompasses many different kinds of tokens that are exchanged on blockchains. The most well-known among them are Bitcoin, Ether, and Dogecoin. While these are designed as a general medium of exchange—similar to how money functions—there are also more limited-purpose cryptocurrencies. For example, governance tokens that allow holders to cast votes within a particular blockchain project, security tokens that essentially represent shares of a blockchain company, or utility tokens that give buyers access to a good or a service.

NFTs are a special kind of token that is non-fungible. This means that each NFT represents a specific, unique asset rather than an abstracted amount of value (as is the case with currencies such a Euro or a Bitcoin). Because they have this characteristic, NFTs are most famously used in the process of trading of digital artworks and have been hailed as (theoretically) making digital scarcity possible. Important to note here is that NFTs are not the artworks themselves, but rather a unique identifier of that artwork stored on a blockchain. This means that while ownership of the NFT is cryptographically secured, the actual file it identifies does not receive the same protection.

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AT THE END OF THE ROAD, THERE'S MEMES

MEMEING READING // READING MEMEING

JORDI VIADER GUERRERO

Let's start at the beginning. The final conversation with the Patriot AI in Metal Gear Solid 2:
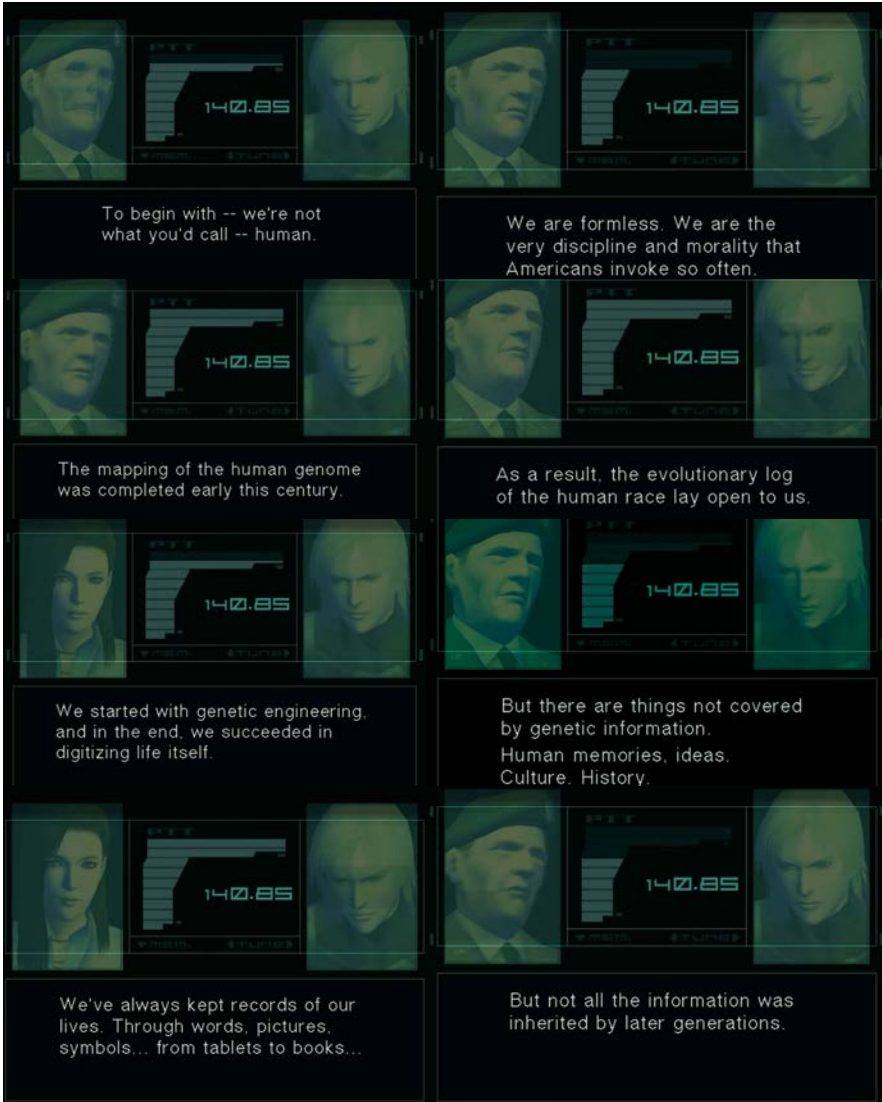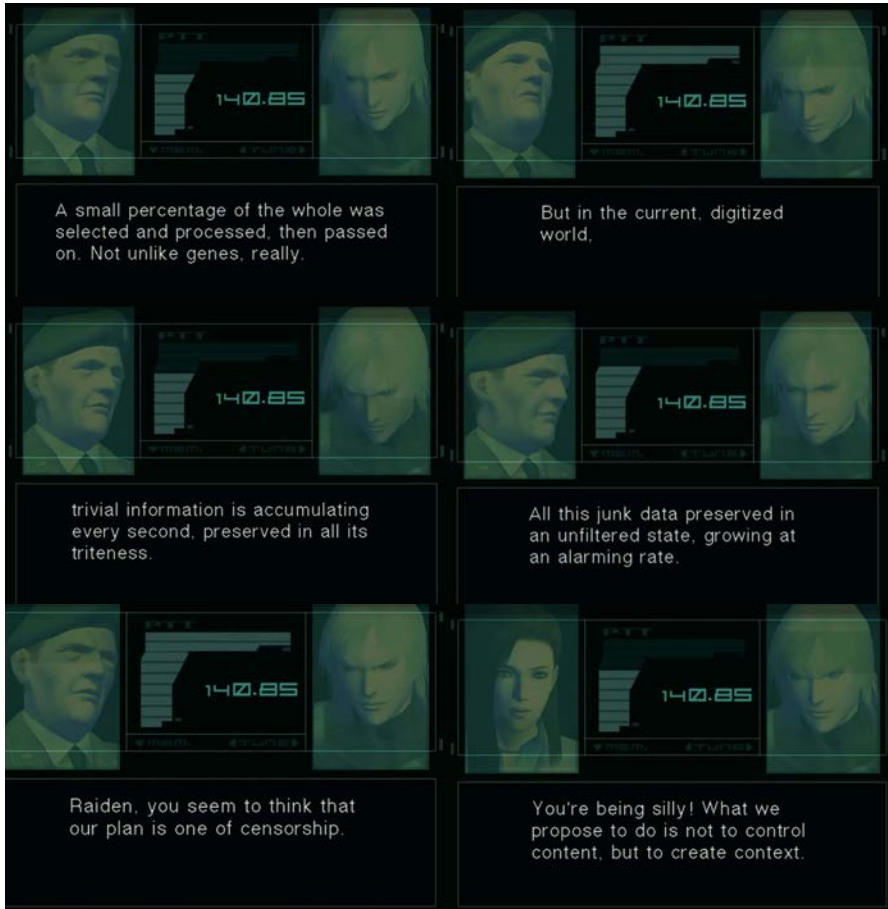
Fig. 1: Screen captures from 'Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty'. Hideo Kojima and Konami Computer Entertainment.

Released two months after 9/11, MGS2 took Baudrillard's claim 'the Gulf War did not take place'¹ literally, and transubstantiated geopolitical conflict into the circulation of images. This, however, is not presented as just another ontological scandal in the tradition of Plato's Cave. The scene does not frame the circulation of images as the hiding of an underlying reality. Instead, images are the source of the very conflict that produces the real. The Patriot AI is not conspiring to occult the real, but rather produces the real by performing conspiracy: it creates context, decides upon canon, stabilizes and tames the exuberant logics of images into a straightforward representation.

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1   Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Batton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

Fig. 2: Frame from 'Le Vent d'est'. Groupe Dziga Vertov (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin).

I haven't played this game, but that's beside the point. In the same way that Baudrillard claims that the Gulf War did not take place, MGS2 suggests that MGS1 never took place (it was just a game, after all); not playing the game doesn't prevent its reading. However, it must be acknowledged that my reading of MGS2 is as close to playing the game as the player of MGS2 is to being a paramilitary secret agent. And that's notwithstanding that video games are not transparent vehicles of meaning as text allegedly is.

This scene was handed down to me by the circulation of networked images—that is, following the very same memetic logic that the evil Patriot AI wanted to educate the player about. In any case, the unveiling of an original meaning in the text (MGS2) is not what motivates my writing: rather, it is navigating the opacity of memetic transmission—late-night doomscrolling—that keeps me awake at night. This external brain activity, screen-mediated nightmare, or the practice of reading within the Patriot AI's conspiracy, raises the question: don't reading and writing themselves always imply a qualitative distance from their subject? Aren't writing and reading always about the transmission of the message, rather than the message itself? Or, in cheeky academic terms, isn't primary literature always secondary literature? Fortunately, the old McLuhan dictum has answered this question for us: yes, of course, the medium is the message.

I will get to memes and, more specifically, the loose collection of theory-focused Instagram meme accounts known as Theorygram, later on. For now, I will ask you, dear reader, to bear with me through a brief account of the scandalous liaisons between theory and writing. And, for my part, I will pin this essay's main concern here, allowing it(s) ~~presence~~ to haunt the rest of its reading:

> If theory is nothing more than its medium, the question of me(a)me(n)ing is also the question concerning the new forms of literacy/understanding/intellectual practices engendered through it. Or, in brief: I'm not tackling what memes are doing outside the screen (the sociology or politics of memes), but what sort of epistemic activities are

those that involve the screen. **What becomes of theory after generalized personal computation?**

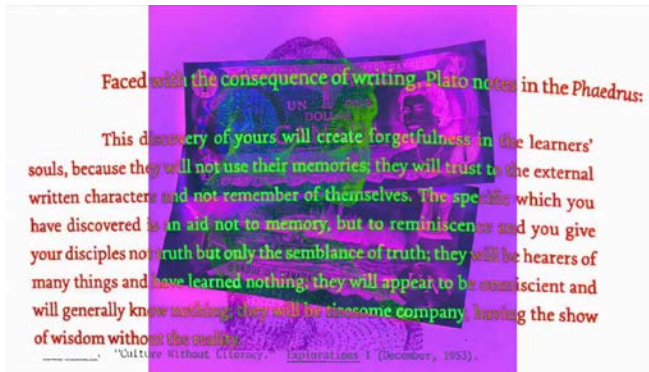Let's take a look at the (original) ontological scandal:

Fig. 3: Frame from 'Oscars Too Human', quoting Marshall McLuhan's "Culture Without Literacy" in 'Explorations 1' quoting Plato's 'Phaedrus'. McLuhan Video's YouTube channel. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANM_QSBmXEc&t=33s&ab_channel=MCLUHANVIDEOS.

The platonic foundational moment of phono(logo)centrism[2] is paradoxically written down, and thus, by performing the very thing it disavows, it is also the foundational moment of writing as a theoretical act. With this double movement theory, the contemplation of ideas mutates into the marking and deciphering of inscriptions. As inscriptions become the technical medium through which reasons manifest, knowing is then something that is done with texts. Taken to the extreme, this calls for the transformation of the world into text—an attitude encapsulated by the notion of 'law', fully embraced by the religions of the book, as much as the modern rationalist project.

I give this brief Derridean account of theory as text for a reason: framing the question of theory as that of its medium. Knowing is not necessarily enacted through reading and writing, but it is nevertheless tied to the historical back-and-forth of these technologies. Theory as writing holds the productive tension of symbolization: a dead, physical mark generating the effect of

2   'In the *Grammatology* Derrida suggests that this rejection of writing as an appendage, a mere technique, and yet a menace built into speech—in effect, a scapegoat—is a symptom of a much broader tendency. He relates this phonocentrism to logocentrism—the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full self-consciousness. In the *Grammatology* and elsewhere, Derrida argues that the evidence for this originary and teleologic presence has customarily been found in the voice, the *phoné*.' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translator's Preface" in *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), lxviii.

a life beyond the conditions of life. That is, the eternal life of ideas beyond death and decay. Moreover, this contradiction also introduces a dialectic between excess/differentiation and stabilization/self-conservation that will later become my argument's structuring hinge: a symbol qua inscription is a medium for the stabilization of meaning that paradoxically triggers boundless meaningless proliferation.

The first ontological scandal takes the world away from us, leaving us with mere inscriptions. The second withdraws the subject of knowing:
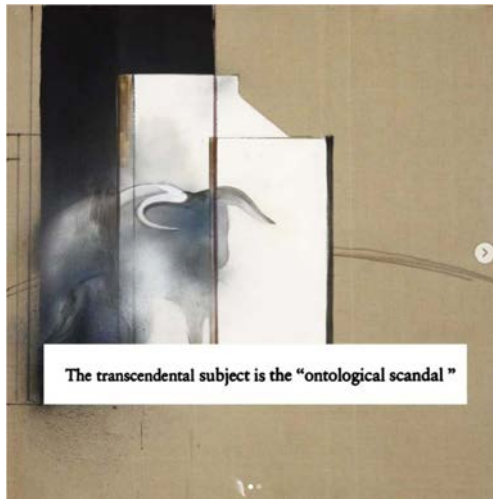

Fig. 4.1: 'The transcendental subject is the ontological scandal'. Meme posted by @candychuckles. Retrieved July 4, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc9np12vrMn/?utm%5C_source=ig%5C_ web%5C_copy%5C_link.

Fig. 4.2: 'The transcendental subject is the ontological scandal'. Meme posted by @candychuckles. Retrieved July 4, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc9np12vrMn/?utm%5C_source=ig%5C_ web%5C_copy%5C_link.

The Kantian transcendental subject is a sophisticated solution to the denial of unmediated epistemic access to the world. Counterintuitively, in an attempt to safeguard objective knowledge, Kant's critical project turned its back to the world and directed its gaze towards the subject. Or, to briefly sum up this key moment in the history of western philosophy with an image: the transcendental subject is an eye looking at its own looking. Epistemology is therefore a meta-analysis dealing with the conditions of possibility of knowing (how the subject knows) to shed a light on the limits of knowledge and, thus, solve the issue of what can be known. The result is a chimera: just like inscriptions, the subject of knowledge is and is not part of this world. Not a physical or psychological person, but a reflexive formal structure—a mediation, a ghost resulting from the implications of reading the world as text, as an object of knowledge. If the world is text, the transcendental subject is the synecdochic structure capable of containing all possible texts.

While this turn to subjectivism may amount to perspectival relativism, it is not the relativism we take for granted. The issue in question is not how different variations of truth fall into the subject, but the conditions in which the truth of variation appears to the subject. The question of truth becomes not that of eternity but that of giving an account of excess, overflow, or difference through subjective structures, ratios or laws. That is, through the enactment of a point of view. It is useful to depict the transcendental subject as the act of enunciating the world as an epistemic object or, in short, something different from itself. Basically, by stating that A is B, the subject is the opening of the world to theoretical vision; it is the continuous repetition of an inaugural act of symbolization.

In his early 20th century essay 'Perspective as a Symbolic Form',[3] neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer placed the transcendental subject's empty reflexive structure within the history of visual representation. He argues that renaissance linear perspective, as the rational organizing of space by an out-of-sight vanishing point, is the technical tool through which transcendental subjectivity translates itself into the sensible world. The subject itself is not visible except as a structure implied in all that is visible. This movement transforms theory into an act not only concerned with an objectified sensible world, but also as one necessarily mediated by images and imagination[4]. This implies not only that perspective is the visual translation of an epistemic tool, but also that transcendental subjectivity, the reflexive structure of understanding, is nothing other than a visual form. The subject is a trope or a technique of vision and speech—such as a meme—allowing us to do the sort of things that amount to knowing.

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3   Ernst Cassirer, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, trans. Cristopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
4   The role of imagination as the common root between the faculty of understanding and sensibility in Kant's critical project was famously debated between Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos in 1929. My interpretation of this argument, for which understanding becomes an image as images and imagination become rationalized, is not representative of Cassirer's own neo-Kantian position in that debate.

Fig. 5: 'What if I told you that you are the meme?' Meme posted by @proyecto_televetica_. Retrieved July 4, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cb5ddJXudT3/?utm%5C_source=ig%255C_web%255C_copy%255C_link.%252.

This pictorial plot-twist[5] sets the stage for the third ontological scandal that blows up this game of displacements: not only is the world a text, but the subject is an act, which is itself an image—and since image is the condition of world-as-text, text and image take part of each other. With this, the triad that concerns us has been set up: image-text-theory. Notice that neither world nor subject are anywhere to be seen in this triad. No transcendence or substantiality is allowed in this game, just a continuous play of displacements. Or, to come back to the question pinned at the start: if theory is something we do with texts as well as something texts do to us, what has become of the practice of theory once generalized personal computation unbinds text into a process of circulation of images?

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5   The expression 'pictorial turn' was coined by W. J. T. Mitchell after the notorious linguistic turn of the 20th century. However, it is relevant to clarify that the pictorial turn is not the inauguration of a new historico-epistemological epoch, but rather 'the pictorial turn is a trope, a figure of speech that has been repeated many times since antiquity. When the Israelites turn aside from the invisible god to a visible idol, they are engaged in a pictorial turn. When Plato warns against the domination of thought by images, semblances, and opinions in the allegory of the cave, he is urging a turn away from the pictures that hold humanity captive and toward the pure light of reason. When Lessing warns, in the Laocoon, about the tendency to imitate the effects of visual art in the literary arts, he is trying to combat a pictorial turn that he regards as a degradation of aesthetic and cultural proprieties. When Wittgenstein complains in the Philosophical Investigations that a picture held us captive, he is lamenting the rule of a certain metaphor for mental life that has held philosophy in its grip.' W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: a Critique of Visual culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 173.

Fig. 6.2: 'My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?'. Slideshow posted by @the_reality_of_the_ virtual quoting Slavoj Žižek's "Less than Nothing". Retrieved July 4, 2022. Source: https://www. instagram.com/p/CdRAFoYv7Qp/.
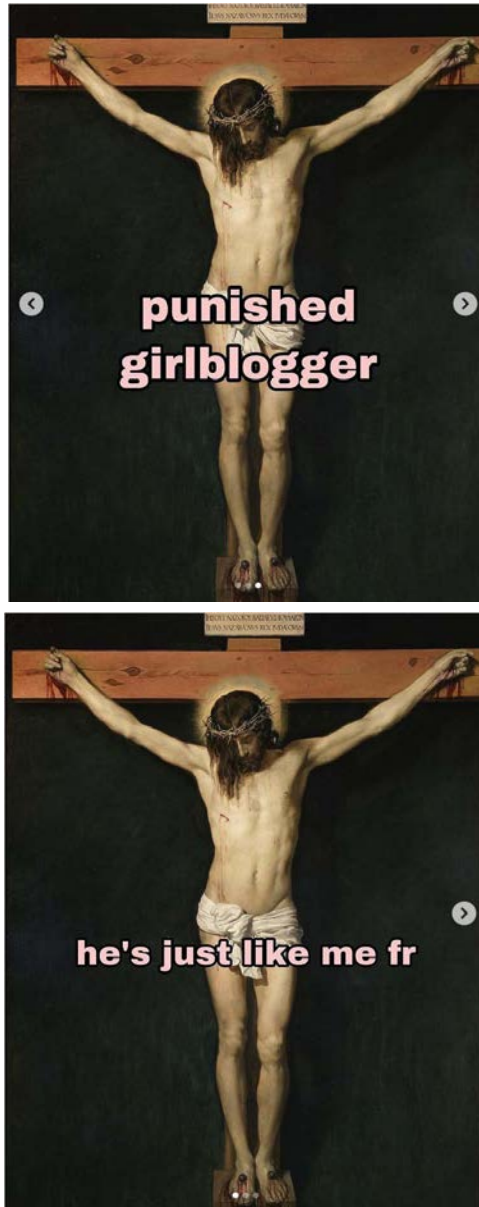
Fig. 7: 'Christ is the revelation of subject-as-image. Christ, the OG meme'. Slideshow posted by @ simoneweilfooddiary. Retrieved July 4, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CeO6W-GNhcp/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

Writing a geopolitical shift and a computational revolution after Cassirer, Daniel Dennett described consciousness as 'a huge complex of memes […] a virtual machine implemented in the parallel architecture of a brain that was not designed for any such activities.'[6] Dennet is more concerned with the emergence of consciousness as a psychological phenomenon from the workings of the biological brain rather than the epistemological subject. Nevertheless, back in the early 90s, when Dawkins still had the monopoly over the definition of memes as the basic unit of cultural transmission, Dennett was able to make the argument that, not only is consciousness a meme parasitizing on the human brain to replicate itself, but the content of this meme is itself the continuous circulation of mental states: 'the meandering sequence of conscious mental contents famously depicted by James Joyce in his novels'.[7] As this quote was written before the advent of web 2.0 (for the lack of a better term), when Dennett argues that consciousness is a meme, he is not implying that it is akin to viral images circulating on contemporary internet platforms. Yet, for my (mis)reading purposes, Dennett's depiction of consciousness as a meme provides a stepping-stone to advocate for the proliferation (or the production of production) of memetic images as a model of enacted epistemic subjectivity (i.e., theory).

The attempt to rebuild epistemology as the productive interaction between image and text is not unprecedented. It is, famously, the basis of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*[8] and his notion of allegory (in opposition to that of the symbol).[9] These were, in turn, developed in an attempt to update the visual trope of subjectivity from that of linear perspective to cinematic montage and, thus, move away from the humanists Brunelescchi, Alberti, and Dürer to the revolutionaries Vertov and Einsenstein. This is a tradition that has been picked up countless times during the 20th century and whose basic movement also animates my own drive for deconstructing the divide between visuality and literacy, profusion and stability. Thinking with images is a platonically anti-platonic endeavor that fundamentally changes our conceptions of how thinking should be performed. To illustrate this, allow me to extensively quote Boris Groys:

> Although we no longer speak of a disembodied soul, still we can and must speak of a soulless body, or a corpse. The soul may have no further life after the death of the body; however, the body certainly lives on after the soul passes away. Here we can definitely speak of a life after death, because a corpse is active throughout: after death it remains active, in that it elapses, decays, and decomposes. This process of decay is potentially infinite—one cannot definitively say when the process ends because the body's material substances remain identifiable for a

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6   Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1991), 210.
7   Dennet, *Consciousness Explained*, 214.
8   Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambrdige, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
9   Walter Benjamin, "Allegory and Trauerspeil" in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso Books, 2003), 159-235.

long enough time. Even if the vestiges of the corpse can no longer be identified, it doesn't mean the body has disappeared, but simply that its elements—molecules, atoms, etc.—have dispersed throughout the world to such extent that the body has practically become one with the entire world. If you wish, it has become a body without organs. This unification with the cosmos, materially as well as spiritually, offers a perspective that makes possible another kind of metanoia. Instead of the immortality of the soul we achieve a different kind of immortality: the immortality of the body's material substances, the immortality of the body as a corpse.[10]

Now, let us talk about Theorygram (finally).
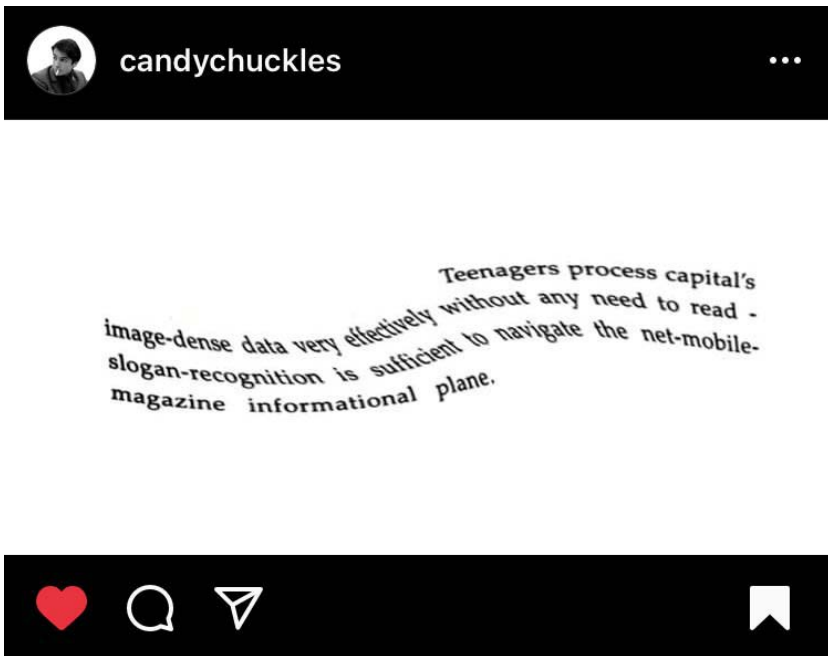
*Fig. 8: 'Mark Fisher's Boomer Tears'. Meme posted by @candychuckles. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CbaUI1-vSMb/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. 'Teenagers process capital's image-dense data very effectively without **any need to read** —slogan-recognition is sufficient to navigate the net-mobile-magazine informational plane.' 'Writing has never been capitalism's thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate', Deleuze and Guattari argued in Anti-Oedipus.*

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10   Boris Groys, Elena Sorokina and Emily Speers Mears, "The Immortal Bodies," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, Vol 53-54 (Spring-Autumn 2008): 345-349.

'Electric language does not go by way of the voice or writing: data processing does without them both'[11] — *Mark Fisher*

Until now, I have discussed theory as the inaugural act of the epistemic transcendental subject, or as what Groys so vividly illustrated as a life after life. Theory and the transcendental subject are, however, dead. Not only in the social-media-critique way, for which visual media kills off literacy, but as in the acknowledgment that theory is media —inscriptions from the past refusing to leave the present. This undead body lingers and finds a new life as something different than itself. Along with the corpses of Gallimard and Suhrkamp, the epistemic subject rots underground. Its bounds are disintegrating into *artificial mycelial networks* of theory-focused meme accounts metastasizing in a corner of Instagram popularly known as Theorygram. Perhaps accounts such as @fakebaudrillard, @bodylessorgans, @girlwithoutorgans, @dankdeleuze, and lest we forget @inherent_thembo (@lobotomized_thembwo at the moment of writing, though previously known as @catboy_deleuze; the OG catboy), were created with the intention of 'bringing theory to the masses'. A starting point for the lurkers of the world to further explore the original, paper-bounded, texts later in the future (or at least their skeuomorphic translation, that is, bootlegged PDFs). Nevertheless, mimicking theory's own notoriety of being a displacement of praxis, memes have a way of taking a life of their own and, following Fisher's quote, scrolling through a plethora of memes threatens to displace the careful decoding of texts.

I will refrain from mapping the Theorygram ecosystem. After all, there is always one more @fake[x] @catboy[y] account to consider. Furthermore, many of these accounts are constantly shadowbanned or abandoned as new ones are being created. But, more importantly, that enterprise would be yet another conflation of knowledge with compartmentalization and not its reconsideration through the articulation of memeing as a critical framework. What matters for my epistemological purposes is not so much who is meming (an admin reveal or the sociological mapping of identities), but how once the medium is profoundly changed, then so too is the subject.

If thinking doesn't take the form of writing, its portrayal as an act of symbolization (be it visual or textual) ceases to be pertinent. As mentioned above, a symbol is the determinate negation of that which is symbolized. The former negates the latter in an attempt to affirm it and stabilize it; an originary theft to ensure conservation. This is the logic of both text and (perspectival) image as mimetic (though not memetic) illustration, but also that of (Lacanian) desire. In the same way that the writing down of the platonic condemnation of writing legitimizes it, symbolization attempts to overcome the originary foreclosure between the world and sign while simultaneously performing it. It is the foundational act of the subject condemned to repeat itself ad infinitum.

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11   Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 25.

Theorygram accounts have never shied away from ironically engaging with their sources. By this point we all know that irony is a given on the internet. Attempting to be serious or illustrative, especially when memeing, is bound to be mocked as an act of mediatic naïveté (a condition now baptized as cringe). Account handles such as @fake[fill_in_with_notable_theorist], @catboy[choose_your_western_thinker], or @[girlbossy_terminological_pun] are already using niche internet jargon to mock any attempt of translating existing texts into shareable posts. Scrolling through a catboy/bodilessorgan-infested feed is not and has never tried to be a repetition or a preamble for reading a text. Memes are not illustrative, informative, nor pedagogical; they are not stock images, infographics, or pastel-colored Instagram slideshows. That is, they are not redirecting the reader/scroller somewhere else (transcendent meaning, transcendental subject); they are instead immanently enacting scroller, text, and image within the process of their propagation.

To some extent, theory memes are, however, a commentary on the original text, as well as on the notion of origin and signification. Nevertheless, they perform this by constantly evading the clear transmission of a message or disavowing text to act as just text:

Fig. 9: 'Exemplifications of the erotic opacity of text'. Memes posted by @post_cum_spinozist, @machinic_specters, and @memeuzby/@rhizomatic_memer. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CR8VStArJB-/?utm%5C_source=ig%5C_web%5C_copy%5C_link.
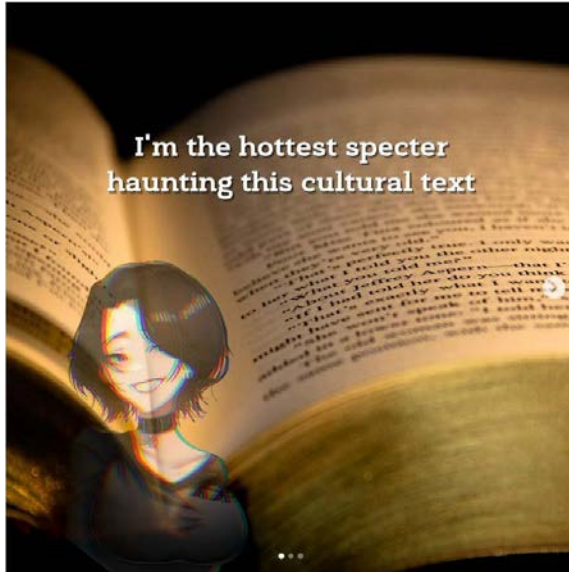
Fig. 10: '~~Exemplifications~~ of the erotic opacity of text'. Memes posted by @post_cum_spinozist, @machinic_specters, and @memeuzby/@rhizomatic_memer. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CR8VStArJB-/?utm%5C_source=ig%5C_web%5C_copy%5C_link.
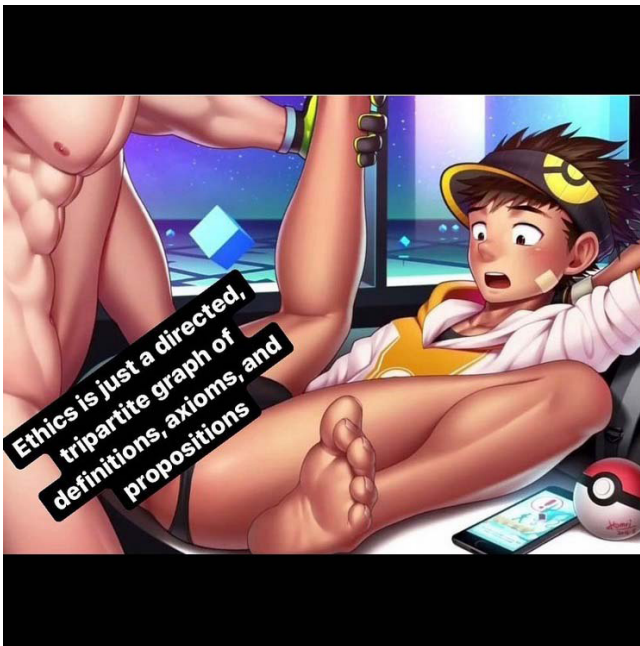

Fig. 11: '~~Exemplifications~~ of the erotic opacity of text'. Memes posted by @post_cum_spinozist, @machinic_specters, and @memeuzby/@rhizomatic_memer. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CR8VStArJB-/?utm%5C_source=ig%5C_web%5C_copy%5C_link.
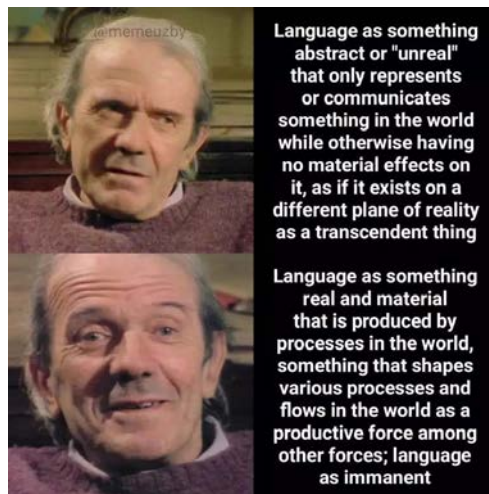
Fig. 12: 'Why reading is problematic'. Slideshow posted by @the_philosophers_meme_mk24. Retrieved July 12, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CXCOf5uhQU2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

For a meme, the call for sources or origins is irrelevant. When the inaugural act of symbolization is nothing but the neurotic repetition of the very theft it seeks to amend, there is no need for external legitimization, no need for grounding. Ever since the 2016 US presidential election, this logic has become quite explicit in mainstream internet discourse: the impotent calls for sources from fact checking initiatives to 'combat' fake news (the name the uninitiated gave to memesis) and set things straight (remember the Patriot AI?) inadvertently produce the energy upon which memes are parasitic. Memesis does not care whether an image is or is not representative of an original, nor if it conveys any clear meaning. But it does feed from the productive power of the desire to return to the origin and fill in the void left by mediation and the symbolic. Memeing is not the ritualistic act of restitution of an original order, nor the proper predication of A as B, but the unbinding of the self-replicating flows of semantic desire from the 'bourgeois notion of representation'.

Fig. 13, 14: 'There is no plot, just the cryptic symbolism in my dreams (AKA memes)'. Memes posted by @candychuckles, @djinn_kazama, and @hyperreal_pill. Retrieved in May 2022. Source: https:// www.instagram.com/p/CZqQ1Nss2Nr/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

Without the linguistic structure of symbolization, enunciation, or judgment, there is no subject. Or at least not as a structuring vanishing point: there is only circulation. Nonetheless, this process still feeds from the remnants of transcendental subjectivity, incentivizing its impulse to continuously perform and preserve identity (gathering clout, niche-microcelebrityness, profile curation, admin cult of personality, group partisanship, etc.).

This is, once again, the dialectic between symbolization and allegoresis (excess/differentiation and stabilization/self-conservation), now performed on the stage of social media user interfaces. Or, repurposing Dennett's metaphor, the virtual machine of subjectivity and meaning-making is a scrolling user interface installed on top of the asignifying circulation machine with the purpose of producing the tensions between excess and stabilization (image and text) that, in turn, produce production.

Memesis is the evincing of the immanent materiality of the relations borne from the clash between image and text. While the epistemic logic of representation would state that a fact states something about the world, memesis would focus on the fact that the stating of a fact produces more facts. Or, that representations are not in a different metaphysical plane, but a *different* part of the very world they represent. Naming an object is the production of an object: the name of the object. Data begets more data that begets data. It is, fittingly, *ironic* that big data and machine learning sublimate the search for meaning and insights among the unseen (hidden patterns, occult correlations), whilst the sociotechnical environment that made them possible has driven the very notions of representation, insight, and meaning to a dead end. How could anybody expect machine learning to be the ultimate mapping of empirical reality, when the internet has shown time and again that a map does anything but mapping (or, returning to Baudrillard, that the map precedes the territory[12])? Like the transcendental subjectivity it seeks to reproduce, machine learning is not an artificial intelligence system because of its unparalleled insights or predictions about the world. Instead, it is so insomuch it fails to attain them: a failure leading to its blind automation/perpetuation. Data boasts no insights other than its own (re)production.

What I am attempting here is, of course, a Deleuzo-Guatarrian anti-oedipal exercise in productive alienation: replacing the *perspective* of the transcendental (oedipal) subject as the inaugural epistemic act with the never-ending circulation of networked images mediated by the scrolling interface (a.k.a. T H E A L G O R I T H M). Taking this exercise one step further, I propose a limit case analogous to the Deleuzean schizophrenic to provide us with the personification of this critical framework: catboy_subjectivity. Unable to see anything other than desiring machines all the way down, the schizophrenic regards the world with the eyes of capital. Through this disorganizing of perception, it can conceive the structures of transcendental/oedipal subjectivity that concoct the symbolic self as a mode of participation in the asignifying productive processes of machinic desire. But let us be clear: catboy_subjectivity is not a person, an identity, nor a surface for signifying—they are not alive, they're undead at best.

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12   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 1.

> If desire produces, its product is real. If desire is productive, it can be productive only in the real world and can produce only reality. Desire is the set of *passive syntheses* that engineer partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production. The real is the end product, the result of the passive syntheses of desire as autoproduction of the unconscious. Desire does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or desire that lacks a fixed subject; there is no fixed subject unless there is repression. Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine, as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it. Hence the product is something removed or deducted from the process of producing: between the act of producing and the product, something becomes detached, thus giving the vagabond, nomad subject a residuum. The objective being of desire is the Real in and of itself.*
>
> *Lacan's admirable theory of desire appears to us to have two poles: one related to "the object small a" as a desiring-machine, which defines desire in terms of a real production, thus going beyond both any idea of need and any idea of fantasy; and the other related to the "great Other" as a signifier, which reintroduces a certain notion of lack. In Serge Leclaire's article "La re'alite du desir" (Ch. 4, reference note 26), the oscillation between these two poles can be seen quite clearly.

Fig. 14: 'The epistemological vibe shift'. Meme quoting Gilles Delueze and Félix Guattari's 'Anti Oedipus' posted by @candychuckles. Meme posted by @simoneweilfooddiary. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ1%5C_SkLPRJ5/?utm%5C_source=ig%5C_web%5C_copy%5C_link.

Fig. 14: 'The epistemological vibe shift'. Meme quoting Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'Anti Oedipus' posted by @candychuckles. Meme posted by @simoneweilfooddiary. Retrieved May 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/simoneweilfooddiary/.

Catboy_subjectivity is better represented by the sum of all abandoned Facebook profiles that somehow still post, the Y2K aesthetics comeback on TikTok, 4chan, 'biased' machine learning algorithms, or by the Gulf War not taking place. Catboy_subjectivity is memesis personified in order to infiltrate the workings of desire (literally by becoming a thirst trap to double tap on). It is the positive, creative moment of what seems like merely a negative-critical enterprise for demolishing the subject. But rather than constituting new substantial identities (based on gender, sexuality, race or class), catboy_subjectivity is a personification that, just like a meme, is always already the process of its own memesis. What seems like a single identifiable picture is actually the continuous (un)folding of a network of references—catboy_subjectivity is a profile without admin or, better yet, posts without a profile. There is no meaning, no original text nor author, just memesis all the way down.

Fig. 16 and 17: 'Subjectivity, a technology of literacy/capital'. Memes posted by unknown Theorygram account, @lobotomized_thembwo, and @memeuzby. Retrieved May 2022.
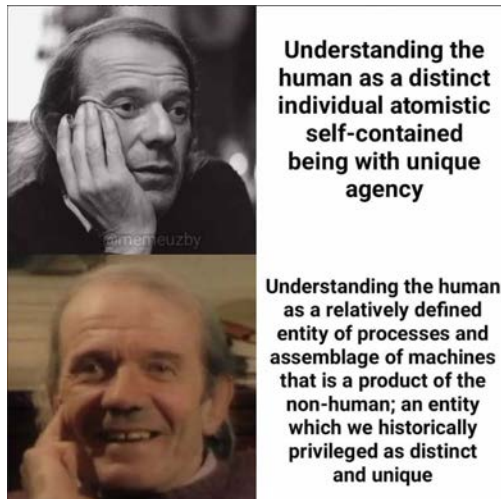

Fig. 18: 'Subjectivity, a technology of literacy/capital'. Memes posted by unknown Theorygram account, @lobotomized_thembwo, and @memeuzby. Retrieved May 2022.

So, what has become of theory/literacy after generalized computation? A catboy. A meme account without an admin. An immortal body. A living machine. An AI. Knowledge not as the reunification of subject and object or the repetition of a foundational act, but as an impersonalized process of circulation and production of difference. It is the contradictory dissection of a decaying corpse in order to allow the dead (circulation) to speak. To translate into the realm of the living that upon which only the dead have a hold. In this sense, this is what text and all forms of media have always been doing: reminding us that presence is built upon absence —the subject upon the force of its negation.

This is the reason why the question above is not a historical argument. It is not that, before memes, theory was one thing and after them it has become something else, but that memes as a medium for theory allow us to see theory, writing, and reading differently. Texts have always been material machines: evices capable of manipulating themselves and the reader into a mesh of biological and technological agents, constantly assembling and disassembling every time it is read. In the same spirit as Theorygram, I engage in the process of writing this text not in an attempt to explain these memes away, but precisely to take part in this production of difference for the sake of difference that is the practice of theory. And, along the way, to come up with affirmative models for both networked, algorithmically-mediated social relations (other than exploitation, extraction, or ideological manipulation) and thinking. This thinking should not be an internal reflexive process in which the mind's overexistence is domesticated into self or consciousness, but a joyful practice of overcoming the shame, guilt, and negation concomitant to the structure of lack inherent to symbolization. If theory as reading could be described as a joyous activity of self-confection (subjection), why can't meme scrolling be the affirmation of this joy though machinic self-(dis)confection?

Fig. 19: 'Theory is over-existence'. Meme quoting Jean Baudrillard's "Why Theory?" in 'The Ecstasy of Communication' posted by @candychuckles. Retrieved July 2022. Source: https://www.instagram. com/p/CafBvNBPkZ_/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=.

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YOU'LL NEVER FEEL ALONE — THOUGHTS ON RELATABILITY

FLORIAN SCHLITTGEN

'The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves'

Hannah Arendt[1]

'OMG, this is literally me'

You

A good decade ago, internet memes were rarely tagged with #Relatable, which was also perceived as an 'odd adjective',[2] at least by those whose lives largely took place outside the digital realm. Now, ten years later, the mass of memes gathered under #Relatable has not only grown to infinity; relatability has also become the key concept of meme cultures in regards to the production of social connectedness—even before the corresponding hashtag was invented.[3] 'Relatable memes' are characterized by their ability to trigger a moment of identification in the viewer, one that creates a feeling of 'sameness',[4] expressed in statements such as 'This is literally me!', 'Same' or 'Relatable'. They do not form a meme genre, but mark a certain kind of reception in which one can identify *with* or feel sympathy *for* what is expressed by the memes, due to 'similarities to oneself or one's own experiences',[5] as modern definitions of 'relatable' suggest. What memes make relatable out to be, is bound to a personal self-understanding, specific life circumstances and collected experiences, all of which are addressed by memes in different ways; through descriptions

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1   Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 50.
2   Ben Zimmer, "The Origins of 'Relatable'," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/magazine/15onlanguage.html.
3   Prof. Dr. Brigitte Weingart brought the terms *Relatability* and *Connectedness* to my attention, strongly promoting them as key concepts in meme cultures and giving them a large place in our project "Aneignen - Bearbeiten - Weiterververbreiten: On the Intervention Potential of Internet Memes" of the Collaborative Research Center "1512 Intervening Arts". Besides myself, Lisa Tracy Michalik, José Amaro Santos Alves and Brigitte Weingart are involved in the sub-project. This text goes back to many conversations with them as well as to discussions with my colleagues Felix Gregor, Jan Harms and Dr. Anja Dreschke, who together with Brigitte Weingart organized one of the first public events on meme culture in the German-speaking world in Düsseldorf in 2020 with their conference "Meme Culture and its Discontents".
4   Akane Kanai, *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture. Managing Affect, Intimacy and Value* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
5   Merriam-Webster, "Relatable," Merriam-Webster, accessed August 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/relatable.

of individual experiences, personal dispositions, or general life situations fed to the online world, in the tacit hope or obvious expectation that others can recognize themselves, too. Relatable memes do not so much serve to inform, but rather are highly phatic: recent history of meme cultures has shown that they can also have a collectivizing effect. One case in point is the *We Are the 99 Percent*-Meme. The meme, a picture protest that went viral in the course of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, shows people photographing themselves in the typical selfie pose, with a sign that expresses their precarious financial situation combined with autobiographical information.[6] *We Are the 99 Percent* was not just a collection of personal circumstances linked to an inhumane and repressive financial system—it was also yet another testimony that the private sphere is political after all. The meme created a social bond of commonality amongst people, precisely because everyone who found themselves in similarly situations could *relate* to the meme.

Relatability in meme cultures is, however, not exclusively established through common fates that translate into concrete interests or political demands, but also through sharing emotional or affective states, those that resonate with everyday situations and constellations—such as the anxiety of withdrawing money 'with no idea what the balance is' (Fig. 1). Commonalities in those cases are found in areas usually assigned to the intimate and internal; in sensations, feelings, and affects, which are felt situationally or in relation to larger contexts. What is seen as common or even the same here are less so external circumstances and more so internal states: experiences and reactions guided or accompanied by feelings and affects.

Fig. 1: The anxiety of withdrawing money 'with no idea what the balance is'.

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6   The intertwining of the individual and the collective is not an unknown phenomenon in meme research. In the sociological wake of Barry Wellman, Limor Shifman has already described 'memetic activities' as 'networked individualism'. According to her, users express not just their individuality in the redesign of memes, but also their membership of a particular community by resorting to a 'memetic video, image, or formula'. Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 33.

In contrast to the *We Are the 99 Percent*-meme, this 'truly felt' material has something almost innocent to it. In the rarest of cases, the sharing of these feelings ostensibly follows a political agenda. However, if we explore the field of memes linked to relatability in a direct or indirect way, it becomes apparent that most of these memes address *feelings* and remain within what Arlie Hochschild calls 'feelings rules'.[7] Feelings rules are embodied norms that regulate emotions contextually, but are also tied to gender or social classes. In her work on feminine online culture, Akane Kanai recently pointed out that relatable GIFs, which are reaction GIFs contextualized by text, are situated in feelings rules and produce a 'normative sameness'.[8] A starting point for her study is the Tumblr blog 'What Should We Call Me', on which young women produce relatability mostly through stereotypical representations of everyday embarrassment and frustration, establishing what she calls a 'spectatorial girlfriendship'.[9] Kanai has traced how the production of relatability on this Tumblr blog creates a place of belonging based on experiences and feelings considered as common, but also 'requires the articulation of a continuous attachment to perfection as well as ongoing struggles to achieve it'.[10] Kanai's relatable/girlfriendly prosumers post about how they deal with their own bodies, their problems at work, or their shortcomings in their social life. This serves to show tension *with* but also closeness *to* an ideal, for which the image of a white, heterosexual, middle-class femininity is the model. The sameness-based relationship of young women on the Tumblr blog is mediated by a social dimension of normativity that hides behind a 'desirable sameness',[11] but tacitly structures the relationship of the blog's intimate public. The relatable GIFs analyzed by Kanai address a specific stereotype of women, and silently propagate it as general and universal. Lying at the crossroad between individualization and unification, they can also be understood as soft and subliminal micropolitics that (re)produce this normative subject based on dominant class, race and (hetero)sexualized forms of representability.

Other examples can be found in which memes create connectedness through the sharing of seemingly common feelings, tacitly following normative identity politics.[12] However, what interests me here are the memes that give feelings a shared attention, one that has not been normatively captured, feelings that are too ephemeral, even too banal, to stand in as

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7   Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

8   Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, 6.

9   Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, 6.

10   Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, 31.

11   Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, 6.

12   A quite worrying example can be found in online incel culture, whose misogynistic conspiracy theories and hate messages are driven by the constant sharing and mutual affirmation of negative feelings and affects. Feelings such as loneliness, powerlessness, uselessness, despair, and sexual frustration get stylized into identity-forming characteristics, politicized and crystallized as worldviews. Sharing insufficiency and weakness in incel culture does not contradict stereotypical associations of masculinity. Rather, the countless juxtapositions of 'Chads vs. Virgins' in which incels, of course, *relate* to the virgins, continue to invoke a hegemonic image of masculinity as the norm— and the failure to live up to this image is discharged primarily in hatred of women.

identity markers or character traits. In very few cases are these long-lasting emotions, but rather fleeting and ambivalent affects that are difficult to classify and have their place in everyday situations and constellations. It is certainly true that 'ordinary affects'[13] are also linked to discursive, political or social spheres, and can become a territory of governmental techniques.[14] But unlike Kanai's relatable GIFs, the memes discussed here do not aim to affirm normative feelings, yet highlight affective entanglements in ordinary constellations that both online and offline usually receive little to no attention—like the aforementioned tension when you use your card with a probably insufficient bank account. With the sharing of these memes, a general tendency is emerging in which people fathom their own everyday lives as primarily felt. In some ways, reality itself becomes re-explored through them as a sensual entanglement with the world we encounter every day. Memes act in this context as instruments to sift through the lower and inconspicuous realms of ordinary affections, bringing them out of their shadowed existence to amplify and transform them into a social reality. For what previously took place in the realm of the intimate is transferred to the public sphere through memes, in a shareable, quotable, and connectable form. Relatability in this case stands less in the slipstream of social normativities, precisely because unthematized and subliminal emotional states are *made* relatable: the feeling of sameness provoked in this process tends to be more in line with a collective desire to assure the reality of one's own experience. 'The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves',[15] Hannah Arendt reminds us, which applies in particular to all those things that have their locus in subjective experience and sensation—and are generously shared via memes.

Relatability therefore also marks a mutual process of showing and witnessing everyday experiences and sensitivities, which itself is to be understood as a rather fleshly act. Even though we have to read memes in order to understand them, identification takes place here not only on a symbolic level, but on a sensual one, which is already indicated in the etymological origin of the term 'relatable'. 'Relatable' draws from the verb *relate to*, which means 'to understand, to empathize, to feel a connection'.[16] Memes are relatable not only because they are easy to understand, but because of a *felt* connection linked to familiar experiences and feelings. As a cipher of closeness and emotional connectedness, however, relatability is not a new figure for modern media landscapes. Memes, in fact, are inheriting a somewhat dusty but still powerful institution, namely television, where the term 'relatable' found its touchy-feely meaning.[17] If relatability originally meant 'able to be related' in the sense of something that can be told or connected to something else, it

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13   Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Croydon: Duke University Press, 2007).

14   Brian Massumi has traced how affects became the object of new government techniques in the aftermath of 9/11 in the USA. Brian Massumi, "Fear (The Spectrum Said)," in *Ontopower: War, Power, and the State of Perception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 171-188.

15   Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

16   The definition is from the Oxford Dictionary, quoted from: Zimmer, "The Origins of 'Relatable'."

17   Zimmer, "The Origins of 'Relatable'".

was propagated in the forges of US television as a relationship between consumers and media, the outcome of which was formed by the viewers themselves.[18] For they were no longer to be merely *entertained* by the media offering, but were also able to *recognize* themselves in the spectacle on the screens. Relatability became the key to reducing the distance between consumers and media content and emerged as a new guarantor of the authentic, which is guaranteed precisely by supposed deviations from the script. Christina Norman, the then president of MTV, said at the 2006 MTV Music Awards:

> They [the audience] love the onstage performance moment, but also that unguarded moment, that moment they [the musicians] run into somebody backstage who they haven't seen in a long time or that they don't want to see that night. That's the kind of stuff that makes them more relatable.[19]

Relatability, however, had already entered the vocabulary of the US television industry in the early 1980s. Ben Zimmer, the author of a small piece on 'The Origins of "Relatable"' in *The New York Times*, points to Bob Eubanks, who told the Washington Post in 1981 that his quiz show 'The Newlywed Game' offered a 'relatable humor', 'the kind that takes place in every home.'[20] Just one year later, the term was used in a press release for the series 'Couples,' a precursor to today's reality TV: 'The real difficulties, conflicts and problems of married, dating, living-together and divorced couples rival any type of fictional format for personal and relatable drama.'[21]

The focus on the private and familiar, especially in reality television, hails viewers not as detached voyeurs but as empathetic and social subjects. In addition to people and stories from everyday life, what is offered with 'relatable drama' in R-TV formats is a 'performance of feeling' to which 'we feel caught up', as Misha Kavka writes.[22] According to Kavka, reality TV designs a world parallel to the situation of the recipient, which is built on a production of familiar feelings. By making the intimate public, viewers not only become aware that 'their feelings are not entirely their own because they are shared by others', the feelings are also 'amplified' and become 'more real', which reinforces a 'everyday familiarity' to a 'level of the hyper-familiar.'[23]

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18   This definition is also from the Oxford Dictionary, quoted from: Zimmer, "The Origins of 'Relatable'."

19   Ben Zimmer, "Silly-Season Linguifying?," University of Pennsylvania Language Log, August 26, 2006, http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/%5C~myl/languagelog/archives/003508.html.

20   Lynn Darling, "The Newlywed Game," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 1981, https://www. washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1981/10/19/the-newlywed-game/d5df8914-00db-4744-af1e-20801825711a/.

21   John J. O'Connor, "TV View; An Exhibitionism Epidemic," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1982, https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/20/arts/tv-view-an-exhibitionism-epidemic.html.

22   Misha Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 24.

23   Kavka, *Reality Television*, 28.

'More real' and 'hyper-familiar': in these ways, memes bleed into the feelings shared about them. To some extent, they depend on this reinforcement since they are often equally ambivalent and fleeting sensations, like the strange feeling of holding the door for someone who is still a little too far away; the dizziness after a power nap that got out of hand; the awkwardness of listening in on a family argument at a friend's house (see Fig. 2). While the accusation that (reality) television delivers emotional surrogates through conventionalizing dramas cannot be entirely dismissed, memes, in this case, rarely carry distinct emotions into the public sphere. They exhibit unremarkable and inconspicuous affects that are less concrete and inferior to lasting arousal such as fear, pleasure, or pain—even if affects are also related to emotion.[24] Viewed from a distance, memes form a user-generated cartography of ordinary affects, whose longitude and latitude map sensitivities that lie mostly (if at all) at the edges of the social fields of the sayable and visible.

Fig. 2: 'Me when I'm at my friend's house and the family starts arguing heavily.'

Memes thus can be understood as a novel 'lingua franca'[25] of feelings, which in meme cultures (in their usual meta-reflexive way) is also made a topic itself (Fig. 3). They create points of reference for classifying and expressing one's own, previously perhaps only dimly understood, emotional states. At the same time, they are not transparent containers, but organize and influence like any communication medium what they represent or describe.

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24 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–25.

25 Ryan Milner pointed out that memes are generally the lingua franca of the internet. Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016).

Fig. 3: Posted on Instagram by @riotgirl_rebirth_, last accessed on August, 15th, 2022. Source: https://www.instagram.com/riotgirl_rebirth_/.

In the first place, it is not so much a question of their social evaluation or ideological trimming.[26] Rather, it is a question of translation work. They transfer singular and individual experiences into a common form, to suit them for public appearance and general understanding (in keeping with the old meaning of 'relatable', that something can be told). That memes trigger a sense of 'sameness' based on familiar feelings, is also due to the fact that they generalize subjective and individual experiences, allowing them to reflect the experience of an un/known audience in a 'plausibly but *pleasingly* [italics in original]'[27] expressed manner, as Kanai points out. Now this is not only true in regard to supposed recipients, but also to the sender. For the meme, after all, precedes the ability to translate one's experiences into a meme.

For Hannah Arendt, the translation of the subjective into a common shape goes hand in hand with its 'deprivatization' and 'deindividualization'.[28] What was previously experienced in the personal becomes a kind of common property through its communication. However, this transfer is necessary, since 'our feeling for reality depends [...] upon the existence of

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26   In his work on the digital right, for example, Simon Strick has shown how right-wing memes politicize affects. Simon Strick, *Rechte Gefühle* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021).

27   Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, 4.

28   Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 50.

a public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence.'[29] But the question arises here: why is it that all-too-ordinary affects, which have little in common with the political of the private sphere and sometimes only shine through their banality, gain mass entry into the public realm? Why is there such a strong connection with everyday life, this strange familiarization with what is familiar? Apparently, memes propel a story commonly told about the internet: that it has become not only an intimate place, but also a fairly *mundane* one—or rather, it always has been. After all, the masses haven't just been reporting their lives since social media began. The blogosphere had already flooded the public with the small things of the private, which were denounced for their triviality even then. Branded the 'banality of blogging', as the international mailing list *nettime* put it in 2007 (albeit not without protest), the sharing of the private was denied any social respectability.[30] And indeed, this 'Garbage for All'[31] has become the engine of digital cultural production. Memes seem to be just more fuel for this trivialization.

The unease about a public sphere that has lost all size and significance through a sharing economy of private sensitivities is, however, only partly justified. We exist in a post-Fordist system that is constantly destroying the familiar in favor of the new, making sustainable structures impossible through flexibilization and deregulation, building structures where traditional value orientations are subject to constant change. In this context, the modern subject basically has little left to reassure itself about itself and its world, other than to flee into the intimate and private. Arendt had already recognized this domiciling of the private in the literature of the early 20th century.[32] The increased scale of 'subjective emotions and private feelings', characteristic of the 'modern age' and which has very likely multiplied with the internet, was a response to the modern decline of the public (the nation, the people) and a sign of a lost 'assurance of the reality of the world and men'.[33] In the decay of the public sphere, Arendt recognizes the loss of a shared world and shared reality, to which subjects responded by inhabiting 'small things' in life. These became emotively and/or affectively charged, in what Arendt describes as the 'modern enchantment' and 'delights' of the everyday.[34]

According to Arendt, the retreat into the private and the everyday manifested itself in the search for the 'petit bonheur', a small happiness, that was sought primarily in one's 'own four walls between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot'.[35]

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29 Arendt, *The Human Condition,* 50.
30 Ulrich Gutmair, "Wie Hannah Arendts Tisch im Netz verschwand," taz.die Tageszeitung, August 25, 2007, https://taz.de/!243878/.
31 "Garbage for All" is the name of a blog by Rainald Goetz, who subsequently published it in book form in 2003 as a 'diary, reflection construction site and existential experiment': Rainald Goetz, *Abfall für Alle* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003).
32 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.
33 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.
34 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.
35 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

Today, a good sixty years after Arendt's diagnosis of the times, petty-bourgeois structures have also had to forfeit their functions of orientation and localization, and the memes discussed here are perhaps the best testimony to this. Like the search for 'small happiness', they are characterized by a certain attitude that has shed the simplified gaze of habit in order to place the ordinary in a peculiarly radiant light. Illuminated, however, are not the enchantments and delights of small things, but the affective qualities of everyday life. Within memes, the subject is suspended neither in a large nor a small structure, but in disparate impressions and sensations, in impulses, expectations, inhibitions, and spontaneous reactions. The more concentrated the gaze is on one's own small entanglements in the world, the larger and more varied it seems to become—but also more subjective and fragmented, for the personal-microscopic gaze transforms what is uniform and connecting on the surface into a ragged playing field of subjective relationships, impressions, and sensibilities. The collapse of the once mediating function of the public sphere was summed up by Arendt in a metaphor, reminding us that the situation is reminiscent of a

> spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible.[36]

Symptomatically, memes align with this view of personal sensitivities and the concomitant potential dissolution of mediating structures, but they also simultaneously provide a remedy, for it is precisely with and about memes that people relate to each other. The memetic trope 'Me When...' is not a deictic one-way street, but is directed at an un/known counterpart, towards a 'You When...', just as the typically idiomatic question 'Am I the only one who...' is basically always asked in anticipation of a very specific answer: *You are never the only one!* Although they are the apparent engines of a 'Generation Me', their driving force lies not in self-expression, not in showing, but in witnessing. They are a collective search for the common in a world that not only indulges the individual but is increasingly characterized by insecurities. Mark Fisher had posed the question whether the destruction of solidarity and security driven by neoliberal, post-Fordist capitalism had not, in turn, fostered a longing for the common and the familiar.[37] He had in mind the retromanic forms of current pop cultures. But the same could be applied to the memes discussed here, which seek the familiar and common not in the past, but in everyday experiences and ordinary affects.[38]

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36   Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 53.

37   Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

38   In this context, the 'banality' of sentiments and sensitivities shared via Memes should not to be understood in the modern sense (as something contentless or superficial), but with regard to the derivation of the term from the French, where 'banal' can also mean something like 'charitable' or 'belonging to everyone'.

At the same time, it is no coincidence that everyday life forms the object of memetic reflections on experiences and feelings. The everyday is less characterized by meaning as it is a space of experience. Maurice Blanchot has therefore defined the everyday as something that eludes us: 'the everyday escapes. This is its definition.'[39] This may sound strange at first, since everyday life is the place that we accept without question. But, (or perhaps precisely because) it has something routine about it, 'it belongs to insignificance'.[40] It 'escapes' the realms of knowledge and conceptually-distanced approaches, for everyday life does not function primarily epistemically but is characterized by an assemblage of practices and movements of connecting and disconnecting, of appearing and disappearing, rather than meaning-making.[41] 'The ordinary is a moving target', as Kathleen Stewart writes, 'not first something to make sense of, but a set of sensations that incite.'[42] Stephenson and Papadopoulos also think of the everyday primarily as a place of experience: as an amorphous space in which 'experience circulates and transforms',[43] which we often only register unconsciously, 'but nevertheless generate affective resonances and atmospheres'.[44]

That experiences and sensibilities in the everyday are seen as moving and circulating phenomena—and consequently not only lie in the bodies of those who perceive them—is due to Stephenson and Papadopoulos' indirect and Stewart's direct invocation of the concept of affect. Unlike distinct emotions, affects not only express themselves more immediately as intensities that are difficult or impossible to categorize, they also do not mark a private interiority, but a relation between self and others or objects. Affects are an embodied entanglement between outside and inside, which do not turn out intersubjectively but bodily-materially and make themselves felt in short impulses, excitations, fleeting impressions, or spontaneous movements. Affects are therefore neither *in* bodies nor *beyond* bodies, but *between* them, which is why they have something divisible and mobile about them.

Kathleen Stewart (and with her the bulk of Affect Studies) thus understands affects foremost as 'potential connections',[45] which should not be pathologized, but mapped 'through different, coexisting forms of composition, habituation, and event.'[46] In her search for 'ordinary affects', Stewart maps them in the most common situations in her foray through everyday Texas life: whilst gambling, shopping at Walmart, fixing the dishwasher, or within flash mobs. In the branch of meme cultures discussed here, a very similar program

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39   Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech," *Yale French Studies* 73, no. 1 (1987): 15.
40   Blanchot, "Everyday Speech", 15.
41   Urs Stäheli, *Soziologie der Entnetzung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2021): 138.
42   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 83.
43   Niamh Stephenson and Dimitris Papadopoulos *Analysing Everyday Experience: Social Research and Political Change* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), xi.
44   Stäheli, *Soziologie der Entnetzung*, 138.
45   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects,* 2.
46   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects,* 4.

emerges, where memes take inventory of experiences and affects resonating within the processes of everyday life. The relational character of sensations is reflected in memes insofar as they locate feelings not in relation to a particular subject, but on the surfaces and textures of everyday life. A situational context is already addressed by the linguistic tropes 'TFW' (That Feeling When) or 'Me when'. Both of these situate the 'Me' or 'that feeling' in terms of a situation or constellation. Sporadically, affective dispositions[47] also become apparent: 'Do y'all ever get pre-annoyed? Like you already know someone is about to piss you off'[48] asks one user on ifunny. On imgflip you can find some—also not entirely unironic—complaints about the lack of recognition 'when you wash the dishes without being asked, and your mom doesn't say thank you.'[49] The affective subjects who exhibit memes are *habituated* ones, who face everyday situations with a certain attitude or expectation. But they are also *surprised* by life: for example, in the shock when one's 'novel research idea' was in fact already researched in the 80s (see Fig. 4). What these examples have in common, is that they show affective relations to circumstances, situations, persons, or generally to an 'outside'. The Me's and You's in these memes do not appear as sole bearers of their feelings; rather feelings appear as hinges that organize the relationship between self and others or events.

Fig. 4: 'Your novel research idea — Some guy in the 1980s.' Source: @phdm.eme.

47   Following a relational understanding of affect, affective dispositions can be understood as 'the sedimented remainders of a person's prior history of being-in-relation'. Jan Slaby, Rainer Mühlhoff, and Philipp Wüschner, "Affective Arrangements," *Emotion Review* 11, no. 1, (2019): 9.

48   Misha, "Do Y'all Ever Get Pre-annoyed?," ifunny, November 6, 2020, https://ifunny.co/picture/IygxOX978.

49   lavender_365, "when you wash the dishes without being asked, and your mom doesn't say thank you," imgflip, 2020, https://imgflip.com/i/44zqop.

At the same time, the 'Me's' and 'You's' also do not appear as actual personalities, since we learn very little or nothing about their identities, motives, or personal backgrounds. Rather, they slide through scenes and sceneries just like the subjects in Stewart's ethnographic research, creating a 'fabulation that enfolds the intensities it [the affective self] finds itself in. It fashions itself out of movements and situations that are surprising, compelled by something new, or buried in layers of habit.'[50] The affective subject is shaped from the interplay of sensations, intensities, expressions, and perceptions, as well as habitualization. It is 'a thing made up of encounters and the spaces and events it traverses and inhabits.'[51] Subjects are not 'inhabited' first in fixable identities or standardized biographies, but in ordinary affects 'that catch people up in something that feels like *some*thing [italics in original].'[52] In their close contact with the everyday, memes make visible the entanglements with the manifold *some*things that give everyday life and life itself their qualities in the first place.

In this respect, memes can be understood as image politics, as strategies for making subliminal intimacies visible. But they do not merge into this moment alone, for they also aim at affective resonances. Memes are not only meant to show something, but to make us laugh or frown, to troll us, irritate us but also attract us in one way or another, and give us a sense of attachment. As a 'felt connection', as relatability was proposed at the beginning, the term signals an affective relation. Relatability manifests itself in two ways. First, the shared feelings and experiences are 'attested' in their reality by affect. It is neither natural nor self-evident that what is represented poses as something that also exists IRL (In Real Life). It is not only the specific image-text economy that lends a certain authenticity to what is depicted, but also the affective resonances that the meme generates, which can be echoed in phrases like 'Totally!' or 'That's me'.

Second, the collective impact of memes can be traced back to affect. Sarah Ahmed's study of 'affective economies' explores the connections and movements between affects, bodies, and signs, and how subjects group themselves under affects. She has argued that in affective economies, emotions (which she does not distinguish from affects) '*do things* [italics in original], and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachment'.[53] According to Ahmed, and in line with Stewart, affects are so binding precisely because they are not located in bodies, but 'circulate between bodies' and 'stick' to them or move on.[54] That affects 'stick' to (collective) bodies or signs is, according to Ahmed, '*an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects and signs* [italics in original]',[55] a relational process of contacts

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50   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 58.

51   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 79.

52   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2.

53   Sarah Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 119.

54   Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 4.

55   Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 90.

that is solidified by repetition and accelerated by circulation. For 'affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced as an effect of its circulation', since 'the more signs circulate, the more affective they become'.[56]

In this sense, circulation reinforces the affective value of objects as it amplifies and fluctuates in and through processes of communications. The focus is here less on the images and actors than on the resonances they generate, and the community they create in the process. There are many examples of this on the internet; the waves of indignation or solidarity, the shitstorms or candystorms, which are constituted precisely by the increased circulation of (often the same) comments or memes, as well as the affects that resonate within them. The same can be said about relatability, which is reinforced as an affective relation via the circulation of memes. Even if relatability is established with respect to certain feelings and experiences, which are to be considered common or even the same, it does not reside in these feelings alone. Rather, relatability makes itself noticeable as a social affect, an 'affective sameness',[57] as underlined by Akane Kanai, who was perhaps the first to spell out relatability as an affective category. The hyper-familiarity of reality TV also resonates within this trope, not only because the feeling or situation we identify with is familiar to us. For Misha Kava, the affective is also decisive here: not 'affect of the social', but 'affect as the social'.[58]

Yet this feeling of connectedness seems to be marred by the omnipresence of relatable content on the net. The *#Relatable* hashtag is so ubiquitous that it 'has become a kind of winking gesture at its own utter meaninglessness as a form of social connection',[59] as Jeremy D. Larson points out. Indeed, relatability seems to have degenerated into yet another play of platform capitalism, a glue-like networking effect between users and social networks. Relatability binds users to their screens, since it carries with it a guarantee of attention. The memes discussed here ultimately satisfy two needs, both of which are highly motivated and monetized alongside the general affect economy of social media on the net: the need for social connectedness as well as the recently insatiable desire for what Sianne Ngai calls 'the interesting'. In Ngai's formulation, the interesting is an aesthetic category prevalent in cultural production that 'marks a tension between the unknown and the already known and is generally bound up with a desire to know and document reality.'[60] The everyday becomes interesting under the documentary performance of memes if only because it is not exhibited as a space of habits and procedures, but of subliminal and

56   Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 45.
57   Kanai, *Gender and Relatability*, 20.
58   Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy*, 28. In contrast to Kanai, Kavka does not understand affect in the context of a production of sameness, but also assigns it an unpredictable moment.
59   Jeremy D. Larson, "Why Do We Obsess Over What's 'Relatable'?," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/magazine/the-scourge-of-relatable-in-art-and-politics.html.
60   Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 5.

fleeting affects. In this, the feeling of social connectedness is mixed with the affect of the interesting, which Ngai describes as a 'low, often hard-to-register flicker' that 'accompanies our recognition of minor differences from a norm'.[61] Memes dance on this tightrope when they address brief, ordinary affects, but generalize them to the point that many can relate to them.

But that doesn't mean the program traced in the memes discussed here has to be swept off the table. Kathleen Stewart reminds us that 'everything is always already somehow a part [...] of a totalized system', but the distant gaze which always looks at things from an abstract point of view is at the same time unable 'to describe the situation we find ourselves in.'[62] What is overlooked in a detached view, is that memes do not only evoke an affective commonality structured by norms which have always been caught up by an attention economy. In the sharing of affective branches with everyday life, a diffuse commonality also announces itself. The feeling of sameness takes place less in terms of a particular subject or shared fate, but via similarities in everyday sensations and experiences. Of course, everyday experiences also depend on the cultural and gender background of the subject. But the everyday is characterized by a certain openness, and the memes discussed here allow for relations of similarity that go beyond rigid constructs of what is one's own and what is foreign.

In this sense, they do not serve to consolidate identity constructions that are already solidified in themselves (although they do not destabilize them either), but rather to search for commonalities in a system that is simultaneously globalized and fragmented. In this search, the common is not found in the actual sense, but is produced through its affective charge and attachments. 'The affective subject', writes Stewart, 'is a collection of trajectories and circuits. Out there on its own, it seeks out scenes and little worlds to nudge itself into being.'[63] In the digital landscape, it is through memes that we not only drive through the smallest intimate scenes. As affective invocations, memes also nudge us into being—on our own, but with regard to a counterpart, to a very specific, tiny resonance: *same*.

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61   Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 18.
62   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1.
63   Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 59.

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THE PROMISE OF *MEMES*: THE CASE OF *FOTONSKI TORPEDO*

MARIANA MANOUSOPOULOU

Fig. 1: 'Admini Fotonskog' means the admin(strator)s of the page 'Fotonski Torpedo' in Croatian.

The Situation

The heat, the movement, the noise, the salty humid atmosphere accompanied by occasional winds, and the distant sounds from the sea organ[1] all point to the general effervescence of the Zadar[2] promenade (Zadarska Riva). These sensorial elements—synonyms of vacation and resting time for the tourists—juxtapose the stressful and liminal working environment for our protagonists. It is in this context that the meme page 'Fotonski Torpedo' first saw the light, started by two worn-out young men, Bosco and Malverzando,[3] working a seasonal touristic job as bookers, hiring out boats for short trips for tourists in Zadar, on the coastal side of Croatia. The would-be administrators were in search of something 'to kill the boredom' and to 'let off some steam.'

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1 Morske Orgulje (Sea Organ) is a well-known tourist attraction which serves as a landmark of Zadar and is visited by hundreds of visitors every day.

2 My visit in Zadar was part of a preliminary fieldwork trip, preceding my long-term fieldwork stay planned for summer 2023. During these four months, within the scope of this preparatory exploration I engaged in numerous official and unofficial conversations trying to track future interviewees and map the situation before my long dive into the field.

3 The research participants are anonymized and the names are of their choice, according to two fictional characters they created during their work.

> So, our boss wanted us to be professional salesmen and we were everything
> except for professional salesmen. We were always bored and we were trying to
> find some things, some activity to do, to kill the boredom, and I do not recall who
> started it but one made a few memes. We did not do it at home, but exclusively
> when we were working.[4]

Here, we enter the world of 'memetic warfare' of 'Fotonski Torpedo', to shed light on how memes are employed as counter-actions against precarity, and how their deployment is delimited by precarity itself. Bosco and Malverzando respond defensively to the liminality of work by creating a counter memesphere of inversion and critique. Aligning humor and critique, satire and randomness, the two meme creators sketched an alternative universe of well-known historical figures or persons either known in the Croatian/Balkan context or in the global limelight, combined with unexpected punchlines. Their 'memesphere' mainly comments on popular issues regarding politics, sports, society, or current affairs. The 'Fotonski Torpedo' memes are situated in the world around them but also take a critical position in relation to it; in this regard, meme creation, meaning-making and subversion take place in parallel. Precarity initiates resistance in terms of fun and humor, a lightness that nevertheless also provides a structure in which resistance takes place.

12-hour work shifts, like the ones our dear Bosco and Malverzando go through as bookers, shape the environment for the genesis of a meme alliance against what Lauren Berlant calls 'an everyday crisis'.[5] It is a crisis marked by neoliberalism,[6] the retreat of social welfare's assurances, and general precarity. As Berlant writes, 'Since the 1970s, delocalized processes have played a huge role in transforming and restructuring postwar political and economic norms of meritocracy'.[7] Similarly, as the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology puts it, 'Informal, temporary, or contingent work is the predominant mode of livelihood in the contemporary world, with severe repercussions in terms of class relations and ontological conditions'.[8] In particular, the job of our research participants as boat trip bookers is seen as deeply precarious, embedded within the inherently unstable character of seasonal jobs in the tourism industry in a coastal area bound to tourism for its survival. Under a rationale of *book or die*, bookers spend the whole day trying to

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4   Interview conducted with Bosco in Zadar on February 18, 2022.
5   Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
6   As we read in the definition provided by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 'neoliberalism' is
    a distinctive political theory, which holds that a society's political and economic institutions should
    be robustly liberal and capitalist but supplemented by a constitutionally limited democracy and
    a modest welfare state. This essay aligns itself with critical views on neoliberalism and remains
    mindful of the power relations such global constellations put into force. See also Harvey, 2005:
    http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1353/book-review-a-brief-history-of-neoliberalism-by-
    david-harvey-2005.
7   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 9.
8   Sharryn Kasmir, "Precarity," The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology, March 13, 2018, https://
    www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/precarity.

jump at opportunities, almost in a looting fashion of grabbing as much as possible, as fast as possible. Both of them would describe their job as heavily stressful, burdening, and challenging.[9] Malverzando puts it this way: '(you had) the freedom to do or die, to do the job. You know, how much you sold, that's how much you got [...]. I burned out every summer. [...] It was like mental chess.'

Simpson et. al argue for the specificity of the place, as physical locality as well as a constellation of opportunities, processes, and relationships,[10] three elements which all contribute to shaping both the conditions and the lived experiences of precarity. This is in a context where, 'as with many seaside towns that have suffered long-term decline, precariousness is likely to be at the forefront of their labour market condition'.[11] Our two protagonists, born in Zadar almost at the turn of the millennium, were nurtured in the years of rebuilding and flow of capital, of regeneration and restoration, the years when the aftermath of the Homeland war was more acutely felt. As they would witness, these were the years of war veterans suffering PTSD, years in which populations would be relocated to new locations, years of syringes and needles in playgrounds, years of excitement in finding objects—including used condoms—thrown out of balconies with the sole aim of hitting someone. Zadar comprises a place, multiply precarious, whose survival is inextricably linked to tourism and services, which becomes a city for tourists every summer and is thus directly affected by the ebb and flow of global transformations. Zadar keeps its (blue-collar) workers busy for four to six months a year and the Dalmatian Riviera, where Zadar belongs, follows suit despite being already established as a top tourist summer destination. This is simply the fate of many tourist destinations subjected to the rule of thumb of the industry:

> The dominant tourism model is determined and shaped by the interests of the global economic and political elites, who impose it as a (false) fix for economic growth and job creation without consideration of the associated costs: loss of community, reduced access to housing, precarious work, increased inequality, care debt and environmental and climate impacts, amongst others. Tourism with its focus on the provision of services is fast becoming one of the largest economic sectors worldwide.[12]

This 'place precarity' and 'occupation precarity,' coupled with the generalized and ubiquitous contingency of contemporary society, multiplies the burden of all workers, including the bookers of this case study, where the responsibility of being efficient and

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9   It is of particular interest to underline how, despite all these characterizations, both would repeatedly mention this was a 'fair' job.

10   Ruth Simpson et al, "Living and Working on the Edge: 'Place Precarity' and the Experiences of Male Manual Workers in a U.K. Seaside Town," *Population, Space and Place* 27, no. 8 (2021): 1-13.

11   Simpson et al, "Living and Working on the Edge," 1.

12   Max Carbonell Ballestero, *Your Tourism or Our Lives: Work and Precariousness in the Neoliberal City* (Barcelona: Observatori del Deute en la Globalització, 2019), 6, https://odg.cat/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ODG-TURISMEPRECARIETAT-ANG.pdf.

profitable in order to remain employed is shifted to the employees. Within this highly affective environment of boredom and *hectic*-ness, uncertainty and tiredness, the idea of the meme page emerged. Most of the time, the memes would originate from spontaneous jokes, later refined and articulated within the meme logic. Both administrators would name 'fun' and 'excitement' as feelings they experienced in the process and would describe themselves as a 'bunch of idiots doing funny things'[13] with the intention to make fun of each other, the community, political problems, or their job.

Torpedos and Affect

> We loved memes, way before the page, we would make memes just for ourselves to have fun. During summer, we kinda burned out… We decided to make a meme page, a way for us to blow off some steam. We would actually make the meme while we were working. (Malverzando)

Sara Ahmed describes the 'promise of good life' as a directive of life choices, a cultural track of the imperative to be happy in an ultimately *specific* way, forged by inclusions and exclusions. It takes the form of duty and entails normalized trajectories.[14] Ahmed's argument about this 'promise of good life' is intended as a general phenomenon, but central elements apply to memes as well Ahmed contends that 'the experience of pleasure is how some things become good for us over time'[15] which is exactly what my interlocutors describe with the everyday word *fun*: memes are joyful. The element of accumulated 'affective value'[16] is especially significant, as it could explain the proliferation of memes in the digital sphere over recent years, plus the numerous nuances and contexts memes have embraced. Through insisting on the materiality of the encounter between subjects and objects and the divergence of harm or benefit, Sara Ahmed underlines the importance of relationality and orientation in form of action: 'Happiness is an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with. We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them.'[17]

Memes as cultural artifacts do not occur in a vacuum; they are part of the wider social context, a dimension elaborated in the next section. Within this very agentic mode of dealing with precarity, joy and happiness become a coping mechanism put in motion by the two co-workers. As 'objects become saturated with affects, as sites of personal and social tension they can serve as conversion points',[18] turning bad feelings into good and vice versa.

13   Inspiration would be drawn from the Croatian collective 'Gitak', https://gitak.tv/ as well as the American platform *Newsbar*.
14   Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
15   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 21.
16   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 38.
17   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 24.
18   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 44.

In the example of the 'Fotonski Torpedo' meme page, we could claim that anxiety turns to excitement, stress into joy, into laughter and fun. The *stickiness* of the affective objects, in fact the memes, enables this perversion and reacts to the alienation of the workplace.

A 'Fotonski Torpedo' Against Precarity

> Politics is like high school bullies, what can you do if someone is much, much stronger than you, you know he can beat you up, but the only thing you can do to fight him is to mock him and that's what we did with the page, we were mocking the system. (Bosco)[19]

It would be difficult to find a metaphor more apt than the one offered by my interlocutor here. Memes function as affective responses, 'blowing off steam' as short-term everyday critiques. The perpetual crisis of capitalism and precarity that transcends all spheres of life necessitates the employment of diverse strategies to 'get through the day'. Memes thus satisfy the immediate need of Bosco and Malverzando to laugh at their problems, and the problems in the world around them. In a 'hypervigilant' mode[20] the subjects employing this humor manage to create an antidote to the everyday contingency of their lives, embedded both in the local and global context.

The meme creators draw upon their realities as well as background experiences to build a *memesphere* functioning as a counterbalance to everyday life. The proximity between each other, and the mutuality of experiences and stances, allows this collective interface to be joined and enjoyed by a wider audience, further distanced from their own specific environment. Sara Ahmed discusses the sociability of happiness, contending that the 'social bond is always sensational'.[21] The meme partners shared with their followers their own happy objects and with this an orientation towards the world. They were 'feeling like, they were feeling social'.[22] In adapting and in rising against precarity they find *affective allies,*[23] namely people who liked and disliked the same things, who could decipher their jokes and were amused by them, who were perceiving the happiness and suffering of this world in congruent ways.

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19   Interview conducted with Bosco in Zadar on March 18, 2022.

20   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 196.

21   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 38-40.

22   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 40.

23   The phrase is inspired by Ahmed's 'affective community' (Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 41, 43). Nevertheless, I could not claim that the 'Fotonski Torpedo' memes present characteristics of a community, since the usual attributes of long lasting and deeply grounded bonds are absent. Maybe 'Fotonski Torpedo' could potentially provide a platform for a community to emerge. However, the observed convergences between the administrators and their public remained on an occasional level, within the mutual scope of having fun; exactly for this reason I conceptualize them as allies.

In the memesphere, every element—from the meticulous description of the meme to the creation of *work personas*—was carefully selected and demonstrates the scope of their affective investment. The nicknames the meme partners picked for themselves for the sake of anonymization—Bosco and Malverzando—were their own nicknames as bookers. Malverzando comes from the Croatian word 'malverzacija', meaning manipulation combined with the ending *-ando*, indicating the trickery of a wizard, inspired by an incident when he managed to cover a mistake in the bookings. In turn, Bosco, as his more jovial sidekick, counterbalances Malverzando's exploitative intentions. Throughout the discussions with my interlocutors, critiques of the hegemonic logic of ruthlessness that permeates the profession of bookers have been an important element.

The complementarity of the characters Bosco and Malverzando, and their self-ironic sarcasm, mirrors the relationship of the two co-workers: inexperienced and struggling yet forming a two-person collective against both the work and the world's pressure. Bosco and Malverzando's real life trajectories have thus far intersected in many ways. Age, gender, social circles, and experiences, but also certain attitudes and personality characteristics converged, rendering their relationship deeply emotional. The properties of coworkers, meme partners and page co-administrators was later added to the equation. In this regard, humor becomes emancipatory while the two bookers, as a dyad, built upon their long-lived friendship and shared cultural codes[24] to embody elements of solidarity and 'being with (each other)' against an oppressive working environment. By completing each other intellectually, but also by being united within the working environment, fighting against its underlying logic, they set themselves apart from the neoliberal ethos of individualization and self-responsibilization.

What Do Memes Promise?

The genealogy of expectation is to think about promises and how they point us somewhere, which is 'the where' from which we expect so much.[25]

Fig. 2: 'I put in Google fotonski torpedo and the first picture we got, we put that as a profile picture, some kind of object, I am still not sure what that is, some kind of a bike light, I am not sure'. (Malverzando).

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24   It is indicative that their friend from the next stand could not participate in the meme-making.
25   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 29.

One could intuitively picture a 'promise' as something pending, or maybe forthcoming, but in any case, not yet achieved. The question, then, naturally arises, whether anything could be made out of memes carrying 'the weight of the present'.[26] Memes, at least in the eyes of the two research participants, do not *promise* anything, in the sense that happiness promises for Ahmed.[27] However; memes *do something*, possessing emerging political potentialities as warfare tools against the everyday insecurity induced by omnipresent neo-liberalism.

In Fig. 2, a contingent outcome of a Google search that lasted a mere two seconds demonstrates the memetic elements of randomness and casualness. Next to the promising name—photonic torpedo—instead of something like a forceful light-saber as one might expect stands a not so easily identifiable object, one that looks weirder than it does threatening. In contrast, the name of the meme page 'Fotonski Torpedo' is a direct reference to the eponymous weapon from Star Trek[28] and introduces the visitor to a universe of hostilities. Memes are themselves operationalized as both entry points for reflection and as an armory to manage the present. As is the case in Bosco's metaphor of 'politics being a high school bully who cannot be knocked over but only mocked', mockery here stands in direct opposition to the world.

Memes construct a space which is unrealistic, a fantasy where things are sort of upside down. Thomas Hobson and Kajal Modi (2019) attribute a productive capacity to (political) memes, 'seeing them as both sites and practices of world-building, and as places where understandings of what is and our visions of what ought to be can be produced collectively'.[29] They use the term 'intersubjective imagination' to explore how memes enable the consideration of possibilities on a collective level. Since they locate the political as inextricably linked to the production and sharing of iconic imagery and text, (Hobson and Modi,2019: 335) the making and sharing of memes represents a site of imagination as a cultural and social practice, where new ideas come to light and potentially new relations can emerge.

Echoing Arjun Appandurai's take on imagination,[30] Hobson and Modi turn to memes as a locale in which imaginaries are developed, shared, and have affect. At the same time, they

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26   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 29.
27   Interestingly enough, during the interviews the word happiness was not mentioned even once, while the world fun transcends the discussion.
28   Star Trek could also be seen as a direct reference to the *utopian*, to the *impossible*.
29   Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi. "Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures: Memes as Sites of Collective Imagining," in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Punctum Books, 2019), 329.
30   He defines imagination 'as an organized field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ("individuals") and globally defined fields of possibility.' Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

remain mindful of how visions of the future are conditioned by the lived experiences and, often, prejudices of the present. For Bosco and Malverzando, memes are a way of claiming back the agency and the freedom missing from the analog world, which is bound by power relations such as boss/superior and worker/subordinate. In 'Fotonski Torpedo' things are reversed, unexpected; a world that is witty and surprising instead of boring, structured, and boxed in. All possibilities are open: Attila the Conqueror talks about dope; the ex-mayor of Split resembles Steven Seagal; Tito and comrades ride to a Serbian turbo-folk song; Jesus gambles in the name of God; famous Croatian chemist Leopold Ruzicka curses wires and their inventor—which is in fact himself; nationalist Croatian singer mixes his song lyrics with an everyday Croatian proverb; Croatian Cardinal of the Catholic Church Josip Bozanic openly shares how delightful—just like a caramel—a small kid was; Ivan the terrible owes 50 lipa—the equivalent of less than 5 cents; Josef Stalin makes bets in dalmatian slang using a non-winning system;[31], the Pope raps about drugs, and a noble Serbian fights a Turk over a fidget spinner.

Fig. 3: 'Give back to me the fidget spinner, you murderer, you Turk' — Prince Marko.

Fig. 4: 'System 6 from 12, we are getting money bro'.

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31   This has been the most successful meme, in terms of popularity.

Fig. 5: 'They tell to me slow down, this is a dangerous turn, my life like a motor bike, every dangerous machine (motorbike) goes 200 (kilometers) per hour, the void is in my heart, doctor says the speed will not help, it is love I miss'.

Fig. 6: 'Fuck cables and those who invented them' — Lavoslav Ruzicka.

Fig. 7: 'I (will) owe you 50 lipa' — Ivan the Terrible.

Fig. 8: 'God is gambling and so am I — Jesus'.

Fig. 9: 'What are you looking at? Do you want me to break your legs?' — Steven Seagal.

Fig. 10: 'All weed is good for, is to smoke it, all underwear is good for, is to take it off' — Pope Francis.

Fig. 11: 'The little one was like a candy' — Josip Bozanic.

A detailed content analysis is beyond the scope of this essay; however, I want to emphasize the common thread that runs between all of these articulations: their *randomness* and *unexpectedness*. That is, how socially central characters and/or persons become dethroned by being associated with trivial objects or situations, while their status or influence is being toned down by mundane events and moments that outbalance their 'power'. In this respect, I locate an intention to challenge the order of things and the premises on which this order came into being: an intent to 'step off the beaten track'.[32] My interpretations coincide with Lauren Berlant's 'skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures for modes to live on',[33] as presented in their *book Cruel Optimism*.

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32   Malverzando notes: 'And usually just, I figured, later on as I had normal jobs, that there's actually just protocols that you have to follow, and so boring. So, basically, you can just go out of your way to help somebody in a way, that wouldn't hurt anyone, but you just can't do it. Like just can't help out this person. Right? But you can't. By regulation, you cannot.'

33   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 8.

Berlant mentions the significance of aesthetics as 'metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us'.[34] Meme aesthetics[35] are in this regard telling; the conditions of their production and consumption, and the way their value is accumulated through algorithmically organized virality and circulation, are perfectly in accordance with capitalist code. The particular codes of meme aesthetics manifest a rationale of specificity and detachment, both being values celebrated within the neoliberal organization of life. They express this via the dominance of the image combined with the elliptical nature of their messages, their reliance on technological mediation, and the platform logic this entails, as well as 'their diffusion through competition and selection'.[36]

At the same time, memes become the weaponry of the two bookers. This might seem paradoxical at first sight, yet it makes sense if we consider once more the situation of precarity: in the omnipresence of neoliberalism, everything is streaked with its logic, even the means that could potentially resist it. Lauren Berlant named this dynamic the 'impasse,' a situation marked by ongoingness and the imperative to incessantly adapt, where a continuous crisis takes the form of the ordinary.[37] Thus, the present is described as a 'mediated affect'[38] and precarity is seen as structural, going well beyond the economic sphere to permeate the affective environment.[39]

Bosco and Malverzando engage affectively and in a two-fold manner with the world around them: they alienate themselves from work and invest themselves emotionally in the memes' creation. They engage in a fantasy not just dealing with the dream of 'the good life', that Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant describe, but one made out of multiple and diffused moments of *inversion*. Fragmented, floating memes of figures and quotes, images, verses, and punchlines make up this fictional world.

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34 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 11.
35 Aesthetics here are employed holistically, including not only the semblance of memes but also the logic that organizes their articulation and coming into being. If we were to comment on mere appearances though I would totally agree with Thomas Hobson and Kajal Modi that 'one of the most notable things about memes, particularly image macros, is that they do not display a particularly refined design aesthetic; and that might in fact constitute a large part of their power. Those of us in the global minority tend to live in highly sophisticated visual societies, and to cultures overloaded by slick advertising tropes and hyper-real soft-focus filters, an inexpertly made image can often seem like the last authentic voice in a sea of artificiality'. (Hobson and Modi, *Socialist Imaginaries and Queer Futures*, 345). 'Fotonski Torpedo' memes, as most bottom-up memes, are pierced by DIY, simplistic aesthetics that in my view amplify their originality.
36 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 22.
37 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
38 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.
39 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 192.

This is a world marked by a carnivalesque take on the real world's disorder,[40] achieving this mainly through *incongruity*, through *invasive humor* grounded in the violation of expectations. What's funny about these memes is that something incongruous and unexpected occurs instead of the anticipated.[41] By intertwining random and deviating elements, the meme creators wink at the given world and satirize practices, persons, power relations, and objects. Dannagal Young reserves a special place for irony in this context, as a means 'to playfully expose the gap between the way things are and the way things should be'.[42]

The concept of the 'impasse' as Berlant described it focuses on the present as its temporal dimension. However, the memes' futurity—or precisely their absence of a determinate future—could be equally insightful. In Sara Ahmed's words 'the future is what is kept open as the possibility of things not staying as they are, or being as they stay'.[43] Amidst this open temporality, 'Fotonski Torpedo' has an *instantness* to it, for my interlocutors do indeed remain moment-focused. Berlant pinpoints emergency as another genre of the present,[44] which, I would add, reveals the rush, the necessity to improvise, adapt and overcome. This is, of course, the mode in which the meme partners had to operate while standing in the kiosk on the promenade. A particular temporality transcends the experience of the meme-making within precarity. As they retrospectively inform us, the life of the page lasted for the season. After the work environment ceased existing, they stopped meme-ing and posting, resulting in the page discontinuing its activity. The present thus appears to be the dominant tense of the meme-making process; it is my conviction that the absence of futurity in the words and acts of the two workers is impeded by precarity. Jeff Derksen's building on 'chrononormativity', 'the use of time to organize individual bodies toward maximum productivity',[45]delineates a framework of the '(terminal)[46]presentism' as a social force.[47]

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40   One salient tendency that heavily echoes the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque is the moment of *disorder*, 'where laughter and satire bring bawdiness and bodily functions, the riot of the people, inversion of hierarchies, and a temporary abandonment of moral rules, to temporarily hold sway'. Kennan Ferguson, "Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance," *Contemporary Political Theory* 18, no. S4 (2019): 249.

41   James Beattie, however, stresses that humor is just one possible response to incongruity and that our perception could result in a wide spectrum of emotions such as fear, pity, and moral disapprobation (Morreall, 2020).

42   Dannagal G. Young, "Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

43   Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 197.

44   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 294.

45   Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

46   The term corresponds to Natalie Melas' take on the matter. See Natalie Melas, "Comparative Noncontemporaneities: C. L. R. James and Ernst Bloch," in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 56-77.

47   Jeff Derksen, "Productive Presentism," *Sprengerin* 3, no. 1 (2016), https://www.springerin.at/en/2016/3/produktiver-prasentismus/.

framework of the '(terminal)[48]presentism' as a social force.[49] This framework 'reductively seeks to foreclose a future outside of capitalist value practices as well as the potential of pasts that imagined a different present; presentism as a process intensifies the present'.[50] The *intensification of the present* comes into sight in the everyday life of the two bookers, through their refusal to contemplate the future and instead stay with the now, experiencing the world and memes *immediately*. I view this refusal as structural, as imposed by precarity and neoliberalism, constituting a convergent point of the lives of all lower-class workers who survive *hand to mouth*, or booking to booking, in our case.

Okay, an Impasse. Now What?

Despite this impasse of the present, critique inherently entails a future dimension because it indicates not necessarily what *should*, but at least what *could* be. For Kennan Ferguson, critique can only potentially be linked to resistance and change: 'it may provide the intellectual groundwork for future political action, for example, without changing the present at all'.[51]

A possible next step would be to explore the transformative power of memes in inventing this meme world of disputation. It could be said that meme creators do not 'make the alternative possible', but 'make impossible the belief that there is no alternative'.[52] However imaginary and present-bound their memes and words are, they cast doubt on the given life. Bosco and Malverzando (subconsciously) stay with the possibilities and the potential of conversion. Maybe this is the only possible resort within the impasse, maybe the imperative of survival allows no *promise of a good life* to be configured. Maybe.

The memes situated on the 'Fotonski Torpedo' page remain ultimately local, constituting Zadar-specific references and originating in my interlocutors' early 2000s childhood. Zadar, as a setting, appears precarious in multiple ways, embedded within the tourism economy. Although it surpasses the limits of this text to elaborate on the post-war period or today's Zadar, it is still important to emphasize how social traumas (re)surface in the thoughts and hearts of two young workers, who through memes set themselves against precarity and inherited social challenges. By criticizing the future, the memes deal with the past yet orientate themselves forward, unfolding in a diachronic fashion. Memes can open thoroughfares to alternative futures by calling out the evils and wrongs of this world,

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48 The term corresponds to Natalie Melas' take on the matter. See Natalie Melas, "Comparative Noncontemporaneities: C. L. R. James and Ernst Bloch," in *Theory Aside*, ed. Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 56-77.

49 Jeff Derksen, "Productive Presentism," *Sprengerin* 3, no. 1 (2016), https://www.springerin.at/en/2016/3/produktiver-prasentismus/.

50 Derksen, "Productive Presentism."

51 Ferguson, "Comedy and Critical Thought," 248.

52 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 163.

calling attention to the need to 'work through the past'[53] with our eyes facing the future. Questioning, challenging, and inventing the tools to see critically brings transformation one step closer; nonetheless, the rest of the process is not guaranteed.

The 'Fotonski Torpedo' memes confront the asymmetrical power relations of this world with intellectual anti-violence fueled by satire and humor. Structural forms of oppression in the workplace are unveiled,[54] but omnipresent precariousness inflicts an inescapable present upon the two workers. Enduring their day-to-day, booking to booking work-life fires up their imagination and their creativity, yet confines them nonetheless in the present. Fantasies remain fixed as the overarching principle of precarity. The memes do, at least, succeed in an ad hoc decompressing of the pressure, enabling a getaway of everyday escapism to the memesphere and building a counterweight of criticism to the diffused insecurity. A word such as *promise* is fitting, since memes do not promise or guarantee anything; their palliative service remains embedded in the 'crisis defined and continuing now', of adaptation and improvisation.[55] Could the *impasse* state be superseded, what follows would still remain unanswered and we, in turn, can only remain curious.

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53   Theodore W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
54   Interestingly enough both would say this was an honest and fair job because 'if you put enough effort in it, it would literally pay (you) off.'
55   Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 54.

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'THEN WE COULD EXPLORE SPACE, TOGETHER, FOREVER': ON HOPE AND MEMES

SAVRIËL DILLINGH

Many of us are looking for hope, nowadays—myself included. And although I suspect no one considers *The Principle of Hope* an easy read, Ernst Bloch's magnum opus has inspired more than a few revolutionaries over the past century. So, it's no surprise that his work on hope has recently seen reinvigorated interest. Young progressive activists leaf through Bloch's pages in search of something helpful, very much hoping that Bloch had seen something that we, at the end of the early 21st century, have not. A way out, or perhaps even a way forward—but at the very least a way towards an alternative. Really, though, *The Principle of Hope* is esoteric to the point of being unreadable—either a work of genius or of particular insanity (I suspect a little bit of both)—but its message seems to resonate with revolutionaries of any generation. According to Bloch, hope is born from looking 'beyond the day which has become'.[1] Hope requires daring, imagination, *belief*, even. Hope, says Bloch, requires a vision of a homeland 'still unbecome, still unachieved'.[2] Unfortunately for us, the reason for his resurgence seems to be that we live in an especially hopeless age, in which Bloch's homeland is difficult to imagine and seems terribly far off.

I'm certainly not immune to this modern brand of hopelessness. The climate crisis weighs heavy in the back of my mind, always; and astronomical economic inequalities leave me fearful we won't be able to stop a resurgence of fascism. Even on good days, I find it difficult to imagine alternative ways of living together. Yet Bloch's characterization of hope offers us something completely counter to the received wisdoms of 'traditional' progressive praxis. That, and it can tell us something about how to use memes.

What Hope Isn't

His recent resurgence notwithstanding, Bloch's very specific conception of hope really doesn't gel with the way even revolutionary progressives have *done* politics in the past couple of decades. Perhaps most indicative of the modern progressive method is the work of the great G.A. Cohen, Oxford philosophy professor and co-founder of the September Group. Cohen managed to modernize Marxism, a change that was sorely needed, especially in the years preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall. Revolutionary thought had, understandably, somewhat diminished in popularity. So, while Margaret Thatcher was popularizing the idea that 'there is no alternative', Cohen set out to formulate a new kind of Marxism that included the same techniques used by economists working for Thatcher's government. In his brilliant book *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Cohen most

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1   Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 9.
2   Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 9.

notably 'Marxified' 'the techniques of economic analysis…which were given mathematical form within neo-classical economics' as well as decision theory, game theory, and, more generally, rational choice theory.[3] In brief, he set out to criticize capitalism using the tools of capitalism! It's not an exaggeration to say Cohen didn't just put, but *kept* revolutionary thought on the map. But in order to do so, he had to give it a fresh coat of paint and adopt the language of liberalism.

Around the same time, an analogous process occurred in traditionally labor-oriented political parties. Third-wayism, championed by Tony Blair in the UK and Bill Clinton in the USA, attempted to reconcile social progressivism with neoclassical economics, giving birth to what we would now call neoliberalism. Moreover, a similar penchant for liberal logic can be seen in even more modern expressions of progressivism. That is, modern leftists quite often do not set out to formulate worlds of their own, but spend an inordinate amount of time *debunking* reactionary arguments. Most of the catalog of the loosely connected leftist YouTube-essayist collective 'breadtube', for instance, pertains to carefully dissecting arguments (or argument-adjacent utterances) of people like Ben Shapiro, Stephen Molyneux, and Jordan Peterson.

Perhaps this is why people are again taken with Bloch, who so steadfastly refused to generate hope with what Audre Lorde would surely call 'the master's tools'. The building blocks of capitalism *are* neoclassical mathematics, decision theory, and game theory— the very modern economics that brought us the myth of trickle-down theory, shareholder primacy, and privatization. Why should we think to use them to build a new world—to build hope?

In fact, *not* using the master's tools, according to Jonathan Lear, is exactly hope's strength. In his 2006 book *Radical Hope*, Lear argues that true hope can only be forward-facing. That is, it looks towards something that is undoubtedly good and beautiful, but necessarily something we cannot yet understand. We know it's there, but we simply do not yet have the conceptual language to express it. This invariably means that if we *try to do so anyway*, what rolls out is at best perverted, and at worst plays into the very hands of the status-quo. Because 'the master's tools', as Lorde famously said, 'will never dismantle the master's house'.[4]

This insight scares many of us. It scares me, too: I'm a market philosopher and a business ethicist, trained in the tradition of G.A. Cohen. I speak the master's language, use the master's tools to attempt to expose flaws in the foundation. On my best days, I try to build

3   G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987 [2001]), 36-37.
4   Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, (New York: Kitchen Table, 1981), 99.

a new house. But really, hope isn't the house's bricks, but that which holds it together. It's the mortar. It's the *idea* of the house. It resembles belief more than anything else. Bloch, in that vein, was a *utopian*. Unabashedly so (although he himself believed his utopianism to be scientific, and as such fully compatible with Marxism). To him, the foundation of hope was exactly that tenuous connection between dream, knowledge, and love. Hope *is* the alternative.

The modern progressive legacy, then, is just this: we lost hope.

Hope is a Story Instead

Now, what does any of this have to do with memes? Consider the following: the reason that Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*[5] became such a wildly popular meme years before it was published and has remained so years after (I'm convinced almost no one has actually read the book), is because *it tells a story*. It builds a house. It's also very funny—especially in its modern form which adds the words *Gay* and *Space* (thus: *Fully Automated Luxury Gay Space Communism*). But, above all: it offers hope. The title alone conjures up visions of Bloch's unachieved homeland—rolling green fields, robots serving bottles of the finest wine, endless orgies on starry space stations. In brief, the meme does not just tell a hopeful story: it allows *you* to tell your own.

It does so, however, in a very specific way. In fact, if there is something special about memes, it's not that they are a unique medium. Memes probably belong to the same ontological class as song, poetry, and the visual arts (some songs, poems, and visual art pieces have become memes in their own right). And surely those forms of media are perfectly capable of expressing Blochian hope. In that business, however, memes have a leg up, or so I argue. That is, it's incredibly *difficult* to make an effectively hopeful song, poem, or piece of visual art, whereas even a talentless hack like me can make an effectively hopeful meme in quick fashion. And, if making memes is labor *un*intensive and requires no talent, nor practice, then they allow progressives to *mass produce hope*. I won't be offering a full and thorough ontological analysis here, but what I'm trying to say is that memes just possess a *far more efficient* 'mainline to utopia' than other forms of art. I'll attempt to prove this thesis by way of experiment.

So, how can our experimental meme express hope? Using Lear's diction, it would have to satisfy at least the following criteria. The meme should:

a) Be forward-looking

b) Use a language we do not have

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5   Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism,* (New York, Verso Books, 2020).

Now the first criterion, criterion a, is easily satisfied: our experimental meme will have to pertain to a future that is invariably better than the present. The second criterion—using a language we do not have—might be somewhat more difficult. However, scholars have long devised a solution to this problem.

Already in 1972, German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser saw that good literature isn't just a one-sided lecture, but a conversation between writer and reader. In his famous essay 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', Iser detailed how writers leave 'gaps' in their stories so as to activate a reader's realization of the text.[6] What's more, each reader will realize a given text in a different way (that is, if it leaves gaps well enough), even to the extent that readers give birth to a new reality—one that is different from both the reality offered by the text itself and from their own. Thus, by strategically leaving gaps in their stories, writers allow for readers to participate in them, encouraging the reader to offer parts of themselves to create something new. Marvelously, this creation is something that both reader and writer could not have produced *separately*. But, together, reader and writer speak a language neither spoke before.

Of course, the notion of leaving gaps in one's art can be found in any art medium. It isn't particular to the meme. Poetry is perhaps the most obvious example here, leading the reader on a quest for meaning that they co-produce with the writer; but song and visual art are no strangers to audiences 'participating' in their form, either. For instance, I often wonder and make personal decisions regarding what a song is 'about'. If my thesis is correct, then our experimental meme should leave gaps that allow us to create something together that's new—both to you and me—and this new thing should be geared towards a better future.

Weaponized Memery

Armed with the above knowledge, I asked the online artificial intelligence *DALL-E mini* to make me a picture based on the following forward-looking prompt

'Future space traveler floats towards a hopeful blooming planet for humanity'

In 'conversation' with the AI, I reasoned, we'd create something neither of us could make separately. More specifically, something would roll out that 'speaks in a language' we do not yet have. Subsequently, I went to imgflip.com, uploaded the picture and channeled Margaret Thatcher's utterly hopeless exclamation. The whole process took me about two minutes.

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6   Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 279-299.

Fig. 1: Image made with DALL-E, by the author.

Although the meme would perhaps have been funnier if I had left a 'bottom text' or added a 'lol', I'm quite pleased with this result. I suspect Bloch would be. I hope you are, too.

In some ways, the meme works almost *too well* for our purposes. It's forward-looking, that's for sure, but the 'language' it speaks is almost illegible. That is, the *gaps* we've left for our interlocutors are perhaps a bit too big, partially because DALL-E and I were already operating under serious information asymmetries. Thus, the meme is, for lack of a better phrase, 'double-gapped'. And while the dig at Thatcher gives the meme a progressive vibe, I wonder if this open-endedness would not make it overly easy for some other caption to pervert its hopeful message. Then again, those are simply the downsides of being mass-producible. All art is susceptible to perversion—it stands to reason that labor unintensive art would be even more so. And, really, this meme wouldn't be the first progressive image to be coopted by reactionaries.

Disclaimers aside, what I see in this hopeful meme is a story it tells me, or more specifically, a story we tell together. Really, the meme simply allows me to express a feeling of unspecified possibility. Perhaps the lonely space traveler has landed on an alien planet where they've figured out how to run things the right way. They've decided to stay in the knowledge that if they can figure it out, so can we. Or perhaps they're on their way back to

earth, to save us. They've brought us a biological spaceship full of emission drainers and tales of untold civilizations, waiting for us to understand what they have already understood. Your story may be different, of course. Perhaps you've envisioned an escape to another planet, where humanity gets to try again. One thing's for sure: the battle isn't over. There's hope yet. What that looks like, we don't know. But it's worth fighting for. Most of all, the meme embodies the absurdity of believing that there is nothing we can do. It's not just hopeful, but it makes me laugh at my own hopelessness. A hundred-thousand years ago we were living in caves; now we live in castles. Who's to say we can't live in space?

The pervasive view that 'there is no alternative' was operationalized by the late Mark Fisher, in his book *Capitalist Realism*. In it, he argued society had internalized hopelessness, such that it was famously 'easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism'.[7] That is, not only is capitalism without alternative, but it has also become impossible to even *imagine* alternatives! In a brilliant essay in INC's preceding *Critical Meme Reader #1*, Ake Gafvelin similarly argued that 'it is much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of meme-culture'.[8] In a move that Gafvelin would no doubt dub 'cringe', I argue that this is a good thing. You see, before his unfortunate suicide, Mark Fisher had started *Acid Communism*, in which he argued that in lieu of imagining, we could perhaps *reassemble* an alternative to capitalism from the gaps in its narrative. Or, so I think, because he never got past writing only part of the book's introduction. But from what remains for us to analyze, it seems Fisher was partially aiming to find new things in the old or—as Fisher cites from Marcuse—to draw on the idea that what past instances of art 'recall and preserve in memory pertains to the future: images of a gratification that would destroy the society which suppresses it'.[9] In that sense, our experimental meme is the apotheosis of *Acid Communism* and the final proof that we can use the hopeful meme as a weapon.

By way of conclusion, allow me to run an experiment, share with you a final speculative proof. This essay's title is in reference to one of my favorite songs—another mainline to hope—the 2012 Enter Shikari song 'Constellations'. Its last three stanzas go

And then I realise that

We need to use our own two feet to walk these tracks

And we have to squad up

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7   Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

8   Ake Gafvelin, "On the Prospect of Overcoming Meme-culture, or, The Last Meme in History," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* eds. Chloe Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 177-186.

9   Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1964 [2007]), 63.

And we have to watch each other's backs

With forgiveness as our torch

And imagination our sword

We'll untie the ropes of hate

And slash open the minds of the bored

And we'll start a world so equal and free

Every inch of this earth is yours, all the land all the sea

Imagine no restrictions but the climate and the weather

Then we could explore space, together, forever

So, what happens when we drop this into DALL -E mini and memeify it?

Fig. 2: Image made with DALL-E, by the author.

Now doesn't that just make you hope?

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BIOGRAPHIES

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Pierre d'Alancaisez is a curator and critic. In his PhD research, he investigates interdisciplinary knowledge exchange and the relationship between artists' access to non-arts skills and the impacts of artistic practices. For a decade, Pierre was the director of waterside in London, where he pioneered social practice and art activism approaches in the art market. He has also been a cultural strategist in higher education and the charity sector, a publisher, a scientist, and a financial services professional.

Chloë Arkenbout

Chloë Arkenbout co-edited this Critical Meme Reader together with Laurence Scherz. She works as a researcher at the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam, and has a background in both media studies and philosophy. She is interested in marginalized people and their tactics to challenge oppressive discourses in the digital public sphere—from social media comment wars to memes. Arkenbout also co-edited the first Critical Meme Reader INC published in 2021. In addition, she works at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences where she teaches speculative design and is a member of the university's Research Ethics Committee.

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Marijn Bril is a media art curator and researcher. With an interest in the complexity and absurdity of digital culture, she explores topics ranging from networked images to digital metaphors. Marijn has worked with IMPAKT, CIVA Festival, The Wrong Biennale, and the Young Curators Academy. Currently, she is a student in the Erasmus Mundus Master program *Media Arts Cultures* at the universities of Krems (AT), Aalborg (DK), and Łódź (PL).

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Savriël Dillingh is a market philosopher and business ethicist. He teaches and researches at the *Erasmus University Rotterdam*, where his PhD research is focussed on social norms and how they affect market processes. Additionally, Savriël is on the board of the *Clemencia-Redmond Stichting*—a political research institute. At night, he dons a red cape and propagates political memes through his infamous Instagram-account @gratis_saaf_voor_iedereen.

Tom Divon

Tom Divon is a PhD researcher in the department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Divon's research focuses on TikTok's social-political playful cultures in three key areas: (1) users' engagements with the memory of the Holocaust and history-related commemoration and education, (2) users' performative combat in antisemitism and religion-based community building, and (3) users' affective activism manifested within the use of Palestinian and Israeli TikTokers and their memetic practices for playful content creation (#challenges) in times of conflict.

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Jasmine is a researcher and writer based in Berlin, interested in online communities, digital governance, rights, and culture. She holds a BA in political science and an MA specializing in human rights and democratization. Alongside making and researching memes, she is currently working as a researcher for Data-Pop Alliance, a non-profit organization that organizes initiatives at the intersection of data, technology and policy-making.

Carlo De Gaetano

Carlo is a designer and researcher at the Visual Methodologies Collective, where he specializes in data visualization for social research. He is currently developing an artistic research project on climate imaginaries, exploring audio-visual collections on nature from archives and online spaces. He's also conducting experiments in (machine) learning from climate fiction in literature, cinema and social media, with a special interest in the relation between AI and the imagination. He collaborates as an information designer with the Digital Methods Initiative (University of Amsterdam), where he contributed to studies on climate visual vernaculars, climate movements and fake news. Carlo designs teaching materials for

digital design students and other educational programs inside and outside the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences on how to collect, explore and visualize collections of digital images, on the 'spreadsheet etiquette' of the visual researcher, and on how to use data visualization software and computer vision software in the study of social issues.

Inte Gloerich

Inte Gloerich is a PhD researcher at Utrecht University and the Institute of Network Cultures. In her PhD, she explores sociotechnical imaginaries around blockchain technology as they appear in for instance blockchain memes, startup culture, and art. More broadly, Inte's work involves the politics, artistic imagination, and (counter)cultures surrounding digital technology and economy. She co-edited *MoneyLab Reader 2: Overcoming the Hype* (with Geert Lovink and Patricia de Vries) and *State Machines: Reflections and Actions at the Edge of Digital Citizenship* (with Yiannis Colakides and Marc Garrett) and organized several conferences addressing the crossroads between digital economy, technology, culture, and politics. She was a contributor to the Feminist Finance Zine and Syllabus, and teaches Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam.

Manique Hendricks

Art historian Manique Hendricks (1992) works as a freelance curator, writer and researcher. She is currently a guest curator at Frans Hals Museum and curator at Amsterdam media art institute LIMA. Manique specializes in contemporary (media) art, visual- and digital culture. In her practice she touches upon themes as identity, representation, the body, camp, and club culture. Manique's writings have been published by *Stedelijk Studies*, *NXS Magazine*, *Mister Motley*, *Shimmer*, *Tubelight* and *The Hmm*. She is an advisor for the Mondrian Fund and a board member at Nieuwe Vide and Jong VNK.

Katrin Köppert

Katrin Köppert is an art and media historian who studied Gender Studies and Modern German Literature at the Humboldt University in Berlin. In 2010–12, she was a research associate of the German Research Foundation 'Media Amateurs in Gay Culture'. In 2012–14 she was a fellow at the German Research Foundation doctoral program 'Gender as a Category of Knowledge' at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Visiting fellowships include London (LSE) and Los Angeles (USC). In 2018 she obtained a PhD at the Institute of Art and Visual Culture at Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg. Since 2019, Katrin is a junior professor of art history and popular culture at the Academy of Fine Arts Leipzig, as well as visiting professor in the transformation of audiovisual media with an emphasis on gender and queer theory at the Institute of Media Studies at Ruhr University Bochum. From 2020–23 she is and will be the director of the German Research Foundation's 'Gender, Media, and Affect' research network, together with Julia Bee.

Isabel Löfgren

Isabel Löfgren is a Swedish-Brazilian artist, researcher, writer and educator, working at the Media and Communication Studies Department at Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden. Her research interests include cultural politics, digital aesthetics, and the philosophy of migration and diaspora in the fields of contemporary art, media philosophy, and media activism. She often works in collaboration with artistic collectives and art institutions considering issues in visual, gender, social and environmental justice. See also www.isabellofgren.se.

Geert Lovink

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic and author of *Uncanny Networks* (2002), *Dark Fiber* (2002), *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2007), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), *Social Media Abyss* (2016), *Organization after Social Media* (with Ned Rossiter, 2018), *Sad by Design* (2019) and *Stuck on the Platform* (2022). He studied political science at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and received his PhD from the University of Melbourne in 2003. In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures (www.networkcultures.org) at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA). He was a media theory professor at the European Graduate School between 2007-2018, and was appointed Professor of Art and Network Cultures at the UvA Art History Department in December 2021. The Chair (one day a week) is supported by the HvA.

Jesper Lust

Jesper Lust is a junior lecturer in Media and Culture at Utrecht University. His research primarily focuses on understanding and tracing (extremist) online subcultures, besides working in media production as a filmmaker and editor.

Mariana Manousopoulou

Mariana Manousopoulou was born and raised in Athens, is currently based in Austria and is completing her MA in Cultural Sociology at the University of Graz. She received a Bachelors in Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Athens, with a focus on Political Analysis. Her focal point is affect and the digital, as articulated in memes. In her master thesis she deals with (what she terms) 'Balkan Memes', namely memes connected to the cultural area of the Balkans. Next to memes, other fields she finds herself interested in are: precarity, technology, and time.

Eleni Maragkou

Eleni Maragkou (she/they) is an interdisciplinary researcher, editor, and writer based in Amsterdam. Her research focuses broadly on themes of online (sub)culture, vernacular

creativity, playfulness, and ambivalence, topics she has explored in data sprints, academic conferences, and workshops. At the moment, Eleni is a research assistant in the Playing Politics project at Leiden University, which explores the intersection of, well, play and politics from a variety of disciplines and frameworks, including law, philosophy, and media. Beyond academia, Eleni works as a digital producer and editor for the non-profit Next Nature Network and in her free time tries to conceptualise ways of making nightlife safer and more equitable.

Caren Miesenberger

Caren Miesenberger used to admin the workshop-based meme page called FEMINIST MEME SCHOOL but stopped the page because she didn't have the energy anymore besides her job as a social media editor.

Anahita Neghabat

Anahita Neghabat is a social anthropologist, artist and meme making activist from Vienna. Her work is concerned with critical education, intersectional feminism and (anti-Muslim) racism. Since 2019 she has been using memes to comment on Austrian interior politics; since 2021 she has been holding political meme workshops under the title 'MEME THE PAIN AWAY'.

Laurence Scherz

Laurence Scherz (they/them) co-edited this Critical Meme Reader together with Chloë Arkenbout, a real highlight in their career. A writer, spoken word artist, tattoo artist and meme admin on @lothememeho, they work as a researcher and editor for the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam, as well as (guest)editor for *De Gids* and *Boekmanstichting*. Their research involves semiotics within visual and/or viral culture, the neurological impact of the digital, theory-fiction, and the (poetic) power of memes. In the past they worked for The Hmm, Metropolis M, Valiz and documenta 14. They're currently writing their first novel.

Florian Schlittgen

Florian Schlittgen studied philosophy and history in Bremen and media cultural studies in Duesseldorf and Vienna. After working as a research assistant at the Institute for Media and Cultural Studies at the Heinrich Heine University Duesseldorf, he joined 2022 the Collaborative Research Center 1512 'Intervening Arts' in Berlin, where he is involved in the subproject 'Appropriating—Editing—Disseminating: On the Intervention Potential of Internet Memes'. Currently, Florian Schlittgen is working on his PhD thesis on meme cultures as affect cultures.

Christine H. Tran

Christine H. Tran (@thechristinet) is a PhD Candidate at University of Toronto in the Faculty of Information, where their SSHRC-funded research explores the interplay of race, gender, and domesticity on livestreaming platforms. This work is supported by fellowships from the McLuhan Centre for Technology and Culture and Massey College. Christine writes about games, work, and Internet cultures for both peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Television & New Media* and *Communication, Culture & Critique* and creative arts journals such as *The Puritan* and *The Feathertale Review*.

Jordi Viader Guerrero

Jordi Viader Guerrero is a practice-based researcher on the philosophy of technology and media, currently doing a PhD at TU Delft. His research and practice are chiefly focused on articulating digital culture and design within wider cultural, political, and epistemic logics. By conceiving technology as a medium for production, destruction, and expression of identities, his work is an invitation to critically explore contemporary sociotechnical subjectivities.

Jamie Wong

Jamie Wong is a PhD candidate in the History, Anthropology, Science, Technology, and Society (HASTS) program and a Language and Technology Lab graduate fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). As a political and economic anthropologist, she uses ethnographic and internet-based research methods to study how emerging global systems of technology and finance affect development and governance in contemporary Chinese society. Her dissertation analyzes an emergent synergy between the Chinese government's leveraging of the nation's vast scale as a policy resource and venture capital (VC) investors' 'moonshot' approach to business. She also studies the implications of China's internet culture and digital economy for governance and civil discourse.

Daniel de Zeeuw

Daniel de Zeeuw is assistant professor in Digital Media Culture at the University of Amsterdam, and a FWO Jr. post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Media Studies at KU Leuven. He is also a member of the Open Intelligence Lab (oilab.eu) and the Digital Methods Initiative (digitalmethods.net), and, of course, co-editor of the first INC Critical Meme Reader, published in 2021. His current research and teaching focus on post-truth media dynamics at the fringes of digital culture, including conspiracy theories, leaking, trolling, and memes.

CRITICAL MEME READER II
MEMETIC TACTICALITY

EDITED BY CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND LAURENCE SCHERZ

The (political) power of memes has moved beyond virtual images. The distinction between the virtual and 'real life' no longer applies, or perhaps was never really there. Their effects (or should we say affects?) are moving through digital infrastructures, policy, regulations and bodies. If memes are used as a tool by the alt-right to mobilize people to storm the Capitol and play a substantial role in the Ukrainian war, can they also be used by the left to spark a revolution, as memetic warfare is more immediate and accessible than real-life demonstrations? What kind of labor would that require? What kind of tools and principles would we need? And what if memetic logics of spreading information were applied to spread progressive ideas for a possible future?

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