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CRITICAL MEME READER

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CHLOË ARKENBOUT, JACK WILSON, DANIEL DE ZEEUW (EDS.)

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EDITED BY
CHLOË ARKENBOUT
JACK WILSON
AND **DANIEL DE ZEEUW**

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CHLOË ARKENBOUT, JACK WILSON AND DANIËL DE ZEEUW

Memes are bastards, and we love them for it. But memes are bastards in the sense that they are born from two seemingly incompatible ontological registers: an unholy matrimony of semiosis and virality, sense and nonsense, signification and circulation. More on that later. First, let's acknowledge that the meme is also an infantile and laughable term, as are all words that repeat themselves. Yet—encountering its own stupidity, and making this into its generative principle—it is *not* ashamed; like any self-respecting idiot savant, it never ceases to persist in its own convoluted wisdoms. 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results', as Einstein's scientific earworm had it. Call us crazy then, but last time we checked, isn't there difference in repetition? Deleuzean mic-drop.

Notoriously, the meme screws with time, and in this it is pompously and parodically postmodern. Take the memetic format of the animated reaction image. Einstein smoking a pipe, *ad infinitum* (fig. 1); the video timecode permanently skips from the seventh second to the eighth, to the seventh, to the eighth, tik tok, a historical figure evacuated from history. Has the viral image exorcized the Barthesian *punctum*? No: because even when it purifies time from melancholy, it leaves the purely formal mystery of time intact. And the subject, sucked into its vortex, and true to its sado-masochistic genealogy, experiences joy at the spectacle of its own decentering. Ha-Ha.

The meme also screws with narrative, or what could be called the gentrification of time. A truck about to run into a giant traffic pole, forever captured from multiple angles. The existential dread of infinite, contagious suspense: the antithesis of comic relief. Nervous laughter. Please let it end, a feeling intimately known by those suffering from an involuntary imperative to repeat: obsessive compulsive disorder. Wash your hands, turn off the gas, lock the door. Do it again. They demand from the object a solution, namely to rescue them from the abysmal tension that is ripping them apart time and time again. It's a kind of magic. It's a kind of magic. Repetition without end. The curtain never falls on everyday life as the substrate of the historical Event, which is singular and unrepeatable. In the meme, the Event becomes fractured and folded in a million little fragments scattered throughout asynchronous time. The world, as Walter Benjamin held, is only slightly, nearly imperceptibly changed after the arrival of the Messiah. Yet through it, *everything* becomes different, and therein lies its revolutionary thrust.

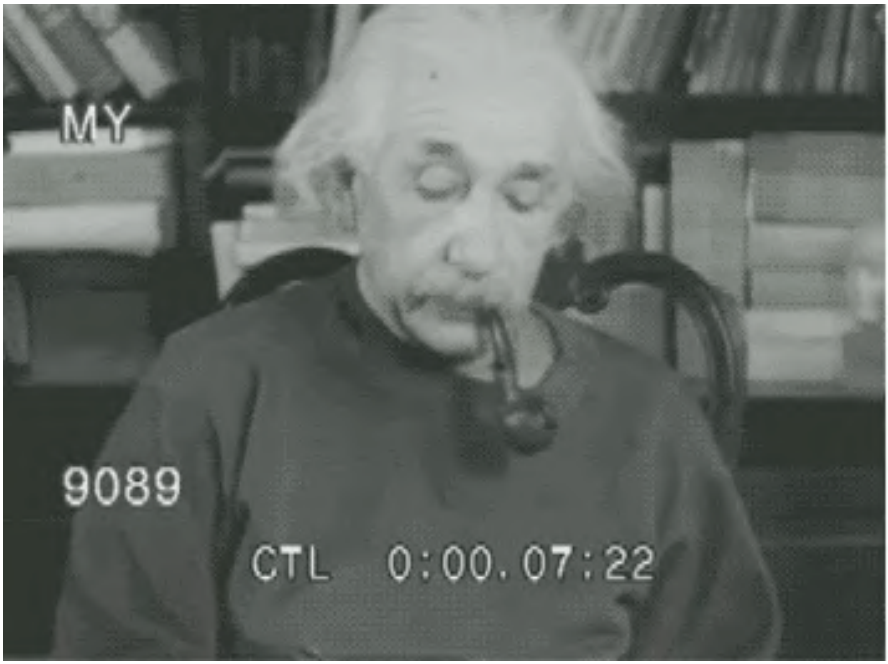

Fig. 1: https://giphy.com/gifs/pipe-einstein-s5z4Oy4xrezm0

Fig. 2: https://tenor.com/view/truck-crash-gif-10492368

Memes are also tricksters, as they make us believe we control them while it's actually the other way around. Classic Žižek: 'Memes, misperceived by us, subjects, as means of our communication, effectively run the show'.[1] Previous critiques of memetics by pious humanists for not sufficiently taking agency and meaning-making into account fail to perceive this *copernican turn* in modern scientific thought. To reject memetics on the basis of its reduction of culture to genetic principles of evolutionary biology *à la* Dawkins and his zealous atheist followers (how ironic), while superficially legitimate, actually throws out the meme with the bathwater.

Returning to the meme as the bastard offspring of two different ontological registers, we could say the meme acts as a medial interface between asignifying and signifying semiotic systems. For Felix Guattari and later Maurizio Lazzarato in *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, asignifying semiotics refers to an operational system of signs that operates below and without any reference to human subjectivity, sociality, representation, and intersubjective meaning, and that extradiscursively acts on human and non-human entities by controlling the parameters of their existence. In this reading, the meme traverses and connects two assemblages of domination: that of social subjection and machinic enslavement. Whereas the former acts on the level of ideology and interpellation,[2] the latter instead 'operates at the level of deterritorialised codes and non-representational signals where the individual becomes a cog of a larger machine that reduces all singular content to an abstract value or axiom'.[3]

The growing prevalence of machinic enslavement over mechanisms of social subjection must in a large part be attributed to information and computation technologies. As Gary Genosko notes, in developing his theory of information, Claude Shannon radically disjoints the notion of information from that of semantic content, and instead proposes a purely technical definition.[4] Put dramatically, from a cybernetic engineering perspective, the meaning of a message seemingly becomes irrelevant, or at least expelled from the equation. It was this theoretical challenge put forward by Shannon that Baudrillard took up in his polemic with the media theorist Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Questioning the latter's emancipatory project of a socialist appropriation of the media, Baudrillard argued that mass media undercuts representation on a much deeper and more structural level. For him, media obey a fundamentally different logic than *representation*, namely that of *simulation*. This is a more radical notion than

1 Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 123.
2 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan, Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014),https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?nObmdR.
3 Claudio Celis Bueno, "Harun Farocki's Asignifying Images," *tripleC* 15, no. 2 (2017): 742. https://triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/download/874/1040?inline=1.
4 Gary Genosko, "Information and Asignification," *Footprint* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 13.

Debord's earlier critique of the society of the spectacle, in that the spectacle still assumes an underlying reality from which it alienates its audiences.

Is signification altogether superfluous, then? Does it still matter *what* the image says, or merely *how* it circulates, e.g. how it is effectively operationalized in an informational milieu? But perhaps we should put the question differently: is there *jouissance* in asignification? Is this perhaps the secret to the meme's unlikely success? Noting the traditional link between the image and the level of representation and ideology, Bueno asks:

> But what if images could also be studied from the non-representational and asignifying standpoint of machinic enslavement? Would it be possible to forge the notion of asignifying images in similar terms to Guattari's concept of asignifying semiotics, that is, as a conceptual apparatus that helps grasping the machinic dimension of contemporary capitalism?[5]

This is also exactly the question memes pose to us. As Geoff Hondroudakis argues in his contribution to this reader:

> The significance of circulation and exchange in memes—their evolutionary function as asignifying network symbionts—is precisely because they mediate signifying content with impersonal scales. The particular quality of the online memetic ecology is its inclusion of both registers. Meme culture is a process of mediation latticing the gulf between the scales of affect and identity, information, and social system (p.188).

As they metastasized from the digital periphery to the mainstream, memes have seethed with mutant energy. From now on, any historical event will be haunted by its memetic double—just as any pandemic will have its own infodemic that will recursively act upon it—issuing in the kinds of cross-contamination that Baudrillard already prefigured in the 1980s: the convoluted age of simulacra, of epistemological crises associated with postmodernity, and of a generalized informational obesity whose gravitational pull bends reality to whatever 'program', in the multiple senses of that term.

Enter: a 100 hour-long video of Nyan cat on YouTube. The perverse delight of endless repetition, the way it tries to make no sense of nonsense: co(s)mic sameness, semiotic entropy. Repeat a word long enough and it loses all meaning, leaving a bad taste in your mouth. When meaning is an effect of the inscription of difference, it makes sense that repetition undoes sense. Only in laughter do we momentarily glimpse our own non-knowledge, which is the closest we probably get to reckoning with it.

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5 Bueno, "Harun Farocki's Asignifying Images," 743.

Fig. 3: https://tenor.com/view/nyan-cat-gif-5716621

Our laughter, then, is precisely our defence against our recognising nothing. To stare too long at the meme is to see its R'lyehian semiotic geometry and therein the birth spasms of an alien whose origin may be in human cultural production but whose form now surpasses our capacities to even comprehend. The single meme, then, has a concealing function wherein horror is sublimated into humor, and we only become aware of this process when it fails: the algorithmic grotesque of 'BURIED ALIVE Outdoor Playground Finger Family Song Nursery Rhymes Animation Education Learning Video,' 'Double Pregnant FROZEN ELSA vs DOCTOR! w/ Spiderman vs Joker Maleficent Hulk Baby - Superhero Fun' and the myriad other examples of recombinant YouTube Kids' grotesquery, the dead eyes of 'Momo,' or the psychic terrorism of the 'Blue Whale Challenge' that Anirban Baishya discusses in this collection:

> 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 (p. 249).

These moments get their affective charge from witnessing—however briefly—the seething incomprehensibility from which the meme emerges and suffuses our being-in-the-world. In many ways, then, the manner in which the meme covers—or reveals—an apparatus of pure terror is analogous to the function of the spectres, zombies, and demons who emerge

with the arrival of the deterritorializing forces of global capitalism.[6] Indeed, this is precisely the thesis of Leslie Braun's reflection on how infrastructures of networked communication, extractive capitalism, and myth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo come to be articulated together in a viral video of the mystical siren Mami Wata, apparently captured by Chinese workers laying submarine internet cable.

What this constellation already alludes to is how, as arguably synonymous with the internet as such, the meme revolves in the orbit of what Peter Galison has called the 'ontology of the enemy'.[7] We concur with his claim that there is a problem with talking about ICT and the web as if they were not embedded in a military way of organizing things. This means that in the case of memes, as in the acronym 3C used to denote military information systems, when we think the C for communication we must always also at the same time think the other two Cs: command and control. Paraphrasing Clausewitz' famous dictum on politics, we could say that digital communication is the continuation of war by other means. Hence the vernacular notion of 'meme warfare'. The roots of current concerns over Russian disinformation campaigns must arguably be sought here, in the convergence of military, communicational, economic, and political apparatuses, rather than in a supposed erosion, by corporate platforms or malicious deep state actors, of an otherwise healthy digital democratic public sphere in the Habermasian sense.

In a presentation at the 2011 Social Media for Defence Summit, the DARPA-associated researcher Robert Finkelstein described the possibilities of 'military memetics' and how this paradigm might be deployed in domains as diverse as PSYOPS, counter-intelligence, recruitment, public relations, and even nuclear deterrence.[8] While we might take comfort in the feeling that the most successful of these specific memetic efforts was likely the hysterical injunction to 'Press F to pay respects' (fig. 4) in the video game and US military recruitment tool *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*—that is, as far as we know (who is to say that the psychic architectures of our corporate platforms are not aspects of a PSYOP being done to us all?)—this presentation speaks to the military history and darker side of the meme. In its spontaneous evocation of laughter—which is classically understood to bypass subjectivity by acting convulsively on the body itself—is a prototypical instance of 'influence' as a tactical acting at a distance, changing the psycho-physical makeup of the agents it targets. Acting at a distance: isn't that the very definition of media?

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6 J. Comaroff, "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (October 1, 2002): 779–805, https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-4-779; Simon Huxtable, "Remembering a Problematic Past: TV Mystics, *Perestroika* and the 1990s in Post-Soviet Media and Memory," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 3 (June 2017): 307–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549416682238.

7 Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (Autumn, 1994): 228-266.

8 Robert Finkelstein, "Tutorial: Military Memetics" (Social Media for Defence Summit, Alexandria, VA, October 24, 2011).

Fig. 4 Screencapture from 'Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare'

From state actors to insurgents, Memes have proven to be powerful weapons in informational warfare. Indeed, even the canard that 'the left can't meme' is a meme unto itself, as Andy King tells us in her essay 'Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-right Culture-jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare':

> 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 feminists and liberals appearing to 'cancel free speech'. Their outreach was far and wide – no corner of the internet was spared (p. 218).

If we move, however, out from under the shadow of memes' dark side, we see that they can be critical acts of positive political intervention as well. As King says, memetic warfare is more immediate and accessible than real-life protests; it is not susceptible to police disruptions and pandemics. Memes are excellent networked objects for challenging state narratives, executing counter-hegemonic strategies, and creating a feeling of solidarity as humor is usually one of the few things those in (abusive) political power cannot repress. For example, Saeeda Saeed, an activist from Saudi Arabia, devised an Instant Meme Noise Generator that spews out nonsensical insults to the top 10 Saudi state-run Twitter accounts in an effort to drown out their posts, directly influencing the online political discourse.

These counter-strategies, however, are not wholly bound to the online domain and can have concrete, real-world effects. In 'Your Feed is a Battleground: A Field Report of Memetic Warefare in Turkey', Särp Ozer explains that memes portraying the former Minister of

Finance and Treasury—Berat Albayrak—as an incompetent dummy caused him so much humiliation that it prompted his resignation. Memes, like those made by Anahita Neghabat, a meme maker and activist who criticizes the right-wing climate of Austria with her Instagram page @ibiza_austrian_memes, highlights how memes are an essential aspect of collective empowerment strategies that are used by marginalized actors to build resilience through a process of self-affirmation.

So while we often think of this in terms of memes being used for destruction, confusion and chaos, they are equally effective as tools in designing a future we want to see – just as the Trans Bears do in their futuristic meme worlds that explore what could happen if we used memes to escape our current moment. Rather than wallow in our present nihilistic memescape, the Trans Bears deploy memes as science fiction tools for speculative worldbuilding, as a means to envision scenarios set in alternative places and times based on pluralistic, positive visions. The potential for memes to have this effect beyond their media context was there all along, but the intensification of their circulation around the world has increased the speed of and potential for this process to occur.

As Grant Bollmer's chapter looks back upon the history of memes as a means to reconfigure our present understanding of them, we conclude this chapter in the same manner. Originally uploaded to the website Newgrounds and popularized by Something Awful and 4chan, the classic meme 'all your base are belong to us' turned twenty this year. Smells like early 2000s teen spirit. In the gloomy vacuum left by the dot-com crisis, the new digital frontier lay wide open for the taking. Bases were taken, new properties claimed. Libertinism is the cryptocurrency of youthful hubris. Platform or surveillance capitalism wasn't really a thing yet (although a lot of the pawns were being positioned in strategic anticipation while we were enjoying cute cat videos on Google Videos).

In the mid-2010s, the 'us' in 'all your base' was identified as a highly media-literate culture of young white men oblivious to their own privileged position in the larger web of things.[9] But as popular culture has been absorbed into a kind of memetic spectrum, this category of 'us' is revealed to have always been inhabited by a heterogeneity of agents. While we can see this see this in Jacob Sujin Kuppermann's history of 'Gopod' on the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, and İdil Galip's reflection on the grotesque on Instagram, another excellent example is in Caspar Chan's account of Pepe the Frog's resurrection in Hong Kong. No longer the worn out crypto-facist figure the alt-right and all-too-credulous news media worked together to create, Pepe has become a symbol of solidarity for protesters as the city heaved with protests between 2019 and 2020. In Pepe, as well as in the signs, phrases, and—really—the entire event of the 6th of January 2021's storming of the US Capitol Building, we can see that memes have gone beyond the internet, beyond discourse, and beyond the image.

9 Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

In February 2021, a digital rendition of the famous Nyan Cat GIF meme was sold as a non-fungible token (NFT) by its creator Chris Torres for almost 600,000 USD. NFTs are—in theory—a mechanism of 'owning' artworks whose digital basis initially foreclosed their monetisation. While what this amounts to is essentially a certificate that says 'I own this' the blockchain technology that NFTs depend on nevertheless interrupts the messy copypasta of anonymous and collective vernacular creativity, whose progressive potential lied in having done away with any distinction between original and copy, authentic or fake, private ownership and communal stock, author and audience. Blockchain operationalizes a cryptolibertarian logic of singularity and property against the logic of promiscuous multiplicity offered by meme culture. Yet, ironically, it is precisely the precarious 'hacker class' of online influencers that may benefit from blockchain tech and social media fame to claim ownership and profit from their immaterial labors—a dilemma Clusterduck's essay in this reader explores.

What will become of memes, then, hinges on developments too elaborate, unstable, and entangled to fully anticipate. In their conceptual idiosyncrasy and their phenomenal evanescence, memes reflect the socio-technical milieu in which they insert themselves. And as they become woven into our communicative repertoires, the meme in all likelihood will lose claim to its status as a unique cultural or digital object. There will be a time when this meme reader will make people smile nostalgically, and there will be a time when it will all seem all so ridiculous and stupid. But, while we do not want to heroize memes, they do, *for us now*, represent a critical moment when the instrumentarium of a global media spectacle is looped and becomes a self-consuming excess, and the life it implicates in its fundamental irresponsibility suddenly bursts out in laughter. The question remains what kind of laughter memes potentialize, and who is laughing: is it the liberating, carnivalesque kind, or the grotesque kind that defers to viral media in nihilistic embrace? Is it the kind of emancipatory laughter of political activists, or that of authoritarian leaders and their troll armies as they leverage memetic tactics to maliciously nudge their subjects or incite violence against minorities? The different artistic, theoretical, and political contributions collected in this volume render different answers to these questions, and we hope you enjoy them.

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WOJAK'S LAMENT: EXCESS AND VOYEURISM UNDER PLATFORM CAPITALISM

ANTHONY GLYN BURTON

Those of us with faint memories of the early internet may remember it making a different appeal: nobody needed to know who you were if you didn't want them to. This memory is made all the fainter with every login to a platform and the uncanny accompaniment of feeling watched by an unseen specter. But to call it being watched isn't entirely accurate: barring traumatic malfunction, human watching leaves an impression on a negentropic memory, one retained over time through its relations and contingencies and callable based on these unknowable strata. Platforms, meanwhile, must account for these memories through bits, electricity, and power bills: hence what begins as negentropy fuels the entropic decay produced by the bunker hoards, hoards that make up the traces of action we undertake in surveillance media. Thus, what appears to the patrons of computational prosthesis as Turing's hypothesis fulfilled—the congruence of data storage and human memory—in reality leads to a homogeneity that, paradoxically, extinguishes this very dream of capture and reenactment. These bunkers contain the data and, in turn, the empirical objects, network configurations, and algorithms that provide the infrastructural basis of the contemporary web, and the fast-twitch access to these bits in stasis is the backbone of platforms' phantasmagoric liveliness. But the algorithmic workings on this well of data present to each of us a highly customized experience with the warmth of a dark cave: frozen images of the other comprise this ostensibly personalized existence.

What political possibilities are foreclosed, and in turn, what possibilities are opened up by the contrast between this datafied memory and human memory? While platforms engineer a custom loneliness in order to generate the activity upon which their economic models are based, there exists a paradoxical means by which this valorization machine is confounded: memes, particularly those that articulate common experience through representation. By leaving an affective impression that exceeds their circulation, memes like Wojak and NPCs open the possibility for the articulation of belonging and political subjectivity that exceeds the capture, extraction, and frozen identities of platform capitalism.

On one hand, these extractive processes are the primary engine by which the circulation that makes up platformed experience functions, and their infrastructures shape both the possibility of what can be said, how one can reply, and what content

is fit for circulation. On the other hand, there is a trace left over by those memes that articulate something beyond homophilic formatting and data capture. There is the impression of there being someone else out there, someone who is like me but not me. Instead of being reified into the commodity form through the capture, extraction, and storage of information, the circulation of memes articulates the presence of an other. This other goes beyond the cardboard cutout version of the social world and leaves the affective impression of belonging. By exceeding its capture, memery points to a potential avenue for transcending the formatting and freezing of digital life into mere bunker data.

The Phantasmagoric Social: Excess, Memes, and Affective Identification

In an aside of Chapter 2 in Platform Capitalism, Nick Srnicek contests Tiziana Terranova's view that user output is labor, claiming that since 'most of our social interactions do not enter into a valorization process… it is hard to make the case that what they do is labor, properly speaking… [instead] advertising platforms appropriate data as a raw material'.[1] But this view of what constitutes valorization assumes all that can enter into this process is only labor itself, freely brought to market. While commodity capital self-valorizes through the extraction built into alienated labor, Srnicek's note opens the question of what alienation, if not labor's, constitutes this 'raw material' from which the phantasmagoric social is constructed? True to its ghostly presence, this raw material is mined from the iterative production of affect. With the 'anxiety of enjoyment', Jodi Dean names the compulsion to continually post that is engineered by platforms and their construction of the phantasmagoric social. Activity on social platforms provides a facsimile of sociality that, instead of leaving us with the sense of accomplishment of furthering social bonds, postpones this very drive in a masturbatory, junkish enjoyment.[2] It is this very deferral of affective closure—the neverending loop of alienated utterance and activity—that constitutes the 'raw material' valorized by platforms. In this sense, then, these platforms are machines that circulate affect yet cancel the potential for activation. The circulation of affect is the stream from which platforms extract surplus value. Despite it not being an instance of exploitation in the classical sense, there remains a valorization with a one-sided benefit. The extraction of user data from platform activity gets something from us that we ourselves have no use for, and relies on the continual construction of something new to observe, something activating to react to, and in turn new data to hoard in the bunker, to justify its own subterranean existence. Called upon to reanimate the very process that once gave it life, this data creates an closed loop that informs the boundaries that mark out platforms and their social

1 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 30.

2 Jodi Dean, "Affect and Drive," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 88-100

space: hence the recommendation systems, sharing, nudges to circulate, and a resulting homophily that signifies a welcome into an enclosed space.[3]

This facsimile of social activity is the stuff of a platform's memories. Text is mined for things that, in the platform's eye, signify meaning; infrastructural syntaxes such as Like buttons and emoji reactions provide a substitute for affective expression. As iterable objects, then, memes in one sense engineer the very activity that creates memories for capital's data extraction machines. Yet in their circulation as images, part of what they express exceeds these machines' metrical tools. They are not the narrow expressive devices given from above that format the potential for affective transfer, but instead confound its measurement by exceeding the format that can be so quantified. Machine learning libraries are (as of yet) underdeveloped in identifying meaning in images. It is difficult for them to measure anything in an image except the image's similarity to those the machine learning program has been trained upon: this confuses platform attempts to capture user affect by measuring images. In their infinite iterability and potential for remixing, memes retain the power to leave impressions or traces much stronger than any infrastructural syntax can hope to do by positing a necessary agential relationality between users as both consumers and producers: in short, active humans involved in their construction of their own social world.

Fig.1: Wojak himself.

3 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Queering Homophily," in *Pattern Discrimination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 60.

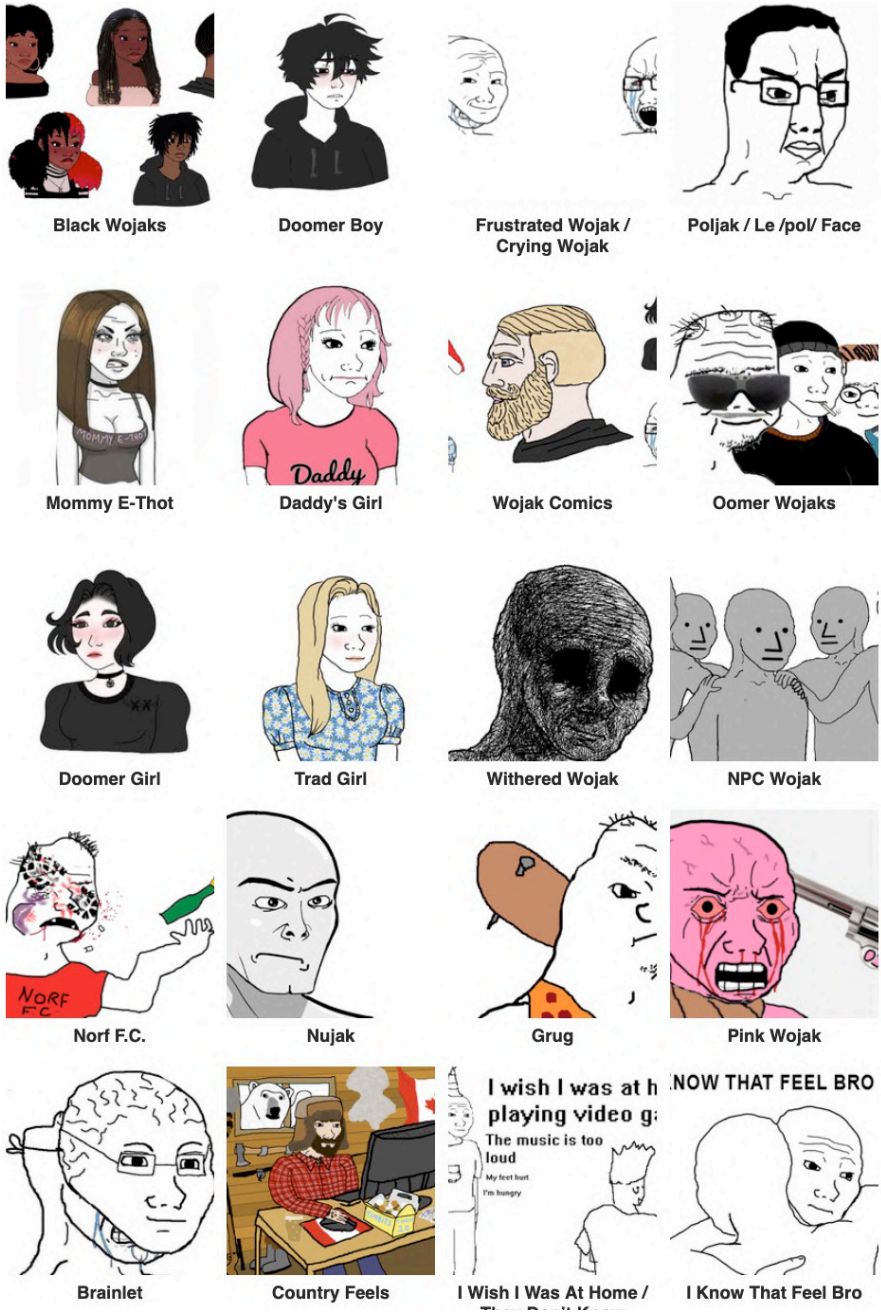

Fig. 2: Wojak wall.

In exploring this meme-cum-excess, I deal here with Wojak and his friends, which we know otherwise as 'NPCs' or non-playable characters. NPCs are figurative line-drawn characters usually engaged in some common experience or experiencing some feeling. Wojak, the first character to appear under this style, embodies this emotive expression though his original slogan: 'that feel when'. By providing a memetic face (and in turn, a name) to affective states under network capitalism, the meme genre has evolved to become the non-playable characters of a particular social experience with particular sets of surface behaviour and aesthetics.[4] But it would be a mistake to dismiss NPCs as a Xeroxed social or an exercise in stereotypes. Wojak and friends articulate an experience that one may *know*, a flash of recognizability in their representations of real archetypes or shared experiences. I may just as easily locate myself in the commons when a doomer meme matches my internal sentiments as I feel overly simplified or unfairly targeted by a picture of the coomer beside a copy of Infinite Jest.[5] This image of the commons is the image of someone else out there, existing alongside me. Memes circulate through networks, and there is an element of affect that is produced in this traversal: impressions of the other *who felt themselves in the NPC meme* are left and felt on me.[6]

I'm using Wojak and NPC here interchangeably because while Wojak himself might be the most recognizable type, he represents a genre of images that share similarities both aesthetic (simple digital paint line drawings) and functional (representing a 'type' of behaviors/appearances that are found together) that comprise the NPC. Wojak's name is a sort of affective loanword, with the qualifier here a prime cut of digital meaning mishmash: the word itself is Polish for 'warrior'. It was the username of a Polish user on the German chan board krautchan's /int/ (international) board; the picture itself was posted by the user wojak, and he claims that he found it on the Polish chan board vichan under the original title 'ciepła twarz.jpg'.[7]

But there's conflicting information. Part of the NPC genre, the 'I wish I was at home' meme illustrating the inner monologue of a person at a party, can be found first posted on the Wayback Machine from December 2009 on the website 'Sad and Useless.' This is an image

4 Of course, there's also the specific gray, plain-expressioned 'NPC' meme of this same genre. I'm intentionally using NPC to describe the genre and not just the plain gray face because the idea behind the NPC—that these line drawings represent types of people one encounters offline, with no 'inner monologue', as one poster puts it—is crucial to how these images take form as empty signifiers, and to call them 'Wojak' derivatives is to undermine the ways they have iterated much beyond the original Wojak drawing.

5 Brave of me to admit, isn't it?

6 Anna Munster, *An Aesthesia of Networks: Conjunctive Experience in Art and Te*chnology (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 12.

7 I'm drawing this information from a Reddit Ask Me Anything thread made by the poster. It can be read at https://web.archive.org/web/20190414195031/https://www.reddit.com/r/datfeel/comments/p8v3d/iama_wojakvoyack%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%BA_guy_who_felt_first_feel_amaa/.

reposting website that describes itself as the 'The Most Depressive Site on the Internet', and likely not the original source of the image.[8] Wojak, likewise, makes it clear in his AmA that he found the picture at some point before he posted it on Krautchan's /int/. Yet short of the original MS paint virtuoso who created the Wojak face emerging (let alone being listened to!), it's likely that these traces are the closest that we'll get to knowing the origin.[9] From here, the concept of wireframe MS paint figures that represent a particular affect, monologue, or personality exploded into the many variations we know today.

NPCs and the Games They Play

It is in the iteration of NPC memes that there is potential for excess. This excess is not, necessarily, politically palatable: as the digital right[10] has become increasingly outspoken, so too has it seemingly held memery as a primary practice. Yet to dismiss NPC memes as solely the domain of the digital right would be a mistake because it brackets a fruitful opportunity to examine how they function in constructing communities through the excess and refuse of platformed existence.

Take Chad. 'Chad' is the name given to an NPC-style character who represents the archetype of a man who supposedly receives a disproportionate share of women's attention and sexuality. He is used to represent the ultimate alpha male, the synthesis of the highest point on each of the hierarchies that grow out of neoliberalism's reconfiguration of the social into the realm of the homo economicus[11]. With Popeye biceps, a Clark Kent jaw and a browline to block out the sun, he represents an archetype of a person who is purportedly encountered day-to-day, yet never exists within the communities to which he is called to account. Chad is especially popular in digital incel communities, whose chief ideology,

8 A little fuel to the fire of what, exactly, constituted the pre-platform capital internet is this idea that there was a time when everything was not stored or captured in a bunker.

9 And amateur internet researchers will always be more apt at tracing these histories than any academic, because being online is being one and the same with your own archive. For a completist history of what is known about Wojak et. al., I direct the user to https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak/children, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-wish-i-was-at-home-they-dont-know, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-wish-i-was-at-home-they-dont-know, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/npc-wojak. There is also information on the Wayback's copy of Encyclopaedia Dramatica.

10 It's in vogue to refer to this group as the 'alt-right', but neo-fascism, reactionary impulses, rigid individualism and a victim complex have been the sentiments of right-wing culture long before they found refuge online (see Mondon and Winter 2020, Robin 2012, Traverso 2016, or five random links in the 'history' section on the Tea Party wikipedia page). The term itself originated in a speech at the H.L Mencken club in a 2008 speech by Paul Gottfried, author of riveting books like *The Conservative Movement*, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*, *The Strange Death of Marxism*, and *After Liberalism* (published 2001). And considering the term 'alt-right' was popularized by Richard Spencer, one of its self-anointed leaders (Wallace-Wells 2015; this was before he became famous for getting punched on camera), using it with regularity is playing into an ahistorical con.

11 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books 2015), 39.

the scientific black pill, articulates a victimization complex and rank misogyny based on a rigidly Manichean system of social value that locates themselves at the bottom. The iterative and enclosed nature of the community (a nature of its own making) prevents, by necessity, the existence of an *actual* Chad in its midst, for the incel's reflexive difference from Chad-types is how they define their social existence. Yet Chad the *meme* appears both in language and image as a sort of summoned Godhead among self-identified incels. What is the function of this representation? By existing outside the mass of players in the community, he becomes an imagined extension of the incel's own existence. Memetically, he rejects the bounding of a particular system. Thus the construction and iteration of Chad is the summoning of a spectre whose presence acts as a constant reminder of an outside to the concatenated, homophilic image of the social world presented by platform capitalism. On the one hand this mechanized body compacts the mass whose culture he reflects into a 'molar' framework, a mass of totalities, discrete and atomized aggregates that make up the incel's idea of his own experience.[12] Yet this very molarity marks out a metastability under which the individual acts of communities can themselves flourish as unstable, changing, and possessing the potential for generative activity as opposed to being frozen in time and place as the imagified, extracted object. Chad posits an outside that remains after the engineering of sameness and voyeuristic extraction has run its course. And while network capitalism is explicitly marked by this valorization circuit, this very circulation continually produces an excess that remains outside of its momentary capture.

If there is such a thing as meme magic, it is this: the combination of individual identification and collective iterability present in the Wojak meme makes apparent the simulated nature of the platform's social. By being unstable in their ability to be remixed, reiterated, and reposted, the not-quite-humans of NPC-style memes become part of a metastability that represents those elements of the social world. This reality, of course, being that which affect machines and their engineering of homophily try so hard to avoid. The × of white wojak becomes the y of Chad, before it turns into nℤ of Stacy, coomer, doomer, doomer gf, that grid where all the female wojaks are matched to works in feminist theory, et cetera. What is originally a normie in both presence and aesthetic becomes the normie who is such because he is busy being Chad in the normie world. The cast is outgrown as the borders of the platform itself are ever more strongly articulated as enclosing, and at every iteration ∈ the non-playable realm qua outside. Simondon calls this process transduction, a process of mutual change that allows for individuation to occur. Through the ever-evolving presence of those who exist outside the platformed social, the very idea *of* a world outside the confines of sameness takes shape as a metastability.[13] This chain of development is causal, through the remixing and reiteration of particular expressions and affects contained within the memetic form. And in the process of this unfolding, a split happens that allows

12 Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 280.

13 Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects,* trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017), 140; see also Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

for memes to exceed the capture and circulation of capital flow. Since extraction machines deal only in the formal elements of exchange, they can only capture the act of sharing: while it relies on this exact process of remixing to sustain the project of continued capture, it cannot recognize the metastability that is articulated through the unfolding chain. Thus, the metastability that allows for the NPC to articulate shared experiences maintains itself through the refuse of platform capital: that which is left over after circulation has been captured and tracked.

Wojak is You

Memes are the perfect object of capital—almost. Easily understandable and affectively engaging, they contain within them the energy to compel the user activity without which platform capitalism would have nothing to hoard. But the memetic image persists in impression and remains fertile ground for articulating the experience of being reduced to sameness. What's left over from the extraction process takes the form of exactly what it cancels out: not the objective data in cold storage, but a grammar in figurative form[14] that articulates a collective subjectivity. In their iterable nature and empty signification, NPC-style memes posit the presence of an other that, by necessity through its NPC nature, cannot exist actively in this affective circulation. Wojak and NPC characters function to name a presence that exists on the outside, and in this naming lies the potential for individuation against homophilic machines. As Butler tells us, in naming something we constitute someone while also locating ourselves.[15] By naming something, we signify it as relevant within our own processes of individuation, something we have to contend with in our constitution of our being. The valorization machine only registers circulation: it cannot see the real social it purports to create. Thus in sharing Wojak and friends, what appears on the surface as a set of cheap stereotypes ends up unraveling our own reified existence, by providing a name to those whose 'typical' behavior makes up a landscape as rich as the social itself: a horizon that always, already exceeds the valorization machine.

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14 Marc Tuters, and Sal Hagen. "(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan," *New Media & Society* 22, no. 12 (2020): 2226.

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THE 'GROTESQUE' IN INSTAGRAM MEMES

İDIL GALIP

Fig. 1: Photograph captioned 'A tari topeng mask, on its dancer' Creative Commons Chris Woodrich Crisco 1492 2014. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

The *grotto* is damp. It is cavernous and dark, existing between life outside and the molten core of the underground. The serpentine foliage on the walls represents an abject reality, animals, plants, bodies, symbols melding together *crypt*ically. The images are so comedic and inescapably wretched that it makes you want to weep with anguish, and at the same time produces frenzied laughter from deep within your belly that echoes incessantly in the crypt. The *grotto* is bizarre, and so is your laughter—it is an uncanny feeling that can only be described as *grotto-esque*.

If the Emperor Nero knew that *Domus Aurea*, the golden palace he built in Rome, was initially thought to be a mere grotto, a mysterious devotional cave, he would have probably

set fire to Rome a second time. This once extravagant palace had been built over by Nero's successors and was only accidently rediscovered in the 15th century when a young man fell through a crevice in one of the seven hills of Rome, upon the *Oppius* spur. It was a bizarre, cavernous world, stripped of its jewels and luxury, left only with a perplexing array of murals depicting flora, fauna, and viscera. The story is that following the rediscovery of the palace during the Renaissance, these images prompted the coining of the term *grotesque*, meaning 'grotto-like', to describe 'frivolously' pagan and uncanny aesthetics. This, of course, does not imply that the grotesque did not exist prior to and outside of the Renaissance, the *Domus Aurea*, the Roman Empire or 'the West'. In fact, the grotesque appears throughout human culture, from *Topeng* dance in Indonesia, the *Haka* in Maori culture, to the mania of *Hacivat* and *Karagöz* in Turkish shadow play, as well as in modes of expression and experience in contemporary digital culture [1]. While the term might have been inspired by this accidental discovery and the vestiges of a Roman past, the aesthetic form itself is monstrously human.

A Digital Carnival

Beyond the story of the golden palace and its curious murals, the grotesque and in particular the literary trope of *grotesque realism* is also closely associated with the carnival and *carnivalesque* folk humor. Mikhail Bakhtin's 1965 book *Rabelais and His World* details the subtext of grotesque realism not only through literature but within the 'structure of life' that encompasses culture, art, everyday politics, economic relations and mundane sociality. These carnivals Bakhtin refers to are those that are firmly rooted in medieval Europe. They are part of a season of feverish festivities that precede the solemn suffering of Lent, and give ordinary people a final chance to revel in debauchery and parody before they are engulfed by the ordeal of penance. The rituals, performances, jokes and laughter of the carnival stand in active opposition to ecclesiastical piety and aristocratic etiquette, and they belong to a world that firmly rejects conventional civility. During the carnival, social hierarchies are toppled and replaced by a mode of expression that favors marginalized and traditionally silenced voices.[2] In this upside-down domain, those with the least economic, political and social power enjoy attention and prominence. Holquist (2009) exclaims that carnival has revolutionary potential.[3] As it seems to offer a glimpse into a mutinous reality where norms are debased with the utmost fervor, and where civilians get to first wear and then desecrate the costume of the rich and powerful.

As with the grotesque, it is important to underline that even though Bakhtin puts the carnival in a mainly medieval European context, where the season of the carnival is sanctioned

1 Hoi-Yi Katy Kan, *Digital Carnivalesque Power Discourse and Counter Narratives in Singapore Social Media* (Singapore: Springer Singapore: Imprint: Springer, 2020).

2 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 15.

3 Michael Holquist, "Prologue," in *Rabelais and His World*, by Mikhail Bakhtin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), xviii.

by the Church, the spirit of the carnivalesque derives 'from a force that preexists priests and kings and to whose superior power they are actually deferring when they appear to be licensing carnival'[4]. The carnival is, then, a set of festivities created and enjoyed by ordinary folk. It is a set of festivities that take place within the larger economic and political structures set forth by the ruling class. It is, in its core, a response to these structures, a reaction bursting with merriment, anger, fear, anticipation, hope, satire and irony. Within these parameters, civilians are allowed to parody their misery and to make money off it. The economic element of the carnival, coupled with performance, sociality and the all-consuming affective atmosphere, makes it so that the carnival becomes more than a mere spectacle and a complete experience, as it is not only 'seen by the people' but 'they live in it'[5]. If the carnival is more than a holiday, a period in the calendar dictated by the Church, then it is a mood, a reaction, and a liminal space between reality and its reproduction. The concept of the carnival can be taken out of its Bakhtinian context, abstracted and applied elsewhere.

On the internet, for instance, an incessant carnival rages on, unstoppable and full to the brim with vulgar marketplace language, grotesque performances, bodily debasement, political parody, and laughter for laughter's sake. The forms of folk culture that emerge from the carnival, 'ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of billingsgate'[6] are all represented to their full extremes online. Within the constraints of digital infrastructures controlled by powerful tech corporations and maintained by low-paid casualized workers[7], ordinary folk are allowed to feel a simulacrum of symbolic power. Through various carnivalesque performances, such as public pranks and outrageous 'story-time' videos on YouTube, elaborate choreographies on TikTok, Twitter 'dunks', and grotesque memes on Instagram, civilians can engage and entertain other ordinary folk.

The carnivalesque is inextricably tied to the concept of ambivalent, all-encompassing *festive laughter* and the crude language of the marketplace, or *billingsgate*.[8] Festive laughter, Bakhtin muses, 'is not an individual reaction to a single "comic" event', but is 'universal in its scope' and 'ambivalent'.[9] Online, internet memes evoke festive laughter because they build on not only one comic event or themselves in solitude, but on a myriad of texts, references and online 'discourse'. The more intertextually layered the meme becomes, the more it asks of its viewer. The viewer must be embedded and fluent in deep internet lore to find enjoyment in the meme, and to be able to set some ironic distance between herself and her position on the internet. The proximity between herself and digital culture is funny, spending time on the internet is funny, and being so fluent in the internet that she can understand even the

4 Holquist, "Prologue," xviii.
5 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* 7.
6 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* 5.
7 See Julian Posada, "The Future of Work Is Here: Toward a Comprehensive Approach to Artificial Intelligence and Labour," *Ethics in Context*, no. 56 (15 July 2020).
8 *Billingsgate* is now a synonym for 'foul language' but took its name from the famous London fish market known for its foul-mouthed vendors (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, 2021).
9 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* 11.

most nonfigurative meme is funny. The meme-maker is also hyperaware of the relationship between her audience and her meme, and creates a communion of laughter that involves those who understand and excludes those who cannot. As with festive laughter, meme-laughter is also ambivalent, laughing with and at itself: after all, she 'who is laughing also belongs to it'.[10] Digital festive laughter multiplies ceaselessly instead of being limited to the temporal confines of the physical carnival. While digital markets, where virality, engagement and online visibility is both the currency and the object of transaction, generate a boundless and rhizomatic digital marketplace talk. Grotesque memes are borne of this digital billingsgate and never-ending festive laughter.

Grotesque Memes

In *The Female Grotesque,* Mary Russo makes a distinction between two forms of the grotesque, the comic grotesque which she associates with the work of Bakhtin and the grotesque as uncanny which she mainly links to Freud's discussion of feelings of unease and fear in his essay The Uncanny' and Wolfgang Kayser's book *The Grotesque in Art and Literature.*[11] She posits that while Bakhtin is interested in the social body in his discussion of the comic grotesque, the grotesque as uncanny is 'is related most strongly to the psychic register and to the bodily as a cultural projection of the inner state'.[12]

Fig. 2: Meme captioned 'you were merely sent to horny jail, I was born in it - molded by it' (Instagram: @todaywasmybirthday, 2020a). Reproduced by permission of @todaywasmybirthday.

10 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* 12.
11 Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7-8.
12 Russo, *The Female Grotesque,* 9.

Within my digital ethnography of a community of meme artists on Instagram, I encountered expressions of both comic and uncanny grotesque. This *grotesque as a meme response* could be connected to many meme makers' experience of precarity. For instance, almost all of the 11 meme makers I interviewed during my fieldwork could be described as precarious workers in some sense. At the time of our interviews, many were working multiple jobs, often as freelancers, creative consultants, service, hospitality and manual workers, in order to survive. The job precarity they experienced was two-fold, firstly due to an inconsistent revenue stream from their creative work and secondly because of the possibility of physical risk, as a result of physically laborious work. During an interview, one participant—a meme artist with a large following—relayed to me that he had sustained a workplace injury during his work as a package loader for a major delivery and logistics company. In addition to his injury, which came as a result of having to lift up to 30 to 60 kilograms at a time, he was also being harassed and intimidated by management. He later filed a grievance with his union and kept his work doing 'light duty', as he had no other alternative, especially during a pandemic. His experiences as a working artist, meme creator and a blue-collar worker is not an exception, as many I talked to in this community were employed in multiple sectors with a varying but ever-present degree of precarity.

Beyond this sense of *platform-captivity* made worse by precarity, a theme of in-betweenness is found in these meme makers' relationship to platform capital. The meme makers who I interviewed, as creators of subversive and grotesque memes, occupy an in-between state of platform productivity and platform resistance. They are *productive* users on Instagram, as they perpetuate the creation of capital for the platform. They actively create and post memes, and use platform functions that amplify, circulate and monetize content. At the same time, they push back against the platform by 'deliberately seeing what [they] can get away with' as one of my participants puts it. This *resistance*, the pushing of platform norms towards an insular 'carnivalesque collectivity'[13] through grotesque language[14] and aesthetics comes at the risk of complete page bans and 'algorithmic punishment' like the much-speculated *shadowban*. The policing of this performance of the grotesque is ultimately at odds with the Bakhtinian conception of the carnival, which is theorized as a period of time where the subversion of the political and economic status-quo is tolerated by those in power. While there is a discernible element of the grotesque within this meme community, their carnivalesque collectivity and grotesque media is subject to institutional, or platform, punishment. This, alongside the exploitation of play as 'serious business', complicates the conceptualization of these spaces as digital carnivals. However, the connection between digital marketplace-talk and the appearance of the grotesque as a meme response is still pertinent as to how festive and grotesque laughter as well as vulgar language can be understood within memes.

13 Daniël de Zeeuw, "The Profane Media Logic of Anonymous Imageboard Culture" (PhD Diss., University of Amsterdam, 2019), 126.

14 A meme @djinnkazama posted on Instagram reads 'kill the cop in your head, the capitalist in your heart and the homophobe in your butthole' (2021). @djinnkazama's memes and posts are sporadically taken down and 'hidden' by Instagram for violating 'community guidelines'.

Marketplaces—especially those which are casual, non-compliant and informal such as this one, as well as others in the wider meme economy, are by their nature vulgar spaces. To that end, they produce their own vulgar and crude mode of communication which also feeds into and from the festive laughter of the continuous carnival, constantly bubbling away on the internet. This community's memes exhibit a self-confessed and intentional garishness which stands in opposition to the aspirational aesthetics of mainstream social media influencers, but they coexist on the same platform and utilize a similar entrepreneurial logic. They laugh at this aspirational spirit, but also laugh at themselves for contributing to it too, in true carnivalesque fashion (Figure 3). In its core, meme-laughter engendered by the grotesque body and the vulgar text is 'not simply parod[y]; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say that it is serious'.[15]

Fig. 3: Meme captioned 'this meme brought to you by THIS FUCKIN GUY AAA??! 😷 😷 😷 GET A LOaD 🖇 of HIM 😷 😷 😷 😷 😷 😷' (Instagram: @lilperc666, 2020). Reproduced by permission

15 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 80.

of @lilperc666.

The comedy, tragedy and seriousness of the grotesque which Kristeva presents can be seen in Figure 3 created by artist @lilperc666. There are many meme creators who are minoritized, and many have developed a sense of left-leaning, radical politics as a result, which they try to practice in both their digital and offline lives. However, their radical politics clash unambiguously with Instagram's aspirational and idealized aesthetics. While being hyper-aware of the incompatibility of their politics and their 'digital workplace', they are still too precarious to completely withdraw their content, and therefore labor, from said platform. This sense of platform-captivity is implied in Figure 3, alongside Trump's famously grotesque visage[16].

Figure 2, on the other hand, is a meme created by artist @todaywasmybirthday on Instagram. It shows a crying baby doll with a clown-like upturned smile, prominent bottom teeth and lips painted bright red. The tears streaming down the doll's beady blue eyes have a gelatinous, plastic quality. The bib and its clothes are an innocuous pastel shade, overshadowed by the bizarre detail of a sloth-like creature with watery eyes gnawing on the doll's earlobe. The doll has an unmistakable quality of uncanniness, and of abjection. It is recognizable as an object but foreign within this composition. In its most basic form, a doll is a toy for a child and the associations we have with baby dolls are therefore of childhood and innocence. This is why a broken doll, a doll with missing limbs, or an abandoned doll strike a sense of despair in us. We imagine dolls coming alive with malicious intent and revel in the horror at the idea when watching *Annabelle,* Chucky in *Child's Play,* and the evil clown in *The Poltergeist.* The doll is also a 'double', an inanimate and foreign reflection of the self, and ultimately a representation of uncanny grotesque.[17]

The doll, with its abject smile and its symbolism of innocence as well as horror, is juxtaposed against a text-based joke about an artifact of internet vernacular (de Seta 2019, Phillips and Milner 2017). The 'go to horny jail' meme[18] originally shows *Doge*[19] hitting a slightly deformed double of itself with a baseball bat while telling it to 'go to horny jail', and is used online as a response to someone posting or replying to sexual content. The set up in Figure 2 builds on this meme culture reference but imposes more than its basic premise on the viewer. Doge is absent and so is the physical violence of the baseball bat. Instead, the doll-jester stares at the viewer bleary eyed, with a sloth dangling from its ear like an earring, whispering 'you cannot send me to horny jail, I already live in a prison of my desires'. This *prison of desires* metaphor should be a familiar one to anyone who has engaged with popular interpretations of Buddhist philosophy[20], the Dutch symphonic metal band After Forever's debut album *Prison of Desire* (2001), or Plato's *Phaedo*, in which Plato provides a 'vivid description of what it means for reason to be enslaved

16 Daniël de Zeeuw, "The Gaping Mouth: Trump and The Carnival in Power," *A*Desk*, 18 May 2020.
17 Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (MIT, 1919), 8-9. https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf.
18 See: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/go-to-horny-jail
19 A much meme-d Shiba Inu breed dog.
20 See Ananda Baltrunas. "A Prison of Desire," *Tricycle*, Spring 2004, https://tricycle.org/magazine/prison-desire/.

by the lower parts of the soul'.[21]

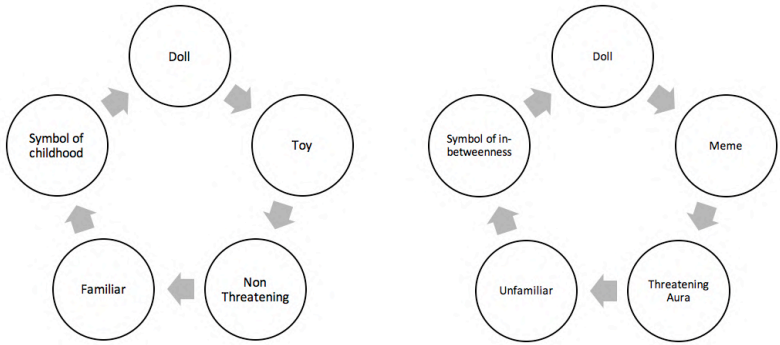

Fig. 4: The cycles of meaning of the doll as a toy and the doll as a meme.

Within grotesque memes, the use of *strange langu*age, a combination of metaphors, rhymes, references, fuses with the *strange image*—absurd, scary, foreign, abject—to *defamiliarize* mundane and inescapable parts of human existence, but also viral meme formats. *Defamiliarization* works by disrupting the ordinary and interrupts our habitual perception of familiar forms. For instance, the doll in Figure 2 is visually manipulated into a something outside of a child's toy into a memetic jester. It is then paired with a seemingly familiar meme format where the viewer recognizes the 'horny jail' reference. The meme delivers on the main sentiment of the original format, of the inability to control sexual desires. However, the expression of the sentiment in Figure 2 is external to the physical comedy of Doge. 'The prison of one's desires' refers to the psychic torment of having sexual desires in the first place, not of being unable to control them. In its totality, the doll as part of the grotesque meme symbolizes *in-betweenness*: between childhood and adulthood, innocence and guilt, and action and inertia (Figure 4).

The logic of the grotesque meme works not by adding a clearly different meaning to the original reference. Memes cannot be 'permanent referent[s] for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through [them]', therefore the purpose of the grotesque meme 'is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object - it creates a "vision" of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it'.[22] The disruption of the viewer's expectations in grotesque memes defamiliarizes the viral meme format, introducing a different vision of the meme. Through abjection, a rejection

21 Charles Kahn, "Plato's Theory of Desire," *The Review of Metaphysics* 41, no. 1 (1987), 99.

22 Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (London: Longmans, 1998), 9.

of social reason, the grotesque meme interrupts understandable, palatable, viral meme logic and creates an affective communion between its viewer, its creator and the incessant digital carnival.

Digital Life and Grotesque Realism

Digital life is life lived in-between, and therefore also partly in a grotesque manner. Our various taps, scrolls, swishes and sounds make it bodily[23], but it is by no means an unconditionally embodied experience. It can be physically lonely and virtually communal. This in-betweenness is defined by its immediate proximity to and distance from the physical. Beyond its gargantuan, pollutant infrastructure,[24] everyday interaction within digital life is maintained mainly by the digits of the dominant hand, the eyes, the mind. Digital life is undoubtedly *real*, but it exists in a liminal space between virtuality and physicality. The trope of the *user-generator*, the *prosumer*, the *content creator* also builds on this inherent in-betweenness. Just like the carnival participant, users become 'both actor and spectator [. . .] [passing] through a zero point of carnivalesque activity and [splitting] into a subject of the spectacle and an object of the game'.[25] In line with customary festive laughter, the meme maker makes fun of herself, her viewer and the meme itself. The grotesque meme is thus the object, the subject and the spectacle in one.

23 Tim Markham, *Digital Life* (Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

24 Nicola Jones, "How to Stop Data Centres from Gobbling up the World's Electricity," *Nature*, 13 September 2018, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-06610-y#correction-0.

25 Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 78.

Fig. 5: Meme captioned 'Dam you felt proud to start w?? Sounds like a personal problem' (Instagram: @todaywasmybirthday, 2020b). Reproduced by permission of @todaywasmybirthday.

Grotesque memes are concerned with the cyclical biological processes, such as sex, birth, death, eating, drinking, defecating, like grotesque ritual in the context of carnival and grotesque realism and body in literature. Even if the textual or the visual composition does not refer to such processes outright, their affect is of an existential kind that confronts the in-betweenness inherent to both the carnival and digital life. The jester in Figure 4 has a far-away look in its eyes and a droopy mouth. It is dissociated from reality either because of an overstimulated mind, a stark realization of the human condition, or simply because it is just not 'alive' anymore. The jester cannot feel shame as it occupies a role of unashamed performance and debauchery by its nature, but also because it is duly aware that the truth of the human body allows no space for 'dignity'. Figure 5 speaks of 'herniating' the brain and 'squeezing out' thoughts through an image of a dog dressed up in a *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* costume, wearing a *Leonardo* mask frozen in a grimace. The grotesque body and the oft-parodied act of defecation is now used to express something beyond the pure biological act[26]. The meme works with the principle element of grotesque realism, degradation, which is 'the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract [...] a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth

26 De Zeeuw, "The Profane Media Logic," 93.

and body in their indissoluble unity'.[27] By likening thoughts to excrement, the abstract and idealized undertaking of introspection is brought down to a visceral level. The fact that the meme creator does this by using the medium of the meme, a maligned mode of communication sometimes seen as trivial, mundane, base or unimportant by 'serious thinkers', adds a further layer of grotesqueness. It also reminds us that carnivalesque laughter is serious as much as it is comedic and tragic.[28]

The mask donned by the image of the dog in Figure 6 is yet another reflection of the grotesque folk culture which emerges from the digital carnival. Bakhtin has a reverence for the mask, as to him it symbolizes the 'most complex theme in folk culture'.[29] He notes that 'the mask is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames [...] it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image [...] it reveals the essence of the grotesque'.[30] The *Leonardo* mask is a replica of the face of a giant anthropomorphic turtle, and is worn by another non-human actor, the obscured dog in the meme. Beady, bloodshot eyes are added to the mask in the final collage and the image of the costumed and masked animal is placed against a glitchy, static background. The resulting visual composite is of a grotesque body, and emblematic of grotesque realism in memes.

27 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* 19-20.
28 Kristeva, *Desire in Language,* 80.
29 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 39.
30 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 40.

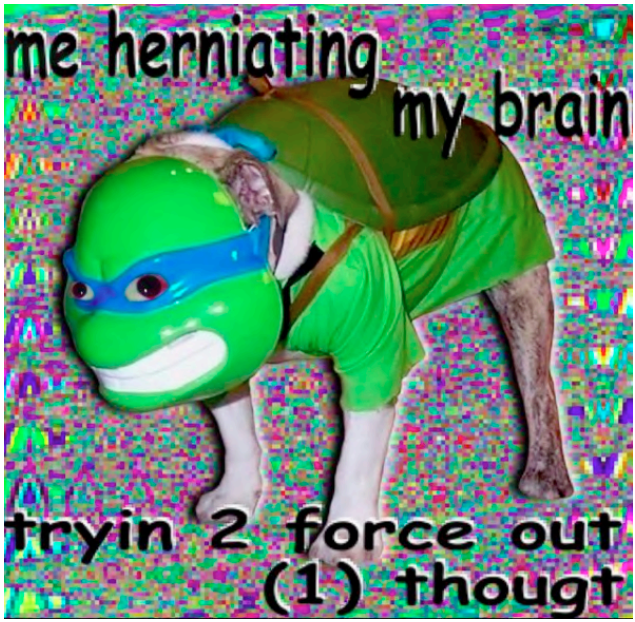

Fig. 6: Meme captioned 'I have brain ibs: either the thoughts won't come out at all or they wanna come out TOO OFTEN but both ways it feels bad' (Instagram: @todaywasmybirthday, 2020c). Reproduced by permission of @todaywasmybirthday.

Conclusion

In contrast to the medieval carnival, digital life is continuous and its existence is uninterrupted by religious calendars and seasons. On the internet, performance and spectacle multiply endlessly, as they are available for consumption, spectatorship and participation around-the-clock. Digital marketplaces are open 24/7, where marketplace vulgarity and its associated mode of language swells and billows, tirelessly feeding into and from digital carnivals. In these corners of the internet, digital carnivals rattle and grow, in forums, online communities, chatrooms, as well as in social media, e-commerce, digital patronage and video-sharing platforms, creating their own grotesque artefacts and affects. The resulting forms, modes, moods and objects of these carnivals, past and present, are linked together by an experience of in-betweenness. Digital life exists between embodiment and virtuality, and the medieval carnival between penance and festivity, and they therefore share an *affective* nucleus of liminality. True to their in-betweenness, both create ambivalent laughter which encompasses the object, subject and spectacle.

Grotesque memes are a part of digital folklore and emerge out of carnivalesque alcoves online where the grotesque meme is an element of a wider communion of ambivalent

laughter.[31] In this communion, the meme as the object is not the only 'joke': instead it implicates subjects such as the creator, the solitary viewer, and the larger audience, as well as the subjects' proximity to and position within digital culture. The way it achieves this is through the *strange image* of the grotesque body and the *strange language* of the digital marketplace. The uncanny grotesque[32] is expressed via the horror and discomfort of the grotesque body, whereas the digital billingsgate textually conveys the comic grotesque.[33] Ultimately, grotesque memes defamiliarize viral meme formats and offer us an opportunity to think about memes beyond virality, image-macros, trends and as digital oddities.

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31 See Gabriele de Seta, "Digital Folklore," in *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Matthew M. Allen (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2019).

32 Freud, *The Uncanny.*

33 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*; Russo, *The Female Grotesque.*

'A VAGUELY EROTIC MIME': MIMETIC TEXT VS. OPTICAL TACTILITY

SABRINA WARD-KIMOLA

TikTok dances assemble various fragments—music, human bodily rhythms, platform infrastructures—towards an imitative end. The imitative body within this assemblage is no novel development; it has moved to the collective rhythms of Saturday night tango and the warehouse rave. Even in a pandemic, Club Quarantine has been a place for bodily togetherness, divided by the margins of a grid.[1] The body desires movement and it desires rhythmic unity. This innate desire to imitate is central to the TikTok body's forward momentum, its platformed desire. A jittering scion of recorded mimetic short videos, the TikTok dance presents bodily unity bounded within platform protocols. Take, for example, the infamous TikTok translation of Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's choreography from their 'Wet Ass Pussy (WAP)' music video: the first line, 'from the top/ make it drop' is accompanied with air splits/low squat, followed by the widely censored 'that's some wet ass pussy' on cue with rhythmic twerking supported by outstretched limbs. Within a month of WAP's release, 200,000 TikTok users had posted a video of themselves performing the same routine.[2]

Despite its antecedents, the TikTok dance's particular assembly of cultural phenomena is both uncanny and novel. While it is simply a dance that can be learned virtually, it is also a massively-propagated and circulated media object: a 'vaguely erotic'[3] form that expands outwards at staggering scale from a central node, or 'original' video posted by TikTok celebrities like @addison.re or @charlidamelio. While they appear to take on processes familiar to memetic logics (i.e. they are widely propagated and shared on and across platforms), TikTok dances maintain their form without transmutation, seemingly impermeable to the trolls, deep friers and various third-party remixers that have historically characterized imageboard meme culture.[4] As a kinetic, mimetic and viral object that resists evolution, the TikTok dance is part participatory internet culture part hypodermic needle: although it *looks* very much like a meme, it doesn't *act* like one. While it circulates at scale, as a distinct video file, it resists reuptake and remixing.

1 "Club Quarantine," Instagram, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/ clubquarantine/?hl=en

2 Zoe Haylock,"Make It Rain If You Wanna See Some 'WAP' Dance Challenges", *Vulture,* 19 August 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/08/wap-cardi-b-tiktok-dance-challenge-explained.html

3 "I do find the TikTok dance interesting because it's not really dance, it's something else. It's like a weird form of vaguely erotic mime. Really TikTok dances and NFTs are the only new artistic mediums of the last decade," Twitter, March 29, 2021, https://twitter.com/deankissick/status/1376692176470614025

4 Whitney Phillips, *This is Why we Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: *MIT Press,* 2015), 172-176.

In light of these tensions, I read TikTok dances through a critical lens of mimesis. I contextualize this within the conditions through which TikTok replicates sameness in a way that extinguishes the possibility for variation embedded in memetics as normally understood.

As distinct from Shifman's definition of memes as 'units that propagate *gradually* through interpersonal contact',[5] the TikTok dance functions less as the networked creativity of memetic publics and more as what Zulli and Zulli call 'imitation publics.'[6] To draw out what in TikTok's mimesis nullifies this memetic logic, I turn to Walter Benjamin's concept of the mimetic faculty, loosely defined as the process through which one reverses perspective through an imitation of the Other. Central to the mimetic faculty is imitation as an undetermined and continual becoming that can only aspire towards, but never fully meet the object of imitation. I conclude with a discussion of the "phenomena of dance as something inherently bound to the social"[7] and reorient the significance of the TikTok dance as a cultural form worthy of further analysis.

In 'Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform', Diana and David James Zulli argue that TikTok's algorithm (the 'For You' page), organization procedures and user-oriented video tools extend the internet meme to the level of platform infrastructure.[8] Using Light et al.'s walkthrough method, the authors point to the way that the sign-up page, logics of categorization (i.e. dance videos organized around a single song), and user norms such as reactive and narrative imitation, coalesce to produce so-called 'imitation publics'.[9] Defined as 'a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the shared ritual of content imitation and replication', imitation publics take form through mimetic processes that TikTok encourages: the habitual imitation of bodies constituted by and through TikTok's protocols.[10] Zulli & Zulli point to TikTok's entire machinery as a mimetic text: the platform governs through a series of technical arrangements that condition habitual regimes of user production. Mimetics thus becomes enshrined in the avenues of possible action by directing the potential unfolding of resulting media objects.[11] This mimetic logic also extends beyond the TikTok platform, as the easily accessible share buttons allow the video to overflow onto other platforms while still

5 Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 363.
6 Diana Zulli and David James Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform," *New Media & Society*, (26 December, 2020): 7.
7 Kasia Wolinksa and Frida Sandström, "The Future Body at Work", *e-flux* 99 (April 2019), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/99/263557/the-future-body-at-work/
8 Zulli and Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme."
9 Zulli and Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme," 2.
10 Zulli and Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme,"13.
11 Ganaele Langlois, *Meaning in the Age of Social Media* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 64.

maintaining its shape. After all, how does one edit a video once it has already been packaged and compressed into a shareable file size on WhatsApp, Instagram, or to the lucky recipient of a text message?[12] The *public* of an imitation public expands into the domain of adjacent platforms through the very infrastructures that both enclose and open the viewing and sharing of content in particular ways. There is no reuptake, no mixing; inscribed with a watermark, the mimetic TikTok is maintained as an impermeable copy both in form and potential bodily uptake. Given the relative novelty of TikTok as an object of scholarly gaze, Diana and David James Zulli's analysis provides a valuable departure point from which to think about the burgeoning role of TikTok in online cultural spaces. Their analysis also presents an opportunity for further teasing of a loose distinction between mimetic and memetic, which elides their mutual constitution. Simply put, mimesis is the mediated imitation of phenomena (or the Other); it is an interpretation of nature through the tools that enable the production of art and culture. Because the imitation of forms beyond our grasp can never be fully achieved, to render it is to create something new. Consequently, there is the evolution of forms that constitute the flows of cultural unfolding – for our purposes here, this is the meme.

As the clock struck 2013, Limor Shifman emerged from the ninth circle with foreknowledge of memetics to come: firstly, it is a unit of cultural information that eventually scales into a macro-level social phenomenon; secondly, it is a unit of cultural information that is repackaged through mimicry and remix; finally, it is a unit of cultural information that competes for attention.[13] Together, Shifman attributes these coalescing processes to memetic motion. TikTok enables the seamless circulation of content at scale through a logic of organization that manifests as the grouping of content based on the sound or song included in the video. Zulli & Zulli also point to how the logic of competition is embedded within these sound/song tags, with the most popular videos sorted at the top of the page.[14] It is this exact infrastructural influence Zulli and Zulli identify that makes TikTok videos something alike but not identical to the meme: TikTok deviates from Shifman's second criteria through these pre-articulated channels of remixing. A privilege revoked from a potential memetic public, the act of remixing has already been determined by the platform. This predetermination is reinforced both by the conditions within which one can create content (a fixed suite of video editing tools), and habitual regimes of TikTok's userbase who yearn for visibility (often manifesting in the aesthetic *du jour*), in addition to the spectral algorithm of the 'For You' page. It is because of these predetermined streams of mimetic output that Zulli & Zulli describe TikTok as a mimetic text, in and of itself.

12 My younger sister laments the inability to render GIFs out of TikTok videos.
13 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World," 365.
14 Zulli and Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme," 9.

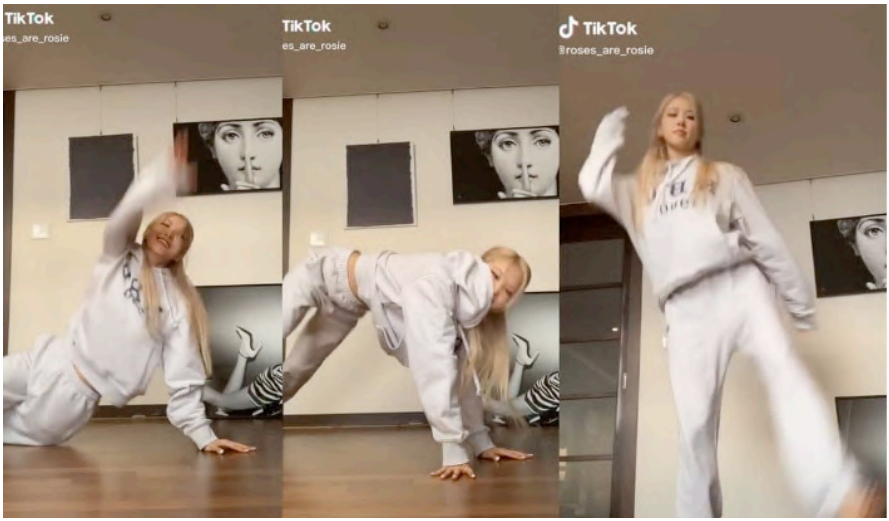

Fig. 1: Stills of pop musician Rosé performing the infamous WAP choreography. KpopPostEditor, Cardi B Reacts to BLACKPINK Rosé WAP Dance Challenge on TikTok, 2021, video stills, KpopPost, https://www.kpoppost.com/blackpink-rose-wap-dance-challenge-tiktok-cardi-b/.

To conceive of TikTok as a mimetic text complicates the role that mimesis has traditionally played in the continual unfolding of memetics. Originating from a central source or node that has maintained virality because of its position in the sound/song tag (i.e. the most popular WAP TikTok dance), the cascade of subsequent TikTok dances resemble cultural processes somewhere between mass communication, characterized by a single broadcast, and participatory internet culture as a model of culture that 'sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined'.[15] Units of popular culture (i.e. Addison Rae's WAP dance) are widely imitated, but not for long; TikTok's infrastructural conditioning of mimetic possibilities restricts the imitation public from going beyond a threshold of similarity. While imitation publics are built upon the production of new content, there are no new forms: they are but an echo originating from a central source, or ideal image. The TikTok dance shines bright and fades quickly. WAP is already ancient history.

As the mimetic text of TikTok makes clear, mimetics are at once a process and a representation. TikTok mimesis exploits an assemblage of working pieces (algorithm, organization, user norms) to produce an aesthetic output that echoes a central ideal image as given *by* TikTok's algorithmic production of culture – the top three WAP

15 Henry Jenkins, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 2.

videos on the sound/song page. The novelty of TikTok lies in the automation of the mimetic process formerly taken up (to varying extents) by online users.

To reveal this processual distinction, I turn to Walter Benjamin's mimetic faculty. It can be described as: miming, or the mirroring of representation through a likeness; imitation; the inspiration to proceed in like-kind; and replication, to produce a material copy.[11] Benjamin's interest in the mimetic faculty centered around the desire and capacity for humans to 'become and behave like something else'[16]. Benjamin scholar Michael Taussig expands on this definition and presents mimesis as 'the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other'[17]. This capacity is contingent upon sensuous probing, as a copying or imitating something requires a 'palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived'.[18] Benjamin even goes so far as to describe the mimetic faculty as 'the gift of seeing resemblances'.[19] The key point here is that the desire to imitate and the 'gift' of the capacity to sense resemblances produce an enactment of similarity, or mimesis. Because the human cannot *be* something else, they can only articulate similarity through the tools at their disposal (i.e. the paintbrush, the alphabet, a flute, vocal chords, the body). Through these mediated enactments, the subject aspires to *become* something else.

In *Doctrine of the Similar,* Benjamin writes that 'neither the mimetic forces nor their objects, i.e., the objects of imitation, have remained the same, unchanged over the course of time'.[20] This underscores phylogenesis as central to memetic behavior. Revealing itself over time, phylogenesis is the iterative mutation of form as a chain of memetic agents render their interpretation of an object. Due to factors that are dependent on context – relations between the object and imitating subject, the tools, the specific quality of the interpretation, to name a few – there will always be a gradual change of form. As is made evident in the evolution of the internet meme, the memetic process at scale dislocates the 'original' form (which in our case refers to the first instance of its emergence as a social phenomenon), effectively priming it towards a multiplicity of possible articulations. While the various processes involved in the coagulation of a given form at a moment in time are not visible, they are central features in the potential of that form. For this reason, the curation of our tools of mimetic enactment towards a particular output (exact bodily movements) within a demarcated space (the bounded TikTok video often unwieldly to share) ruptures

16 Walter Benjamin, *On The Mimetic Faculty,* trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1978), 333.
17 Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xiii.
18 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 21.
19 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 33.
20 Walter Benjamin and Knut Tarnowski, "Doctrine of the Similar (1933)," *New German Critique*, no. 17 (1979): 65.

Benjamin's mimetic process that would yield an infinite multiplicity of potentials. TikTok's communicative conditions, or mimetic text, pre-empts form, retaining the TikTok dance as a bounded entity.

Although Benjamin points to the potential for objects (namely modern optical media) to support the mimetic faculty, Taussig extrapolates from Benjamin's *One Way Street* to suggest the discussion of mimesis begin at the (gestating) body. Describing the 'womb as mimetic organ par excellence'[21] Taussig points to the relationship of a child to their parent as first one of 'reproduction as replication' and further, one of *optical tactility*, with the child yearning to 'hold the object [that is its parent or other desired form] at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction'[22]. From this early age, the gazing, porous ego desires to become that which with they are in relation, a process through which the young child begins subjectivation – the realization of themselves as a subject distinct from the Other. From this moment arises Taussig's concept of optical tactility, defined as the relationship between vision and imitation of the Other. This concept enables a processual way to think through memetics in the online space, where visuality is a central sensorial contact. Drawing from William James' description of the self, Lisa Blackman refers to the 'capacity of bodies to acquire more and more connections to artefacts, techniques and practices'[23] through any means of sensorial contact. As a process that connects the body to a continual flow of 'outer' possibilities, optical tactility opens up a method of thinking the body as a process in relation to objects of imitation and media technologies, as opposed to the body as a bounded, sovereign entity.[24] Blackman draws a distinction between bodies in composition, or bodies as always in the making, and the molar body which has been pre-formatted to a teleological end.[25] The body as inscribed within TikTok's mimetic text pre-figures the body's articulation towards a definable end, foreclosing any potentiality as informed by an assemblage of interacting agents (objects, practices, techniques, artefacts, and so on). The mimetic process as it unfolds on TikTok is best characterized as fabricating a placeholder for an 'any [body] whatsoever'[26] that precludes meaningful[27] contact and articulation.

21 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity,* 36.
22 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken, 1969), 5.
23 Lisa Blackman, *The Body: The Key Concepts* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2008), 106.
24 Blackman, *The Body*, 106.
25 Blackman, *The Body*, 107.
26 Gilles Deleuze*, Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 120.
27 Ganaele Langlois offers a useful way to think through the often-murky concept of meaning: 'Meanings are what make us fit in, what make us develop certain characteristics and responsibilities and adopt culturally appropriate ways of life. Reversely, of course, finding meaning is also what enables us to formulate alternatives, to redefine the contours of our world and to break down the grid of power. The practice of making meanings is thus complex; it is both individual and collective, in turn a process of empowerment and emancipation and a tool of subjugation', in Langlois, *Meaning in The Age of Social Media,* 3.

We might be best to conclude by situating the TikTok body within the compositional futures articulated by choreographer-writer duo, Kasia Wolinkska and Frida Sandström. Their collaborative project, entitled The Future Body At Work, points to the ways:

> The institutionalization of dance has developed hand in hand with ruling structures. Similar to what is inscribed onto the body at work or in war, through city architecture, and the organization of the nation-state, dance enables control and submission. Yet the very same methods used to control the body can be used for the opposite… Through an ongoing practice of scored and informed dance gatherings, we want to bring attention to how space is distributed and how we constitute it with others. In between words and movements, our social conditioning is put to work. We bring attention to how space is transformed through individual decisions and how listening can precede acting, how contraction gives space for release.[28]

Wolinkska and Sandström see the moving body as a site of potential that can be controlled and exploited as a means to a definitive end. Often in the interests of representation, the 'reigning body absorbs the body of the ruled'[29] a bodily relationship famously represented on the front cover of Thomas Hobbe's 1651 text, *The Leviathan.* Rather than a site of relation, enactment and continual becoming, the ruling power facilitates placeholders for the infinitely replaceable, symbolic body. At the same time, the authors posit the body as a terrain of *process* that can possibly be resuscitated as a space where 'feeling bodies burst beyond their representations' [30]. Lisa Blackman suggests that the processual, dancing body not as 'isolated, singular, or molar [but] requires a conjoining with others, human and non-human.'[31] While the body in relation to the online space is not completely foreclosed, the architecture of TikTok's mimetic text attempts to automate the memetic process, historically central to a relational becoming through the Other. Yet this very automation undermines the destabilization of the self-image in this process, reducing it to a tightly controlled development of mere representation. Through the lens of Benjamin's mimetic optical tactility, we see a margin of slippage between representational and processual memetics that imparts immeasurable effects to the potentialities of future forms. To speak of an imitation public through the optical lens is to speak of the virtualized body as a means to a massively-scalable end in the interests of more and more content.

28 Wolinksa and Sandström, "The Future Body at Work".
29 Wolinksa and Sandström, "The Future Body at Work".
30 Wolinksa and Sandström, "The Future Body at Work".
31 Blackman, *The Body*, 108.

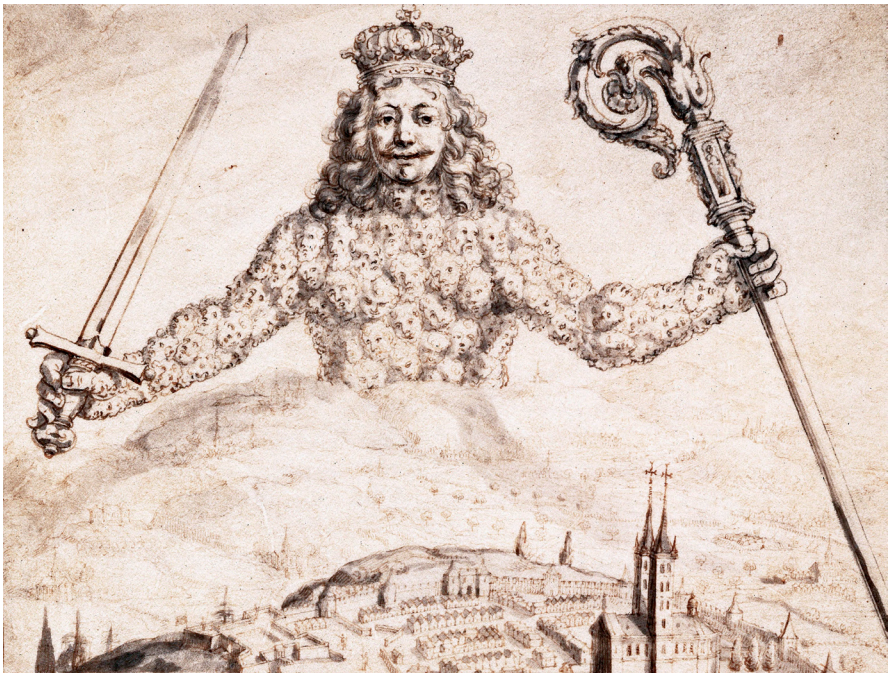

Fig. 2: The front cover of Thomas Hobbes's The Leviathan. Wenceslas Hollar or Abraham Bosse, Drawing of frontispiece of Leviathan, 1910, ink drawing on manuscript, 784 x 600 pixels, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Drawing_of_frontispiece_of_Leviathan.jpg

While I am skeptical of the 'revolutionary' potential of a hypothetically *becoming* body identified by Wolinkska and Sandström, it may be true that cultural innovation, i.e. the embrace of difference, enables an exit from the neoliberal grasp on the tools of our art and culture.[32] To offer a lukewarm conclusion, I now bring your attention to a recent tweet by Spike Magazine's Deak Kissick, similarly reflecting upon our apparent state of cultural paralysis:

> We're trapped in the world Frederic Jameson foretold, 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum.' But I know there are ways out.[33]

32 Wolinksa and Sandström, "The Future Body at Work."

33 1, "We're trapped in the world Frederic Jameson foretold, 'a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left to imitate is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum', But I know there are ways out," Twitter, April 7, 2021. https://twitter.com/deankissick/status/1379823627948933122.

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PRAISE GOPOD: WEIRD TALES AND MEMETIC LORE ON THE WELL

JACOB SUJIN KUPPERMANN

Memetic Prehistory

What is an old meme? It depends on who you ask. On Twitter, accounts like @OldMemeArchive mostly post memes of a distinctly 2007-2012 provenance—references to MySpace and President Obama abound, and the most common forms shown are rage comics and demotivational posters. Similarly, a popular Twitter thread from March of last year from user @jil_slander[1] asked 'What's a rly old meme that made u laugh so fucking hard when you first saw it'—a question that returned responses of similar vintage.[2] Yet these memes, no matter how ancient they may appear to twitter users, are certainly not the *oldest* memes.

Traditional histories of the internet meme typically trace the origins of the term back to Mike Godwin in 1994, whose *Wired* article 'Meme, Counter-meme' brought both Godwin's eponymous Law and the very concept of a meme to the broader attention of the internet public.[3] But Godwin's article refers to his own prior exploits in memetics—he uses the term but he does not coin it. Godwin may have brought the term to a wider audience, as *Wired* served as a sort of transitional medium from self-proclaimed netizens to slightly-less online audiences in the early 90s in the US. But before the term "meme" was widely used in an online context, there were memes.

Most histories of memes neglect to discuss the period before the 1990s or do so with hardly any detail at all. In Patrick Davison's 2012 primer on the linguistic qualities of internet memes, he briefly discusses the development of emoticons within Usenet discussions in the early 1980s as a proto-internet meme, but quickly moves on from the emoticon to discuss more contemporary memes and image macros.[4] Similarly, semiotic analyses of internet culture in more recent years have either mentioned memes in the 1980s only in passing before moving on to more recent material, as in Cannizzaro's work on memes as 'internet signs', or have simply bypassed the area entirely, as in Marino's work on the

1 https://twitter.com/jil_slander/status/1242567579249623045?s=20
2 Sophie (@jil_slander), "What's a Rly Old Meme That Made u Laugh so Fucking Hard When You First Saw It. I Remember Being 16 and like Crying at This," Twitter, March 24, 2020, https://twitter.com/jil_slander/status/1242567579249623045.
3 Mike Godwin, "Meme, Counter-Meme." *Wired*, October 1, 1994, https://www.wired.com/1994/10/godwin-if-2/.
4 Patrick Davison, "The Language of Internet Memes," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York University Press, 2012), 120–36.

"spreadability" of memes, which includes a list of 'classic' internet memes that begins with 1996's "Dancing Baby" and ends with 2004's "Leeroy Jenkins."[5]

The exclusion of 1980s internet/proto-internet memes from contemporary chronologies of meme history is likely explainable by the lack of accessible high-quality sources from that period. While Google provides access to the bulk of Usenet groups from the 1980s via Google Groups, browsing these discussions from the early 1980s can be difficult due to both interface issues and the posting of spam messages to old groups in recent years. Early internet/usenet content is also too overwhelming of an archival mass to sift through to find the first instances of internet meme content.

Much as the history/pre-history distinction refers to our access to written-down historical documents from a period, we can create a similar category of *internet* prehistory: a period when people on the internet were participating in discourses that are not currently accessible to us. Much as the prehistory/history distinction is drawn at different points of time for different areas, the internet entered its historical age not all at once but in fits and starts, as different communities became legible to our current archival practices.

The ancient memes of the 1980s and early 1990s can seem far away—almost alien—to the modern reader. The communities in which they were formed are no longer at the center of online life. The general inaccessibility of historical internet communities shrouds their cultural practices in a certain obscuring mystique. By looking closely at a meme from this period of the early internet in a still extant online community from the 1980s, we can demystify early internet memetics and identify key points of connection between memes present and past.

Thank *Gopod* for the WELL

Fortunately for archival researchers, not all early internet users swam in the vast ocean that was Usenet. Some preferred smaller shores—walled gardens and private networks with less overwhelming amounts of content to examine. One such example is the WELL, a private message board that—due to its popularity among *Wired* writers, Grateful Dead fans, and other members of the Silicon Valley tech world and the broader Bay Area counterculture—became the archetypal 'virtual community' in early tech evangelist literature.[6] Unlike many other early online communities, the WELL survives today. For a monthly fee

5 Sara Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as Internet Signs: a Semiotic View of Digital Culture," Σημειωτκή-*Sign Systems Studies* 44, no. 4 (2016): 562-586.; Gabriele Marino, "Semiotics of Spreadability: a Systematic Approach to Internet Memes and Virality," *Punctum* 1, no. 1 (2015): 43-66.

6 The term 'virtual community' comes from Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Rheingold was heavily involved with the WELL, serving as conference host and board member in the 1990s, and his view of virtual communities heavily relies on the WELL as a reference point.

anyone can join and gain access to the still-active discussion boards as well as access the remarkably well-preserved archival posts dating back to the site's inception in 1985.

Our ability to access posts from the late 1980s on the WELL allows us to get a finer-grained look at how memes spread in the earliest days of the internet. I focus on what appears to be the most pervasive textual meme found on the WELL: 'Gopod.' Originating from a typographical error made by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll, 'Gopod' became a sort of ironic folk deity for WELL users in the late 1980s and early 1990s, replacing the word 'god' in the forum's vernacular.

'Gopod' is one of the earliest internet memes that we can still find records of, and perhaps the first to be used in similar ways to contemporary verbal memes (for one, its memetic uses resemble those of, say, President Donald Trump's tweeting the nonsense word 'Covfefe' in April 2017). It also may be the first case of an internet meme breaking out of online discourse and into conventional media, as news articles in publications like the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times* discussed 'Gopod' and other similar 'new words' found on the WELL as the most distinctive parts of the WELL's rapidly developing online culture.[7]

The WELL was frequently used as the example *par excellence* of online communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Just as an understanding of the memes of the 2010s would be incomplete without an underlying understanding of the cultural norms of Black Twitter or Dank Memes Reddit, or the memes of the 2000s without an understanding of notable forums and image boards like 4chan's /b/ or SomethingAwful, an understanding of early internet memes is not complete with an understanding of the WELL—and more specifically, the WELL's 'Weird' conference.

Tales from the WELL

The WELL stands apart from the other online communities extant in the 1980s for a variety of reasons—its cultural cachet and longevity, certainly, but also the circumstances in which it was founded and its mechanisms of internal governance that allowed it to develop a strong culture. The board was founded in 1985 by a group that included many involved with the *Whole Earth Catalog*, the influential counterculture/communalist publication founded in the late 1960s by Stewart Brand. This common ground differentiated the WELL from other nascent internet communities, which were generally communities of convenience where the users were connected solely due to their access to early online services like Usenet, or service providers like Compuserve.

The ideology informing the WELL's community structures is best shown in a set of founding

7 Jon Carroll, "Cyberchutney & Tipz From Jrcwell.Sf.ca.Us: [FINAL Edition]," *San Francisco Chronicle (Pre-1997 Fulltext),* September 29, 1993, sec. DAILY DATEBOOK.

principles that then-editor of *Wired* Kevin Kelly would recount to Howard Rheingold as part of Rheingold's ***The Virtual Community***, an anthropological survey of the early 1990s online cosmos that focused heavily on the WELL. In between notes on the WELL's business model (it was to be as close as it could be to free while still being profitable), Kelly, who was a part of the WELL's scene by virtue of his editorship of the *Whole Earth Review*, noted that the key to the WELL's community was its 'self-designing' nature. In Kelly's words, 'The early users were to design the system for later users. The usage of the system would co-evolve with the system as it was built.'[8]

This principle served the WELL well over its first few years, where, under the salutary neglect of the Whole Earth enterprise, a vibrant community of a few thousand users would grow. The WELL's business records from the period, which are stored in Stanford University's Special Collections, rarely discuss the actual goings on within the WELL's conferences (think subreddits, or boards within a forum). Instead, they contend mostly with bringing people into the WELL—advertisements, free accounts for tech journalists, press releases. Once they got users to sign on, the WELL's employees were content to allow the volunteer "hosts" and pre-existing users of conferences to set the culture of the community.

So what did the WELL's culture look like? In many ways, it was not radically different from the culture of later forums, or even contemporary discussion boards like subreddits. Like many of these environments, discussion on the WELL was dominated by power users who made the majority of comments, with a larger body of lurkers who rarely commented and mostly just observed. One analysis of posting stats from early 1994 showed that half of the over 150,000 posts made over a two-month period on the WELL came from just 99 users, while over half of the WELL's users made no posts at all in that same span.[9]

The WELL's user base was interested in a variety of topics. Some of the most popular conferences included hippie mainstays like the environment, outdoor recreation, and most of all the Grateful Dead.[10] Yet another section of the network was made up of tech enthusiasts, with conferences on cutting edge topics like Hypercard (a popular software development kit published by Apple), hacking, and virtual reality that also drew hundreds of unique visitors a month. Most of all, though, the WELL was interested in the WELL itself.

WELL user Maria Syndicus (username Nana) put it best in an interview with journalist

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8 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, *2nd ed*. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000).

9 Earl Crabb, "WELL Posting Stats March 10, 1993 thru May 9, 1993," The WELL, digest.30.11., March 13, 1994.

10 The relationship between deadheads and the WELL is long and well documented—for an overview, see Jesse Jarnow, "Call Them Hippies, But the Grateful Dead Were Tech Pioneers," *Wired,* accessed May 1, 2021, https://www.wired.com/2015/07/grateful-dead-fare-thee-well-tech-pioneers/.

Katie Hafner, who wrote the only single-topic history of the WELL: 'if something didn't happen on The Well, it didn't happen.'[11] In a directory of the WELL circa 1992 republished in Rheingold's *The Virtual Community*, 11 separate conferences relating to the WELL itself are listed out of a total of 120 public conferences.[12]

In those conferences, the users of the WELL debated the state of their virtual community. In the Policy conference, WELL gadfly Blair Newman deftly assessed the issue of lurkers vs power users, saying that 'Well words should sink or swim on their own merits, but (face it, folks) they are weighted if they are from sbb, fig, mkapor, jrc, james, metaview (anti-gravity weighted); and such weightings may aggravate the lurker/poster ratio problem.'[13]

The metaWELL, as it was so called, occupied itself with two pastimes: debating the present/future of the WELL, and chronicling its past for the sake of those who weren't there. Unlike more modern online communities, where new users are often told to simply 'lurk moar' in order to gain cultural competency, the WELL's old guard reveled in the recounting of lore to new members of the community. The WELL's self-referential quality made it an early online example of what sociologist Christopher Kelty refers to as a 'recursive public'. That is, 'a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives.'[14]

The WELL's community, in a very real sense, was based on keeping the WELL itself together. This preoccupation made the WELL fertile ground for the spread of memes within the platform as its users were always looking back into themselves, cracking jokes and iterating on the previous day's conversation. The conference that perhaps best encapsulated this ethos—even moreso than the metaWELL boards—was the Weird conference. Described by Hafner as 'the Well's id' and a 'free-fire zone,' the Weird conference was home to what we can now recognize as a nascent form of shitposting.[15] The conversations verged on the absurd, with the only connecting thread being the shared folklore of cultural references and prior jokes that ultimately led back to the WELL itself.

In other words, the Weird conference provided the necessary and sufficient conditions

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11 Katie Hafner, *The Well: A Story of Love, Death, and Real Life in the Seminal Online Community* (Carroll & Graf, 2001).

12 Rheingold, *The Virtual Community,* 32.

13 Blair Newman, "Kill the Anonymous Conference, Please," The WELL, policy.25.13., March 20, 1990.

14 Christopher M. Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.

15 Hafner, *The Well,* 74-75.

for the development of some of the earliest recorded internet memes. It's no coincidence that Mike Godwin cited the WELL twice in 'Meme, Counter-Meme': you can still find his posts from around that period on the WELL (username Mnemonic), although his user page expressly prohibits us, or anyone else, from reprinting them.

Gopod in and out of the Machine

Of all the WELL's memes, "Gopod" is perhaps the best known. In its metastasized form, used thousands of times over on the WELL, it refers to 'The Supreme Being of the WELL', a deity to invoke in times of need or exasperation, but its roots are somewhat more humble. Somewhere in the Weird conference in March 1988, *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Jon Carroll attempted to write 'Thank God.' He, of his own admission, failed, and Gopod experienced its immaculate conception. From there, the cult of Gopod expanded outward, first to the Mind conference and then to the community as a whole. This timeline may not be exactly accurate—there's one recorded post from a non-Carroll source dated to January 1988 that contains the word that's still viewable on the web—but the general arc of the story remains the same. By early 1989, knowledge of Gopod was a *fait accompli*: 'New users just came to understand that the Well has a higher power and it is called Gopod.'[16]

Our knowledge of Gopod on the WELL comes from two slightly different sources. The first is the thousands of viewable posts using the term made from 1988 to the present day found on the WELL. These give a broad view of the casual use of Gopod, in topics discussing everything from AOL to Star Wars to Ross Perot's presidential ambitions to tips for amateur boaters. They also give a view into the mutations Gopod went through in Weird, which served as a sort of cultural bleeding edge for the rest of the WELL. There, Gopod is not just a banal invocation of the divine but something more radical. One particularly infamous topic is dubbed 'the Nine Billionth Name of Gopod.' The poster warns that 'when we reach 10,000 responses, the world will end.' Fortunately for all of us, the topic petered out after a mere 2012 posts, ranging from early 1989 to summer 2000.

But these raw posts do not give us a good window into how Gopod was perceived as a phenomenon on the WELL. For this, we instead need posts *about* Gopod. Here, the metaWELL becomes vitally useful. Take the story of Gopod's origins—it comes to us direct from the WELL's archives, from 'a small attempt at the beginnings of an oral history of the Well' made by Carroll himself.[17] What is perhaps more interesting than any particular detail of Carroll's telling is *when* it was made—the original post of that topic was made on May 15, 1989, scarcely a year after Carroll's first post involving Gopod. After just a year, the term had already worked its way into the vernacular of

16 Jon Carroll, "The Birth of Gopod," The WELL, Archives.93.1., May 15, 1989.
17 Carroll, "The Birth of Gopod."

the WELL to such an extent that an explanation of its origin was warranted.

Gopod became a certain token of WELL-ness, a symbol of the witty, irreverent style of the site. In a *New York Times* article on a largely unsuccessful east coast clone of the WELL called the Echo, one user of the WELL is quoted as saying that 'no one ever refers to God anymore' on the WELL—just Gopod.[18] Similarly, Carroll used his own typo in a *Chronicle* column in 1993, citing 'Gopod' and 'Bog fu' (that is, big fun) as examples of how 'spelling and language conventions change rapidly' on the information superhighway.[19] You can find instances of Gopod being referenced here and there on the wider web—on a Slashdot comment on the news of the WELL's later sale to Salon in 1999[20], a Klezmer news blog in 2006,[21] a tweet from 2018 reminiscing on the WELL.[22]

In this way, Gopod's spread outside of the WELL itself presaged two features of contemporary meme use. The first is the inevitable spread of memes out of the contexts in which they were created—just as Gopod migrated from Weird to Mind to the more couth areas of the WELL to the *New York Times* itself, so do memes now move from 4chan to Twitter to Reddit to Instagram to Facebook—or in endless combinations of those online spaces. The other is the use of memes as symbols of identity. Just as a Redditor in 2010 could identify themselves by saying 'the narwhal bacons at midnight,'[23] or Tumblr users of a similar era could use the phrase 'I like your shoelaces' and the response 'Thanks, I stole them from the president'[24] to winkingly self-associate, a WELL user in some other corner of the world could simply thank Gopod and see who would say amen.

Memes of Future Past

From a historiographical and methodological standpoint, the existence of the WELL's archives and other internet sources from the 1980s and 1990s provides an underexplored angle in meme studies. The historical coverage of these sources is incomplete,

18 Trish Hall. "LIFE STYLE; Coming to the East Coast: An Electronic Salon," *The New York Times*, January 28, 1990, sec. Style. https://www.nytimes.com/1990/01/28/style/life-style-coming-to-the-east-coast-an-electronic-salon.html.

19 Carroll, "Cyberchutney & Tipz."

20 "Salon Buys the Well," Slashdot, April 7 1999, https://news.slashdot.org/comments.pl?sid=16809

21 Ari Davidow, "Thank Gopod* for the Board of Guardians of British Jews," the KlezmerShack, October 23, 2006, https://www.klezmershack.com/archives/004331.html.

22 1, "Getting ready for class and found myself on the Wikipedia page for the WeLL. I miss that community," Twitter, September 5, 2018, https://twitter.com/mediajunkie/status/1037337603287080961?s=20.

23 "The Narwhal Bacons at Midnight," KnowYourMeme, last modified February 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-narwhal-bacons-at-midnight

24 Sam Blueberry the Weirdo, "I Like Your Shoelaces," Urban Dictionary, February 18, 2021, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=I%20like%20your%20shoelaces.

especially relative to more contemporary records: the WELL's pre-1986 archives are largely missing due to a combination of privacy and storage space concerns from the community's early days. But even the fragmented records of the early internet provide insights into the period's norms of communication, and therefore should be sought out and used by researchers interested in internet memes just as much as more modern sources.

On a broader level, the tale of Gopod is helpful in showing that the earlier eras of the internet are not so alien from our own norms. The WELL had tens of thousands of users at its peak; Reddit, Twitter, and Instagram have hundreds of millions. And yet, despite the massive differences in scale, the posting habits of users on the WELL do not seem so strange.

It's a difference in volume but not in form: people joke and debate, and debate their jokes, and joke about their debates, and joke on their jokes in an endless procession of conversation. And in 1989 and 2021, and perhaps onward into the future, memes like Gopod embed themselves deeply within these discourses, leaving an undeniable mark on the shape of the communities in which they reside.

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AUDIO MEMES, EARWORMS, AND TEMPLATABILITY: THE 'AURAL TURN' OF MEMES ON TIKTOK

CRYSTAL ABIDIN AND DR. BONDY VALDOVINOS KAYE

'Audio memes' popularized by TikTok have become the next frontier of meme cultures on the internet, presenting an 'aural turn' in meme ecologies. On TikTok, 'audio memes' and the texture of sound take on an intimate disposition, requiring care, tact, and wit to situate and decipher: TikTokers often rely on the lyrics of specific songs to tell a story (e.g. when the lyrics are central to lip syncing, when the punchline of a video is a specific lyrical line in the song); consider the musical and rhythmic shape of a tune to advance the storyline of their video (e.g. when a beat 'drops', when a song transitions to 'bad recorder playing'); complement or juxtapose audio memes against video content and textual captions (e.g. song to provide ambience for the storytelling, song to change the tonality of storytelling to sarcasm or parody); or organize and streamline content into specific silos.[1]

In addition to reusing and remixing audio clips and music, TikTokers also engage with other original audio templates through duets and replies. In some instances, TikTokers have dedicated accounts to generate original audio clips with the intention of having others use them in their videos.[2] In other instances, TikTokers have circumvented being 'catalogued' or 'streamed' into the silos of 'audio meme' templates by strategizing around refusal, manipulation, soundjacking, and other practices. This has included competitive 'chart jacking' to register higher up in an 'audio meme' stream, conflict around impropriety and ownership of original audio memes, and specific platform norms around the attention economies of sound on TikTok.

Beyond its instantiations on its home platform, TikTok parlance has become integrated into everyday practices and become pervasive in social media pop cultures Let us consider two case studies of 'audio memes': Absofacto's 'Dissolve' and Rocky Paterra's 'I'm An Accountant', to understand the role of memes in engaging in tone policing and performing with mediated identities.

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

2 D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, Aleesha Rodriguez, Katrin Langton, and Patrik Wikström, "You Made This? I Made This: Practices of Authorship and Attribution on TikTok," *International Journal of Communication* In press (2020).

Evaluating Earworms

Ever since we started researching TikTok and writing papers and books on the topic, a new routine that has emerged includes 'TikTok Old' friends coming up to us and going: 'Hey! What is that TikTok song that goes *~~incoherent humming and tapping~~*? Please, I need to know the title or artist'. 50% of the time, we have literally just watched and studied 50 of those TikToks 'For Science' and can placate our friends' raging earworms. The other 50% of the time, we stare blankly at our friends and channel the ¯_(ツ)_/ vibe with our eyes.

Sound is unique as a memetic medium. Unlike other forms of media, sounds have ways of getting lodged in our brains as earworms, often holding us captive and looping on repeat as we go about our day. And then we unwittingly hum and tap tunes on a bus ride, in a lecture theatre, while doing the dishes, perhaps much to the disdain of the people around us! Sounds both fascinate and terrorize us as TikTok researchers with past lives as musicians—Crystal an orchestral percussionist, and Bondy a jazz drummer. On the one hand, we are constantly amazed by the talent and creativity of TikTokers who deploy sounds in the most creative of ways to convey a variety of messages and intentions. On the other hand, our friends have now assigned us as the default Human Jukeboxes™ of the group, all thanks to TikTok.

TikTok is a unique platform to explore how sounds turn into ear worms, and then into memes. The platform allows users to repurpose existing audio in new videos with a few taps of the finger[3], and users can even search through archives of videos to see how others have creatively or subversively used and reappropriated specific audio clips. A sneak peek into the DM (direct message) history between the authors would reveal countless videos containing catchy songs, clips from popular media, and other forms of audio clips that have turned into memes on TikTok. Several of these were accompanied by off-the-cuff commentary that indicated serendipitous coincidences thanks to TikTok's algorithmic recommendations on our FYP or 'For You Page' (*'Homgh! I just saw this one too!'*), cross-platform flows which signposted that a TikTok meme was entering a bigger stage of virality (*'This one is also on reddit now!'*), and our ~feelings~ towards such audio memes as trained musicians and TikTok enthusiasts (*'This gave me a stroke…'; 'Idk why my ears are tinkling?'; 'I love TikTok 4eva <3'*). We became interested in understanding why audio was such a major element in these viral videos and how TikTok prioritizes audio over video.

Templatability on TikTok

'Templatability' is a concept coined by visual social media studies scholars Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin[4] to describe how a combination of vernacular norms by elite users on a platform

3 Kaye et al., "You Made This? I Made This."

4 Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

(like Influencers) and algorithmic recommendation systems that value and promote these norms (by amplifying the content to appear in others' feeds) result in a wealth of content that ends up being aesthetically similar.[5] Interactions between users and platforms lead to specific aesthetic choices, ways of crafting content, and strategies of attention grabbing on social that then become 'templates'. In other words, both automated systems that recommend popular content to users, as well as users who then internalize recommendation logics and try to 'please the algorithm' by posting certain types of content lead to such templates. It is a complex dance to navigate for users to remain visible on the platform to fellow users via 'the human eye', and to the algorithm via 'the machine eye'. Monetization models also influence templates by pushing sponsored content to generate advertising revenues for platforms, or by users with promotional partnerships incorporating popular templates to make more money for themselves. Templates allow users a degree of agency to choose which kinds of scripts they wish to draw from or incorporate into their own content, while simultaneously limiting originality.

'Circumscribed creativity'—coined by digital media studies scholars Kaye, Chen, and Zeng[6]—builds on the concept of templatability by adding a 'call to action' from other users, or a 'nudge' to create from the platform itself. TikTokers can directly circumscribe creativity by asking viewers to create content based on a template they are trying to promote, such as by inviting others to participate in dance challenges. The TikTok platform also indirectly circumscribes creativity by suggesting ways to interact with existing content through a variety of 'platform features'[7]—these are the interfaces and protocols that facilitate interactions between people and platforms. There are several features on TikTok that circumscribe creativity passively, such as through the main viewing interface, the For You Page (FYP) and its underlying recommender algorithm. Actively, there are features like 'duet' which allows users to create a new video side-by-side the one they were just watching, 'stitch' which allows users to clip a portion of a previous video and add new content, and 'use this sound', which allows users to import the audio from a video into a new video.[8] These features may implicitly guide TikTokers towards certain kinds of creativity but can also work in concert with explicit calls to action from other TikTokers who invite audiences to 'duet this video' or 'use this sound'.

Memes on TikTok capitalize on elements of templatability and circumscribed creativity to guide TikTokers as they navigate trends and attempt to boost their visibility. Templates come in all shapes and sizes, and while they do not necessarily represent cultural norms

5 Leaver et al., *Instagram.*

6 D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, Xu Chen, and Jing Zeng, "The Co-Evolution of Two Chinese Mobile Short Video Apps: Parallel Platformization of Douyin and TikTok," *Mobile Media & Communication* Online first, (2020): 1-25.

7 Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

8 Kaye et al., "You Made This? I Made This."

or hegemony, they are both easily memorable and highly replicable.[9] Popular video memes templates share common characteristics such as being humorous, simple, replicable, whimsical, and feature voices of ordinary users.[10] Circumscribed creativity takes meme templates a step further by directly or indirectly pushing TikTokers to create memes based on popular templates. This can be useful for TikTokers struggling to find new original ideas for a short video, or for TikTokers who would not normally post content but are encouraged to do so by platform features and or popular templates.[11] What makes TikTok's templatability and circumscribed creativity all the more curious is its adoption of sound or audio as the 'driving template' and 'organizing principle'[12] through which user actions are massaged and memes are born. As such, we consider the possibility of the 'aural turn' in meme ecologies in the next section.

The 'Aural Turn' in Memes

Traditionally, scholars who have studied memes have seemed to generalize them as a visual format, usually delivered as a video, an image macro, an image, a pictogram, or text-based template exchange. The ways we locate memes have also been primarily visual: collated under a dedicated hashtag, congregated in a specific social media group/page or messaging group, or spreading on the temporally-contingent 'trending' lists of various platforms.

But in the spectacular space of TikTok, memes have taken an 'aural turn'. For one, memes are primarily sorted and organized into 'repositories' of audio clips available in the 'use this sound' feature, which enables TikTokers to reuse the template clip with a new visual performance, or 'embellish' their creative remix of the template clip through volume control, additional dialogue, and the like.[13] The meta-genres of meme challenges on TikTok also build upon established catchphrases, with posts beginning with a signature call-out originating from TikTok, like 'Put a finger down if you are X', 'Tell me you are X without telling me you are X', and 'Hey yo, X check'. In each meme trend, and indeed in each variation and mutation of the meme trend, the specific tonality and register of the voicing, and the ambience and mood of the accompanying music (if any) dictates the call to respond. In essence, audio memes on TikTok literally reflect the 'pop poly*vocality*', or the 'pop cultural *common tongue* that facilitate[s] the diverse engagement of many *voices*'.[14]

9 Leaver et al., *Instagram.*
10 Limor Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme," *New Media & Society* 14, no. 2(2012): 187–203.
11 Kaye et al., "You Made This? I Made This."
12 Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok," 80.
13 Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok," 80.
14 Ryan A. Milner, "Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of lulz," *The Fibreculture Journal* 156 (2013). para. 9, emphasis ours.

In media studies and cultural studies, we often speak of a 'turn' in something when one of these occurs: a sharp pivot in the *focus* of something, a shift in the *emphasis* of something, the rapid increase in the *visibility* of something, or a growing *importance* in the impact of something. The centrality of the 'audio' on TikTok encapsulates exactly this. Trends do not just go viral, they become solidified as culture, whether 'TikTok culture', 'Gen Z culture', or 'social media culture'. The template of catchphrases as an opening, a meme, or a call-to-respond has also propagated outside of TikTok, and taken root on other social media (especially on Instagram due to its TikTok-like Reels feature), on other digital media cultures at large (especially on the social media marketing content of various brands targeting young people), and in everyday vernacular (in our fieldwork and interviews, we encountered young people who frequently spoke in 'TikTok codes' in their everyday parlance). To be cheeky, this illustrates another meta-meme: the memefication of TikTok, establishing its native phatic communication templates, aesthetic preferences, and registers and tonalities as a new social practice on social media at large.

Audio memes that include words or lyrics are an opportunity for TikTokers to engage with, or reinterpret, the meaning of songs or audio clips. TikTokers can engage with the stated meaning of clips to form communities of practice among groups of people who relate to the message in the meme.[15] By reinterpreting or subverting meanings, TikTokers can use audio memes to expand the relatability of audio memes in unexpected directions.[16]

Absofacto's 'Dissolve'

Memes are 'flexible'[17] objects that can be embedded with variants and remixes and layers of meaning. For audio memes, this is intensified given the extensive possibilities enabled by complementing or juxtaposing the aural against the visual. But what happens when memes take on fraught meanings and dark innuendos that are refused by the meme originator, the creator of the content being remixed, or by competing communities of meme connoisseurs?

Musician Absofacto's (Jonathan Visger) 2019 song 'Dissolve' exhibits the tensions and complications that arise when meme creators and TikTokers wrestle over 'ownership claim[s]' and the 'unwanted reuse'[18] of their content. 'Dissolve' was first uploaded onto TikTok in 2019 by another TikToker as the audio meme 'original sound – SunriseMusic',

15 Sangeet Kumar, "Contagious Memes, Viral Videos and Subversive Parody: The Grammar of Contention on the Indian Web," *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3 (2015): 232–247.
16 Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman, "Making sense? The Structure and Meanings of Digital Memetic Nonsense," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 825–842.
17 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World."
18 Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok," 80.

without its creator Absofacto's knowledge. The song originally intended to reflect upon the relationship between a romantic couple, and featured a chorus with the lyrics:

I just wanted you to watch me dissolve/

Slowly/

In a pool full of your love/

However, by mid-2020, Absofacto reported receiving messages from TikTokers, concerned fans, and victims of sexual abuse informing him that the audio clip was being used to accompany 'daddy-daughter POV' (point of view) roleplaying, with innuendos of sexual violence and incest. Following this, Absofacto turned to TikTok to post videos using the audio meme to push back against this reuse. He tells followers that his song has been 'taken over by a gross daddy pov trend', and in his caption, pleads for fellow TikTokers to 'rescue it' by using it for 'something else'.

This tone policing demonstrated the unbridled 'networked publics'[19] of meme cultures, wherein originators have little to no control over how their content is propagated, adapted, or mutated. Absofacto's call for help received responses of various silos of TikTokers, as evidenced in a follow-up post where he thanks users such as '"alt tiktok", "lgbtq tiktok", "kpop stans", and "everyone who doesn't fit in any group"'[20] for using the audio meme to 'take back' the narrative-making. This communal act underscores that meme publics are a 'social practice'[21] that relies on the collaboration of meme creators and audiences. In subsequent follow-up posts, Absofacto continued to appeal to various demographics, subcultures, and silos on TikTok to change the tonality of the audio meme. This resulted in 'competitive chart ranking',[22] where groups of TikTokers would conscientiously replay specific TikTok posts in the audio meme in order to raise their 'engagement rate', to allow these new remixes to chart higher in the audio meme stream, in the hopes of drowning out the 'daddy-daughter POV' ones.

While Absofacto's pleas to the TikTok Safety Team to intervene did not appear to be answered, the coordinated effort of hundreds of TikTokers eventually 'diluted' the meme stream sufficiently that the audio meme was no longer solely claimed by NSFW

19 danah boyd, "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications," in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (Routledge 2010), 39–58.

20 Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok," 86.

21 Kristine Ask and Crystal Abidin, "My life is a Mess: Self-Deprecating Relatability and Collective Identities in the Memification of Student Issues," *Information, Communication and Society* 21, no. 6 (2018): 834-850, 836.

22 Abidin, "Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok," 86.

content. While memes have previously been observed to be a 'common instrument for establishing normativity',[23] this case study is a masterclass on how the moralities and tonalities of this 'normativity' can be continuously challenged, reshaped, or corrupted.

Rocky Paterra's 'I'm An Accountant'

Rocky Paterra's 2020 song 'I'm An Accountant' demonstrates how TikTokers directly engaged with the lyrics at face value and re-contextualized the song into a performance of mediated identities. The lyrics of 'I'm An Accountant' are a simple and straightforward representation of Paterra's real life as an actor and musician in New York:

I'm a struggling actor but if I'm asked by a stranger what I do /

I usually end up telling a lie because there's just too much to get through /

I don't want to go through the motions of saying that auditioning is a full-time job /

I'd rather smile and simply state that I have a full-time job /

As an accountant /

The song is an elegy to Paterra's many long and frustrating conversations with friends and family members trying to understand why a Broadway actor and singer wasn't going in to an office every day at 9am. The lyrics also provide easy-to-follow instructions for any others in Paterra's position who were searching for an easy way out of the 'What do you do for work?' conversation. If someone asks, and you do not want to 'get into it', just say 'I'm an accountant' and problem solved! Surely no one is going to heap follow-up questions onto you with a job as mundane and straightforward as being 'an accountant'.

Paterra's original audio and video work as a meme template by being funny, simple, and relatable.[24] The throbbing bass and minimal melody lines are catchy enough to satisfy the earworm requirement for an audio meme, but the template also includes choreographed line-reading. After the first verse, the song shifts into a back-and-forth conversation between the 'Accountant' and the person asking too many questions. This brief dialogic section allows any others using the meme to create various visual representations of what their 'accounting job' entails. The on-screen text and video caption directly call on 'all struggling actors' to adopt this strategy. Despite being originally being intended for musical theatre communities, the lyrics of 'I'm an Accountant' also tell a relatable story for those working in non-traditional lines of work that might be tricky to explain to others in a respectable manner. (Confession: as young millennials researching social media for a

23 Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan, *Visualising Facebook* (London: UCL Press, 2017), 193.
24 Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme."

living, telling elderly relatives at awkward family reunions that we are just 'accountants' in the University is way easier than explaining that we get paid to study TikTok memes…)

One community that quickly embraced the 'I'm An Accountant' audio meme was sex workers on TikTok. Sexually explicit content cannot be posted on TikTok[25] but many sex workers can use TikTok to boost their profiles. Creators have long used the short video format as calling cards to funnel their followings onto other platforms with more opportunities for growth and monetization.[26] In much the same vein, sex workers on TikTok are free to post SFW (Safe For Work) videos introducing themselves or previewing their type of content on other NSFW (Not Safe For Work) platforms, with links in their TikTok profile for any interested viewers. Representing sex work online can be a radical act, such as in contexts where it is prohibited by law. In contexts where sex work is less taboo, it can still evoke annoying questions from friends and family members who hold misinformed or stereotypical views. 'I'm An Accountant' thus allows sex workers to perform an aspect of their identity by lip-synching to the enigmatic lyrics paired with their own playful, creative, and ambiguous visual representations of their work.

In July 2020, the struggle of precarious online labor was very real, widely relatable, and amplified by a global pandemic. For those who decided to start an Only Fans page during the pandemic, feeling uncomfortable sharing can be stressful and anxiety-inducing, particularly when people start asking prying questions. With audio templates like 'I'm An Accountant' TikTokers can present their existing or newfound revenue stream on their own terms. The meme is obscure enough to create plausible deniability to take something that could otherwise be shameful, and turn it into something playful and silly. As an added bonus, the template is an effective self-promotional tool to grow followings on other NSFW platforms.[27]

Conclusion

Much of the extant meme scholarship tends to focus on the visual elements of memes. Visual memes have been found to foster community,[28] construct identity[29] manage

25 "TikTok Community Guidelines," TikTok, last modified December 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en.

26 Smith Mehta and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, "Pushing the Next Level: Investigating Digital Content Creation in India," *Television & New Media* 22, no.4 (2019): 360–378.

27 Ade Onidaba, "How 'I'm An Accountant' Became A TikTok Anthem For Strippers, Sex Workers, And Creators On OnlyFans," *BuzzFeed News*, September 4, 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adeonibada/accountant-tiktok-anthem-only-fans-sex-work.

28 Kate Miltner, "'There's No Place for lulz on LOLCats': The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme," *First Monday* 19, no.8 (2014).

29 Akane Kanai, "Sociality and Classification: Reading Gender, Race, and Class in a Humorous Meme', *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016): 1–12.; Milner, "Hacking the Social."

visibility,[30] and contribute to social change.[31] The aural component of internet memes has received only tangential focus,[32] despite how heavily some of the most prominent meme trends of the past decade have relied on the viral potential of earworms and catchy tunes, such as the Harlem Shake[33] or the infamous Rickroll.[34]

The platform features and cultures of TikTok facilitate the use of sound in unexpected and effortless ways, especially when mobilised as a trend. Unexpected, because the primary mode of content consumption on TikTok is through the algorithmically curated FYP, and the sheer volume of content makes searching for specific sounds or videos difficult. As a result, new sounds, earworms, or audio memes are discovered spontaneously and benefit from being instantly appealing and widely recognizable. Effortless, because TikTok circumscribes creativity to users and places sound on the same pedestal as visual effects, filters, and hashtags, in addition to the 'Use This Sound' feature. As such, the platform strongly encourages users t creatively employ audio as they would any other type of effect or hashtag.

Like other forms of viral content, memes can become disconnected from their creators.[35] TikTokers increasingly wrestle over the ownership of memes and meme ideation, which is distinctive from the prior ethos of spreadability online, one of the essential components of successful memes.[36] TikTok meme creators join the growing ranks of other online creators seeking credit and acknowledgement for their ideas,[37] especially in instances where the sounds being used are more personal, such as a person's voice that is being reappropriated or separated from them in subsequent videos; a practice made possible through three taps of the finger on TikTok.

The aural turn in memes builds on a format that is still inherently multimodal. Short video memes on TikTok often feature audio interspersed with video plus text and create humorous effects that catch on through a combination of these three elements. It is the layering of audio or earworms that creates a unique legacy by making short video memes spreadable and legible. At the same time, it is important to consider what the harmful potentials

30 Ask and Abidin, "My life is a Mess."
31 An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements: How the World's Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).
32 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World."
33 Michael Soha & Zachary J McDowell, "Monetizing a Meme: YouTube, ContentID, and the Harlem Shake," *Social Media+Society,* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1-12.
34 Ryan A. Milner and Whitney Phillips, "Why We're Never Gonna Give up on the Rickroll," *The Conversation,* July 30, 2014, https://theconversation.com/why-were-never-gonna-give-up-on-the-rickroll-29864.
35 Soha & McDowell, "Monetizing a Meme."
36 Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, & Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).
37 James Meese and Jennifer Hagedorn, "Mundane Content on Social Media: Creation, Circulation, and the Copyright Problem." *Social Media + Society* 5, no.2 (2019): 1–9.

of such audio memes are, such as audio clips that go viral without proper credits to the original creators, or the use of others' voices to bully or harass others. Still, audio memes may also offer bright prospects to aspiring musical artists on TikTok who can leverage audio memes to initiate new collaborations or professional opportunities in the music industry.

Should you have a TikTok earworm lodged in your head, we welcome friendly correspondence to share in your burden, For Science.

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MEMES IN KUWAIT AS COPING MECHANISM FOR A LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE

YASMEEN KHAJA

When the pandemic arrived in Kuwait, things happened fast. Makeshift COVID-19 testing centers were quickly organized, tracking technologies for contact tracing were put into use, grassroots organizations worked to provide suddenly-inaccessible everyday needs to residents, and long lockdowns were implemented. Kuwaiti TV channels and public media buzzed with enthusiasm for the state's initial response to COVID-19.

Then, about a year into the pandemic—7 February 2021—gyms and salons were forced to close once again. Cases had gone up dramatically, nearly doubling in number. Restaurant-goers. however, could still dine in with unregulated conditions save for an 8 p.m. curfew for all commercial activities. After 8, you couldn't eat at a restaurant, but you could do virtually everything else. Unsurprisingly, these decisions were met with an increasing spread of the coronavirus. On March 4th, the country witnessed its highest number of new cases with 1,700 reported in a single day. That same night, the Cabinet met to impose a nationwide curfew and reshuffled some rules: salons and gyms that had been forced to close a month earlier could reopen, while dining in at restaurants was replaced by a delivery and pick up only rule. Parks and other outdoor public spaces were set to close, and a 5pm to 5am curfew would be implemented.

These new restrictions were set to begin on the night of March 7th, but much was unclear: were restaurants allowed to deliver after hours? What happens to those unable to obtain permits? Why are outdoor parks—places where it's easiest to practice social distancing—shutting down? The day before these restrictions took place, the Ministry announced that parks will actually remain open for exercise, but not picnics. On the first day of the curfew, traffic jams lasted for hours as workers rushed home. Videos of people leaving their cars to walk and city workers stranded without transportation circulated online, mainly on Twitter. On March 8th, the Cabinet met again, and the private media organization Kuwait News reported that both extending the curfew and allowing restaurants to deliver while it was active were on the meeting agenda. The head of the Restaurants Union, Fahad al-Arbash, was also quoted anticipating good news, but after the meeting neither issue was resolved.

One of the most keenly felt critiques of the political system and government of Kuwait that came out of this pandemic was delivered in the form of a meme: an animated WhatsApp sticker of a 100 fils coin flipping between sides labelled *lockdown* and *no lockdown.* The message this sticker carries is simple: state decisions feel like nothing but a coin toss. But

the medium— the sticker itself—is uncanny. For those who remain protected by fluctuating policies, law is mediated with no real consequences. In effect, so is their dealing with it. The sticker comes from the same place that yields uneasiness—the screen—except it lets us reconcile it.

Fig. 1: Curfew, no curfew. Digital animated sticker. Received on WhatsApp. February 21, 2021.

A lack of planning and foresight—it seemed—left the government with an ad hoc strategy that appeared to rely on trial and error. Whether this was really true was beside the point; it probably (hopefully) isn't. The point is the virtual experience of it all: the doomscrolling, the fragmented information, the discombobulating pulls of social and traditional media, the lack of a cohesive narrative. There's already little motivation to participate in any politics that aren't directly changing one's life, especially not at the expense of one's own security. But during the pandemic, politics became even more virtual, with the state becoming a live theater in which the unaffected audience witnesses major actors improvising. If laughter is indeed the best medicine, there's nothing quite as satisfying as a punchline that you can download. Memes become a coping mechanism for infrastructural failure—a balm especially soothing for when it seems like there's nothing else you can do.

Memes from the Pandemic

The rise of internet memes in Kuwait is concurrent with the adoption of social media for communication in the country. Though humor can be traced to Kuwait's cultural production since the 40s, the speed of conversation on Twitter and Whatsapp has amplified a

cultural tendency to simply make fun of things. There is a kind of meme in Kuwait that isn't a prescriptive template requiring a certain level of internet fluency, but a free-for-all mocking made up of cartoonish images with text about an event is happening, or event-specific images with satirical text. They're easy to make on any social media app—just upload an image and add some text to it. These memes work like primal language, or like a joke: communication that doesn't change anything, or *do* anything, except carry its message to the receiver.

With the onset of the pandemic in late February 2020, when the first few cases were traced to people having just returned from Iran, a few quarantine facilities were set up for people at hospitals, camps, and—for the definitively non-severe cases—the Khiran Resorts. This was a large beachfront resort with villas, chalets, and apartment studios: a tried and tested spot for local family vacations. It was around this time that pandemic memes began to be forwarded, attached, uploaded, and made into stickers. Some didn't need much cultural context, like a stock image of five white doctors with a caption reading, 'باتساب قروبات الوتس هضو' ('What Whatsapp groups are like now'). Other memes required a knowledge of what was happening on the ground, like figure 2's collage of the Khiran Resort and Nabeel Shuail—one of the first Kuwaiti singers and a symbolic figure dearly nicknamed the hummingbird of the Gulf—with a photoshopped mask asking 'الو يكلم استيديو؟' ('King suite or studio?').

Fig. 2: King suite or studio? Digital image. Received on WhatsApp. February 25, 2020.

Another meme from this period: a video of a woman declaring the free food provided at the resort to be bland, inedible, oily, and the salad without sauce. The actual video is a 57–second long unrevelatory Snapchat, where the person behind the camera complains about the containers of untouched food and says that she wishes she hadn't come back to Kuwait. But the comment that the salad doesn't even have *sauce* prompted a flurry of online responses united by the hashtag and nickname for the woman #أم_الصوص ('umm al-sauce,' or the one with sauce) as well as an article in *Watan*—an Arab-American newsletter—describing the video as 'an irritating clip that shook Kuwait'[1] and eventually turned into a Whatsapp sticker (fig. 3). Even *Al-Majlis*—an online newspaper run by Kuwait's Ministry of Information—tweeted a video of Dr. Mona Abdulredha (a well-known doctor and daughter of the late iconic Kuwaiti actor Abdulhussain Abdulredha) wherein she directly addresses 'umm al-sauce,' asking her to show just how she'd manage to survive the pandemic outside of Kuwait. Dr. Mona goes on to reiterate what hundreds of comments already expressed: Kuwait is a 'mothering, giving country', and that its citizens ought to see it that way. Beyond the nationalist rhetoric, Dr. Mona isn't wrong: if your quarantine facility is a resort, *something* must be working in your favor.

Fig 3: The salad doesn't have dressing. Digital sticker. Received on WhatsApp. March 5, 2021.

1 "فيديو-مسـتـفـز-لمطاوعة-كويتية-من-داخل-الحجر," *Watan,* March 26, 2020, https://www.watanserb.com/2020/03/26/%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%B2-%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%83%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD/

A lot happens around a joke like this, and the activity alone means there is attention and thereby potential for something to be done, or for something to be learned. Of course, a video of a person in a resort complaining about a dry salad is pathetic and ripe with memetic possibility. But at the beginning of the video, the woman addresses the Minister of Finance—she calls out to him, to see the waste in what is happening. Her point, I believe, is not to have a well-dressed salad, but to draw attention to the fact that there is a ton of money being spent and things still do not work.[2] The problem is that this meaning is lost when the video becomes a meme. It is easy to laugh at the forwarded video, the sticker, the joke of someone complaining about a dry salad in the middle of a pandemic—I still do—but nothing is learned regarding the structures or policies that led to these events. What we get instead is a salve to use when the next symptom of systemic failure comes around. This is the nature of the meme in online discourse: it perpetuates hell, then helps you survive it.

The Absence of Feeling

In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*[3] Henri Bergson writes that '*the absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter,' is crucial to the ability to laugh at everything. He reckons that if you were to 'look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy.'[4] If apathy is the mechanism of humor that lets us laugh at hard things, then the kinds of memes that can be found in the Kuwaiti digital public—trivializing issues by turning them into caricatures of themselves—signals a kind of apathy towards how things are handled, namely with regard to the ability of the citizen to change it.

A meme isn't a site to critically examine a problem. For Kuwaiti memes, this means that the humor is only apparent to those who share the same apathy towards things—they're ideologically comfortable and don't require much interpretative work. Perhaps the only critical moment that a meme can offer is when it fails to deliver a punchline. Take a bad joke, for example: if a joke is not funny, it has failed as a joke, and what's left are the words that should've done something. At that moment, the lack of humor suddenly reveals something that maybe, had the joke landed, would've been invisible. Humor conceals the fact that nothing has actually changed.

The more Kuwaiti memes are shared, looked at, and laughed at, the more questions of governance and its failures are obscured. The sticker of the coin flipping replaces an understanding of why decisions have been revised so often in the pandemic. Nabeel Shuail memed into a kind of sweetheart asking if you have a king suite or studio at the resorts has a coddling effect. When it doesn't, a given meme simply falls flat. When memes are

2 Later in 2020, most of major public discourse in Kuwait addressed massive corruption and cases of money laundering.

3 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* trans. Claudesly Brereton, and Fred Rothwell (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 10.

4 Bergson, *Laughter,* 10.

circulating, moving across social platforms and among groups of people, they don't make space for changing the way we think about whatever disaster the memes are addressing—they simply reproduce the disaster in mimetic form, and then deliver the memes that help cope with it. So, if a meme is not capable of transforming the way we think about something, what does a meme do when it moves among some groups of people but not others?

Those Who Laugh Together, Stay Together

Humor is a deeply cultural language that relies on factors like social context for a joke to work. This makes laughter a strong binding agent—when groups of people can laugh at the same thing together, they obviously find the same thing to be funny. However, their laughter alone is a signal that they share something far more important: the *ability* to find something funny. To Bergson's point, if apathy is required to render something laughable, then that means that those who laugh at the same thing share their position of disinterested spectatorship. They are witnessing, but unbothered.

This sense of togetherness becomes even more apparent in internet meme-exchange. On an average day online, we might pass by thousands of images and strings of text. The algorithmic reasons we may be seeing certain items of content and not others is hidden by the user interface. What we see are decontextualized articles, opinions, memes, essays, forwards, videos, links, and status updates—as if there is nothing else to be learned about where they had come from. Did someone send this to me directly, or am I seeing it on my feed? Who published this? What are the motives this thing's being shared? On the internet, and especially on mobile — where scrolling is the main form of movement—there is little to no room to understand the background of what we're seeing. What we see is what we get.

When it comes to humorous things like gifs, stickers, and memes we experience them in an even quicker flash. They are funny, or they are or not. For those who get the joke, something like a bond is created. Sharing the sticker of umm al-sauce creates a space to laugh again, *together*, at something that is now far removed from the actual event or its real-life implications.

In *How to Do Things With Memes,* Eric Thurm converses with Wittgenstein's language-games. 'The closer words are shared and the deeper they are held, the harder it becomes for their users to back away from the things they are doing when they speak.'[5] Sharing memes starts to crystallize a myopic view of reality. With the collapse of meaning, memes meme for meme purposes only: the meme is the end.

5 Eric Thurm, "How to Do Things With Memes," *Real Life Magazine*, January 16, 2018, https://reallifemag.com/how-to-do-things-with-memes/.

As coronavirus cases first started to escalate in Kuwait towards the end of February 2020, memes were not harbingers of racism, but rather trafficked in jokes that could have only been formed from a racist worldview. There is a fine distinction between the two. A photo of the Turkish celebrity chef and meme figure 'Salt Bae' was sent around with the chef labeled 'Iran', the salt as 'corona virus', and the out of frame salted object as 'Kuwait'. Another sticker used an image of former Parliament Member Waleed al-Tabatabaie—known for his conservative Islamist politics—saying 'هالمرة صح هلك من إيران' ('This time it really is Iran's fault'). Reading this sticker as a joke reveals many things, mainly that for those with racist worldviews, Iran is an easy culprit. The jokes aren't funny, but to address them as unfunny would be to address a message that is far from the message that this meme carries. When it comes to memes, the joke is the point.

Fig. 4: Saltbae meme with Iran, Coronavirus, and Kuwait. Digital image. Received on WhatsApp. Feb 27, 2020 / Fig. 5: This time it really is Iran's fault. Digital sticker. Received on WhatsApp. March 5, 2021

There have been multiple critiques of the failure of the Kuwaiti government to address the root of problems. Policies have long protected Kuwaiti citizens in ways that render the environment and 70% of the entire country's population, made up of migrant workers, , vulnerable. But from Sharifa AlShalfan's examination of the effects of COVID-19 on existing urban infrastructure, it appears decisions in the pandemic were especially designed to leave non-Kuwaiti residents facing consequences.[6] As Kuwaiti officials encourage xenophobic hatred by announcing plans mid-pandemic to reduce the expat population down to 30%, the practice of neglecting real issues for ones materialized out of insecurity is perpetuated. Problems only worsen as the byproducts of a faulty system reveal its shortcomings under

6 Sharifa Alshalfan, "COVID-19 in Kuwait: How Poor Urban Planning and Divisive Policies Helped the Virus Spread," *LSE Blog*, September 16, 2020. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2020/09/16/covid-19-in-kuwait-how-poor-urban-planning-and-divisive-policies-helped-the-virus-spread/.

massive pressure to perform, and to perform quickly—the pandemic being the catalyst. These social critiques are quick to draw on law, policy, and regulation that affect the course of society, but seldom do they address the theatrics of the Kuwaiti government. On the internet, there is no government. What we are given instead is a charade that acts and talks like a state.

The Final Meme

Bergson exemplifies the comic as a disinterested spectator. But it helps to think more specifically about the unaffected spectator, for whom the stakes of an event are low. To bear witness to a disaster is not unlike watching it unfold onstage: the event is acutely real, yet out of reach. Consequently, the audience is quite literally out of touch. As Mordechai Gordon writes, 'humor allows us to view the world from a perspective that is amusing and comical rather than serious or sad.'[7] It is all too easy to become disillusioned online, where meaning is compounded and then collapsed into something alienating—hence the persistence of the joke.

Of course, the memes I have discussed here are—for a lack of a better word—mainstream. They are populist even by the standards of the internet, in that they transcend the need for prior literacy in meme culture. This is what makes them powerful tools to speak with. But as regards their potential to become a site for useful critique, these memes fall short. They are circulated to diffuse tension and offer a cheap laugh. All of this continues to mystify the conditions that sustain xenophobia, climate deterioration,[8] and an unimaginable labor crisis in Kuwait.[9]

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7 Mordechai Gordon, *Humor*, *Laughter and Human Flourishing: A Philosophical Exploration of the Laughing Animal* (Springer, 2014), 3.

8 In 2018, flash floods in Kuwait revealed extreme unpreparedness. Memes permeated social media, and I traced their use in perpetuating national identity online. https://vimeo.com/341394524.

9 Faisal Hamadah writes about the Kafala system and migrant labor a few months into the coronavirus pandemic. See Faisal Hamadah, "COVID and Kafala," *Monthly Review Online*, 17 August 2020, https://mronline.org/2020/08/17/covid-and-kafala/.

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MASKS, MONSTERS, AND MEMES: IN CONVERSATION WITH SCOOBERT DOOBERT

BY MAX HORWICH

Forgive the 'Webster's Dictionary defines…' introduction, but I recently learned (from Wikipedia, obviously) that the word meme comes from the Greek word for 'imitation/impersonation.' When I excitedly relayed my discovery to Scoobert Doobert, he already knows: 'I actually studied Ancient Greek for a minute,' he tells me. 'When I retire, I want to translate the early Socratic dialogues into Japanese. Everyone has to have goals.'

Over the past six months, I've spoken to Scoobert Doobert more often than my own parents, although I still don't know his real name and have never seen his face. He's a San Diego-based musician, and I've been working with him on a variety of techy creative projects—building his website, animating his album covers to make Spotify canvases, designing an AR Instagram filter for the release of his upcoming EP, that sort of thing.

Late last summer, a friend sent me a link to his album-length music video *Masks and Monsters*, a sprawling reflection on life in the early months of quarantine set to a pastiche of woozy, psychedelic guitar pop. I watched the 50-minute video in its entirety four times that night. We were introduced over the phone two days later and have been working together ever since.

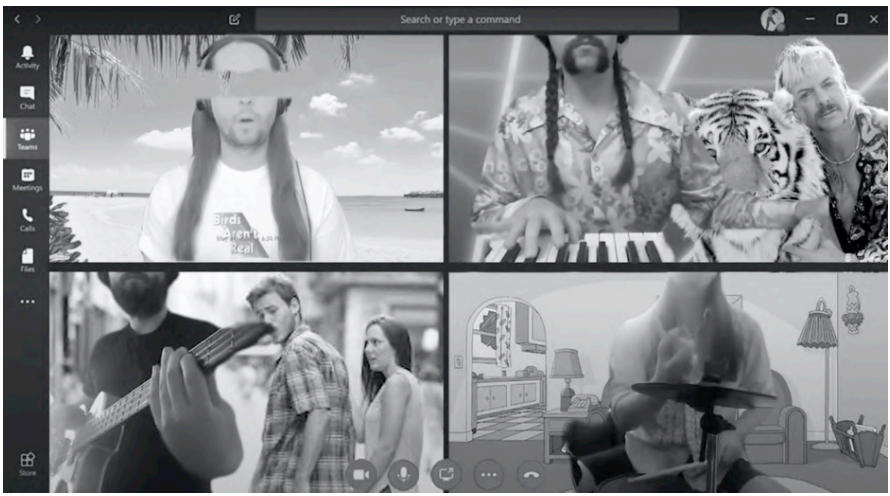

Fig. 1: Still from Scoobert Doobert's video for 'A Good Life'.

While his stage name and many of his song titles ('Shaggy's Anthem,' 'Mystery Machine,' 'What a Velma What a Night,' etc.) might give the impression of some sort of Scooby Doo-themed novelty act, he rather uses this source material as a conceptual and ideological framework through which he examines and navigates the contemporary world. It turns out to be a disarmingly potent metaphor: accidental heroes with no superpowers or special abilities—they're not even brave, they're just stoned—forced to confront one monster after another which, in the end, always turn out to be just another rich asshole.

However, Scoob is quick to clarify: 'My namesake is actually the Scoobert Doobert memes. So let the record show, it wasn't from Scooby Doo. In fact, there is no character named Scoobert Doobert. Just Scoobert Doo.'

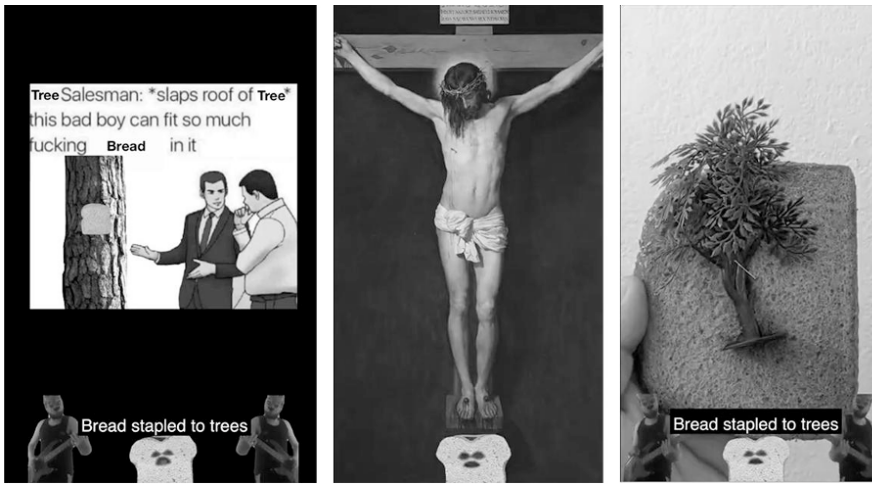

Fig. 2: A tryptic of stills from the music video for 'Bread Stapled to Trees'.

Much of his work engages heavily with memes—from his ongoing series of one-minute songs dedicated to various Subreddits, to the year-in-review supercut for his recent single '2020 Is Over,' to the aforementioned *Masks and Monsters*, which feels like a 50-minute scroll through knowyourmeme.com set to music. And while his work is at times laugh-out-loud funny (the shot of Christ on the cross at the end of his video for 'Bread Stapled to Trees' is one of the best visual puns I've ever seen), the humor is often a Trojan Horse for genuinely affecting moments of open-hearted poignancy and philosophical inquiry.

In many ways, Scoobert Doobert is himself a living meme, a meta-modern spin on Gilbert and George's 'living sculpture' personas of the previous century. Unfettered by the shackles of his Christian name and real-world identity, he is free to ascend to a higher plane of existence, becoming one with the internet and the zeitgeist that it has spawned.

Scoobert explains it more humbly: 'For me, being liberated of identity allows me to create things that I might normally be embarrassed by. David Bowie said in an interview that his goal of art is akin to being in a pool, deep enough to barely touch the bottom. That resonates with me, but I don't know if I can do that without some freedom of judgement. Then again, David Bowie wasn't his real name.'

I recently called Scoob to talk about memes, what they mean to him, and what they mean to all of us.

I had your song 'Don't Worry' stuck in my head recently and realized the hook is a paraphrase of a joke I've seen on Twitter. It got me thinking about how music engages with meme culture, and how much it's changed over, say, the past decade. Ten years out from the coinage of the term trollgaze and we've had Beyonce and Lizzo unassumingly interpolating tweets into lyrics for chart-topping songs. It feels like pop music is figuring out what to do with memes.

Popular music has always been meme-based. A 'hit' is unpredictable, it catches some invisible thread of shared reality.

Now it's like an internet allegory, where you're using this cultural repository like in the way that we used to use Shakespeare or the Odyssey. Then it's taking that same thing, but then being recursive with it—it's a really cool thing about where we're essentially headed. Allegory used to be such a highbrow art, and now it's becoming as lowbrow as a bastardization of a bastardization of a tweet. It's taking something that used to be part of an institution, tearing it down, and then rebuilding it back up while laughing at it.

People talk about how Donald Trump was this very postmodern president, like revealing how every institution is fake and flawed; but then there's kind of a necessary question of 'and then what? What do you do after that?' And there's no real postmodern answer.

I think that when it wraps back around on itself and you get to the absurdity of meta-modernism, then you're able to look at things more honestly. I think there's a lot of power there because you may actually get an answer out of it, not like an answer that's handed down to you from God, but an answer that we recognize as entirely flawed and entirely artificial, but still useful.

And I think that it's the role of the artist to try and influence that conversation, to try and nudge us along... to look at the world that we've created, look at the amazing scientific advancements, but also look at the things that we completely don't understand—probably never will understand, and have the hubris to think that we will—and digest it, help people digest it. Be part of the conversation that is the dialectic of culture.

I really believe that through absurdism, by taking things that are precious and making them unprecious, but then analyzing them and seeing what we still want even if it's artificial—what we still think has value in an entirely artificial world—there's a very optimistic path that we could take, that recognizes that everything is meaningless, but then does the next thing beyond just tearing it down.

Absolutely. When I think about the absurdity of this time period, and the way art reflects that and tries to deal with it—which is something that I see you engaging with a lot in your work—it reminds me of how modernism largely emerged as a response to World War I, and this previously unimaginable sense of, like, 'Oh, shit, people can be awful.'

We have the means to be awful on a grander scale. We were always awful. We just… industrialization turned to war, and then from there we realized that we were able to create hell on earth, and we did. We chose that option.

Right. And since then there's been this cultural churn over the past century, where movements will emerge to combat or subvert the dominant problem of the day, and the Powers That Be figure out ways to adopt the tools of our resistance and judo flip us back into subservience. Like, the things that saved us from misery a hundred years ago ended up making us bored, and the things that saved us from boredom fifty years ago ended up making us anxious. And now we're so entrenched and overwhelmed by that anxiety that, like, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. It's hard to address a problem when you're so deep in it that you don't even have the language to identify and describe it, and it seems to me like one of the roles of memes as an artform (or whatever you want to call them) has been to help us develop the language.

I think that's barking up the wrong tree though. I think that postmodernism, to me at least, was all about trying to find the right language to deconstruct language. And, like… it's so hard to read Derrida. It's just a nightmare. He's a genius, and you can get great stuff out of it. But it almost feels like talking to a lawyer about law rather than talking about, like, 'why do we even need a law?'

The longer that we're kept out of the roots of the problem, the harder it will be to really talk about or tackle the problem. And sometimes I feel like we spend so much time trying to develop the proper language to discuss something that we end up getting thrown off course through that same verbal judo.

Like, I really like Socrates, a lot more than Plato. I like him because he's this ultimate ironic figure. You don't really know his true identity. You don't know what he looks like. You don't know any of his own words. You just know that he could go into town and talk to the smartest guy and make them feel like an idiot; because we're all idiots, and his central wisdom is we're all idiots. And, it's like, that's a really hard thing for people that are academic and

people that have aspirations to cope with. That's why I like absurdism so much — I think it drills back down to the essential truth that, like, we're not that smart. We're not that good. There's not a lot for us to grasp onto. We can't trust our eyes. We can't trust our experiences. We can't trust the systems that we've built. All of it is artificial.

Figure 3: Still from 'Scoobert Doobert Eats a Banana in the Void'.

And then what do you do with that knowledge, according to Socrates? You laugh! And you just say, like, 'I don't really know what good *is*, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't try to be good.' And it's like, there are these contradictions that you can't get to with language. Like you can't dissect and find an answer with language, but it doesn't necessarily mean like you have to say, 'Oh, there's a Platonic Ideal.' That's a stupid leap, in my opinion, from 'we can't understand anything, we're all idiots, deal with it, accept it' to 'no, no, no, there's this *thing*, we just can't get to it. It's like looking at the sun... but it exists.'

And so in terms of memes and stuff, I think that it's getting hijacked by the thing that it makes fun of. And that pisses me off a bit. When you're waving a meme flag while you're storming the Capitol, it's awful, but it's also so absurd; and if you can't see the absurdity in it, then I don't think you can be broken from the chains that it's ensnaring you in.

For me, hope lies in acceptance and then moving forward. Because if you accept that we're all in this fatalist experience with artificial trappings that make us *feel* comfortable and safe, but that safety and comfort don't really exist, you feel anxious. But you could also feel community, because, like, we're all in the same boat and nobody's better than each other. Nobody has any secret wisdom, and that's freeing to me. That's the state of play that I think Derrida was getting at, but had a hard time communicating because he was trying to deconstruct language with language, rather than just laughing.

Since we're having an academic discussion about memes, I feel like we should probably talk about Richard Dawkins. I haven't actually read The Selfish Gene —I was supposed to read it in grad school but I think I was busy that week—but I'm interested in him as a figure, because before I knew he was 'the memes guy,' I just thought of him as 'that stuffy old British dude who's shitty about Muslims,' and I'm fascinated by a guy who's so on-point about one thing and so wrong about everything else.

Definitely. Richard Dawkins is funny because, like, my first introduction to him was some of my religious friends showing me, like, 'watch this guy get schooled about creationism.' Going back to the conversation we were just having, I feel firmly agnostic about almost everything now. I think that in atheism, there's the same hubris that there is in religion. It's like you think you know, but nobody knows anything. Richard Dawkins is funny because he's such an authority figure for this thing that spiraled completely out of control; so then he, by nature, doesn't have authority over it.

It's just funny, like how Bukowski says 'you'll never meet an old radical.' There's just a certain erosion that I think happens over time. I think it entrenches people deeper and deeper into their observed reality and stops them from imagining others. And then it's funny to see somebody that was so imaginative, like Richard Dawkins, flipped in a tweet right now. He's the butt of the joke.

Right. I mean, in some ways, we do kind of get dumber as we get older — when we're young we spend all this time forming synapses and making connections; and then at some point in adulthood we figure out which ones are useful, and then the other ones just sort of slowly start to die off. And I think it happens literally on a neurological level, but I think it also happens on a more ideological—or I guess the word would be memetic—level. You get to a certain age and you're an expert in your chosen field. You know everything there is to know about one thing, and you know just enough about everything else to make it work. You have an understanding about how the world works, but it's sort of the 'Columbus sailed to America to prove the world was round' kind of understanding. It's wrong, but it works as a placeholder until you can learn how it really is. But the longer you sit with that incorrect understanding as the objective truth, the more ossified it becomes and the harder it is to break out of it.

Yeah, exactly. There is a hidden danger in the economic theory of specialization, where you look at people as little machines—even if you're good at more than one thing, you should only do the thing that brings the most economic utility and let the other people do the other things. And I think that industrialization has helped us program ourselves in that direction, but people aren't meant to be that.

And I think that we've seen younger generations kind of fight back against that a little bit—with the rise of DIY culture and stuff like that—where it's like, what happened to the

Renaissance Man? What happened to the... you know, you dabble and you study and you grow and you question and then, 'hey man, like, I figured out a new field of botany!' What happened to *that*?

And it's not that everything's been found out already. I think that there's a certain danger to the culture of PhDs and very narrow fields of research and study, now that we have so many more things that are multidisciplinary. And as we get more robots, I think the skills that we really need in a post-AI world are the ones that connect dots that a robot couldn't.

And that's the human stuff. That's where art comes in. And I hope that art can help lead people to, you know, interact with it more. I don't like that people are such passive music listeners. I like that there are more tools to actively make music, because that'll allow me, as a performer and instrumentalist, to do more things, because now the listeners will be capable of listening to more things at once because they've trained their ears. I feel like even if you don't get great at something, just like the act of doing other stuff, it'll make people and society as a whole more open, more generous, more well-rounded.

I think this is a great place to segue back into talking about your practice. I know you primarily identify as a musician, but to me your video work feels indispensable to the project. All of your videos look and feel, unmistakably, like Scoobert Doobert videos, in this idiosyncratic, almost auteurish way. Did you have experience working with video before this project started? Or was it just, like, 'I got Adobe Creative Suite from work, I guess I'll start fucking around with it'?

A little bit of both. Um, funny enough, the day I was born I was on TV, because my dad was on TV. They filmed me as I came out of the womb with a big cone head, 'cause they had to like vacuum suck me out of my mom. So I had a very misshapen skull for the first few months of life. So yeah, like, I don't know, video has been a big part of my whole life growing up; my dad was a cameraman and did stuff on screen too. And so yeah, I was learning like shots and framing and stuff and like watching things a little more critically, I guess.

But at the same time, I'm not a film student. I don't really know what I'm doing. I'm kind of trying to bring, like... you know like Meg White from the White Stripes?

She's my favorite drummer.

Dude, right?!? Like, there's an appeal to a childlike approach to a medium. And I'm trying to bring that too. I'm trying to push myself in a way with it so that, you know, like I find myself I'm getting pretty decent at it just because I'm trying to keep myself scared with what I'm doing and intimidated by the vision. But I also try to bring improv to everything I do. Pretty much every record has got at least one song on it that's entirely improvised, at *least* one. And I want to do that forever. I'm trying to bring the same kind of spirit to the

video editing where it's just, like, split second, *what if I did this?* Do it. And then like a day later look back and be like, 'that's funny.' Like stuff that you wouldn't be able to logically think out, you just have to find subconsciously.

I also feel like that's kind of a big thing with memes, right? Like, sometimes I see memes that are too logical and it doesn't sit right. I really like the way gen Z is memeing, because it's so chaotic and it's so reductive. I love the chaos, but I'm also kind of sad because I worry about them sometimes. Because sometimes it's pushed so far that it doesn't seem like it's absurdist anymore. Sometimes it just feels really depressed and dark and sad through an absurdist lens.

But I dunno, as somebody who makes art, my goal would be to pull the people that are too literal away from the literal, and the people who are too sad toward the happy, because I think that absurdism and like retrospection should have a laugh to it, even the darkest things. Like even some of the worst things in human history, I think that the human impulse to laugh is one of our greatest strengths just to cope with existence. And it's not like I want to just make happy glossy music, but I hope to bring that sensibility to the videos and to the music and stuff, so that even when I'm talking about a dark subject, it'd be a little bit tongue-in-cheek so that, you know, there's a place to land.

Yeah, absolutely. One of the things that I think is so interesting and powerful about humor is the reaction is so immediate and visceral. Someone tells a joke and either you laugh or you don't, there's no faking it. And a joke is often an observation about the world, so when someone laughs at your joke, it's because they share some of your underlying assumptions about the way the world works.

I mean like so much of the stuff that you're doing is genuinely funny, but it's always in service of the other stuff that you're grappling with, like deconstructing the absurdity of modern life and, you know, Derrida or whatever. Humor can be in service of these like larger things that don't go down so smoothly without it, you know?

Definitely, definitely. I think it's interesting how there are certain things that translate really well across cultures—like character acting, everybody loves Mr. Bean all over the world. But, like, I go to Japan and nobody knows who Will Farrell is. A lot of American media gets consumed in Japan but a lot of American comedy doesn't land. I want to try and bring a healthy dose of that to what I'm doing, and hopefully make stuff that's cross-cultural. I don't want to get too swept up in the U.S. and thinking that our problems are the universals.

Will Farrell is a funny example because, did you see that EuroVision movie that came out like last year? I mean, it wasn't great; but the thing that I thought was interesting about that movie was 1) it was clearly intended for an international audience (i.e. people who watch EuroVision), and 2) all of the humor is visual. There aren't really any funny lines of dialogue, all of the jokes are in the camera tricks or the staging or all of these other things that are unique to the language of film;

which is great, because it's kinda rare for American comedies to meaningfully engage with the medium of film in their humor — it's mostly just a camera pointed at people while they tell jokes. It begs the question of what's even the point of making something as complicated and expensive as a movie when the content could just as easily be delivered through a much simpler medium?

That's a good way of looking at it. And I think that that's a good way to kind of flip the narrative, because I know a lot of people are really bummed, especially directors. I just listened to a podcast where the director who did the new Billie Holiday movie was lamenting how everybody should just do superhero movies now.

It's the same way that I get frustrated with how music can sound very commoditized, how record labels are just signing competitive acts that sound similar to another already-successful act, and it ends up squishing music into a very narrow spectrum.

And I feel like the same thing is happening to film, and film just doesn't know what it's like yet. They're complaining about having to be direct-to-streaming, and losing out on the revenue streams. And like music has had to deal with this since forever. 'Oh, boo hoo! Netflix bought your movie!' Like, I get that you're gonna make less money, but you're still gonna make money.

And people are going to be watching it on a smaller screen, but at least they're watching it.

They're lamenting the change of experience. There's a certain experience of going and seeing a movie for the first time in a theater with other people that are validating your emotions. And I miss that a lot since the pandemic, so I don't think that's going away. But I think it's funny because music lost that experience, and it's not coming back. But you know, we're just going to have to continuously evolve and hopefully find a bright path. And this pandemic I think has reinforced that in my head. It's like, there will be black swans. . . What do we do today? We can't control very much.

And I think on the flip side, another trend I'm noticing in film discourse, that music was dealing with like 10 years ago (and it was insufferable, so good luck guys), I feel like film is experiencing poptimism for the first time now. Which, on its most basic level, like, that's valid. Your love of [whatever popular thing] is no less valid than my love of [whatever unpopular thing]. Sure. But it also has people doing some like pretty weird mental gymnastics trying to politicize every consumer decision they make. It just seems a little unnecessary, and frustrating for everyone involved. It just becomes another thing to get angry at strangers on Twitter about.

Yeah, but I feel like that goes back to control. For a long time we had this illusion of control that felt safe but boring. Now there are cracks in that illusion—and the Covid crisis was the biggest, most obvious one, just like a war would be—and the boredom turns into anxiety. But then that anxiety either turns to outright fear, which turns to anger, or it turns into a moment of revelation of growth and community.

And we've seen both throughout the course of the pandemic, the highest high of 'we're all in this together'—finding out that things like student loans and rent can just go away; that if we want to, everybody can get vaccinated, like, for free. There were paradigm-shifting responses, not just from the policy angle, but like from businesses, from people, from neighbors. And then it all eroded it into storming the Capitol.

Totally. What strikes me most about your album Masks and Monsters is how it feels almost nostalgic now—there was that period in 2020 from around March to May when it really felt like everyone on planet earth was dealing with the same problem for the first time ever. It's like we were all right on the verge of this incredible epiphany and then just ran screaming in the other direction.

Figure 4: Still from the music video for 'Why, How, Yeah, Yeah'.

COVID connected all of us, and I think a lot of people were extremely uncomfortable with that. Just consider all of the rich people fleeing to New Zealand. I've gotten pretty into learning about billionaire bunkers. Did they forget they're human?

I guess, hyper-connective moments are terrifying to those that aren't used to connecting. Some very literally spend their lives trying to disassociate from the masses. Why?

Imagine what it would actually be like if aliens landed. I think we just got a taste of it. For a brief moment, it really felt like we were All In This Together™. There was something heartwarming while that brief moment lasted. And it was sad how quickly it evaporated. But it gives me hope, because we had a glimpse of what a united globe could look like. We really could solve every problem on this planet if everyone actually cared. If we stepped out of the damn billionaire bunkers. Figuratively.

So we saw what I think is both the revelation and that acceptance of these things as artificial. And because they're artificial, we can look at them rationally rather than just saying 'this is the way it always has been and this is the way it always will be.' We can have a discussion about our artificial thing rather than a holy thing.

And instead of weaponizing memes to protect what we think is holy, we can use memes as a tool to poke fun and to show absurdity and to flip things on their head and unite, even in small communities. And so I think that there are two logical responses and I'm just trying to put my weight on the one that is less combative and is more revolutionary, because I think you can do both. I don't think it has to be a revolution of killing people. It can be a revolution of thought. If we're able to accept the absurd and accept that it's artificial, then anything is possible.

On the subject of revolutions of thought, I want to bring the conversation back to humor one more time. Humor is a powerful tool for creating in-groups and out-groups, and some of the worst people in America have used this to great effect. Do you think there's a way that we could use humor to fight back?

Especially in the West, we tend to think linearly and in binaries. There's left and right, with cause-and-effect. One and zero. So, our natural Western response would be to say, we need to fight the Pepe's with an equal-and-opposite force. Some sort of Newtonian retribution.

Dig down deep enough though, and everything *can't* be reduced to 1's and 0's. It can just appear to be. Like how a movie is just images moving quickly enough to give the impression of reality. Or a pixel can give the illusion of a curved line with nothing but blocks to work with.

I'd like to pitch an alt-alt path, for us to be less adversarial and more absurdist. I mean, we have people flying meme flags storming the capitol. That's horrifying, but is the appropriate action to fuel it—or to laugh at it?

Of course, seeing things that I love weaponized yields a certain disquieting vibe. But the goal shouldn't be to take up arms against it. Instead, what if we neutralized it. What if we left the Nazis punching air instead of fighting back. What if there was no equal-and-opposite force. What if?

That's the ethos, I guess. Take a step back. Laugh at it. Neuter hate.

And remember what we can be together. All of us have a defined and absolute destiny—death. What do we do with that knowledge? I think we either turn our fear into anger and anger into hate—or—we can laugh at it. In that, we can assert control over the uncontrollable.

Like, Socrates laughed on his deathbed. That's memeable AF.

LE MEME D'AUTEUR, OR: HOW WE LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE ORIGINAL CONTENT MEMES

CLUSTERDUCK (SILVIA DAL DOSSO, FRANCESCA DEL BONO, ARIA MAG AND NOEL NICOLAUS)

At the start of the third decade of the 21st century, while internet Memes certainly can't be considered a cultural novelty anymore, their definition remains as elusive and difficult as ever.

According to Limor Shifman, the three main attributes of memes are their gradual propagation from individuals to society, their reproduction via copying and imitation, and their diffusion through competition and selection.[1] Many other aspects, such as their contextual and historical nature (the true meaning of a meme becoming clear only when viewed in its original context, and when considering its origins and evolution over time) or their ironic, quasi dada ethos,[2] are often proposed as discriminating factors when trying to differentiate memes from other digital imagery.

One salient feature, however, seems to enjoy almost universal consent when trying to characterize memes: 'The value of a meme arises not from the work of one author but from that of many' according to copyright law experts May Cheng and Maryna Polataiko.[3] Memes don't care about copyright; memes don't care about authorshipFrom a copyright lawyer's perspective, the answer clear: 'To this day, copyright law is heavily influenced by individualistic conceptions of authorship. Yet unlike a literary work penned by the "author-genius", memes are collective creations comprising diffuse and oft-anonymous involvement'.[4]

If only it were this simple.

As Clusterduck,[5] we're currently working on a project called Meme Manifesto.[6] During our research, we bumped into a cluster of images that shattered our preconceptions about memes. They looked like memes. They felt like memes. However, they presented with

1 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013), 49.
2 Valentina Tanni, *MEMESTETICA, il settembre eterno dell'arte* (Roma: Nero, 2020).
3 May Cheng and Maryna Polataiko, "Need a Good Laugh? Memes and Copyright," *Osler*, April 30, 2020, https://www.osler.com/en/resources/regulations/2020/need-a-good-laugh-memes-and-copyright.
4 Cheng and Polataiko, "Need a Good Laugh?"
5 https://clusterduck.space.
6 Clusterduck, "Meme Manifesto," Meme Manifesto website, accessed June 2021, https://mememanifesto.space.

some important differences: while often quoting or referencing popular memetic formats, they didn't rely on them. They weren't playing according to the usual rules. Sure, the basic mechanics were the same: images and texts of all sorts, juxtaposed through remixing and collage. However, the thought and care given to these creations was unusual. The visuals were polished, the fonts refined. The roughness and 'ugly' aesthetics of these works was clearly the result of careful work, inspired by undeniable visual savviness. In more than one case, the quoting of artistic currents or famous artworks was explicit, though of course masked under the usual layers of memetic irony. Most importantly: not onl could these images easily be traced back to their original author, individual authorship seemed to be one of their main hallmarks.

While trying to identify these artefacts, we couldn't help but ask ourselves: were these *meme d'auteur*? Did we need to revise some of the most common assumptions about the nature of memes?

We don't want to give a final answer to this question here. Instead, we are going to share some of our reflections and present the three lines of investigation we have been following so far. The first is related to platform architecture, platform politics and how these both relate to deplatforming and community diasporas. The second is related to the conflicts surrounding identity politics, and to the online culture wars that arise from them. And finally, the third path is searching for hints in contemporary revisions of the concept of social class.

PART I: A Community gets Deplatformed

In December 2018, following accusations involving child pornography, Apple decided to remove the microblogging platform Tumblr from its iOS App Store, leaving its then-owner Yahoo with no choice but to drastically restrict the presence of NSFW-content on its servers. Huge quantities of images, from hardcore porn to female nipples (a specification of the new community guidelines that became an instant meme),[7] were flagged and deleted overnight on very short notice.[8] The policies of the platform were thus radically altered, leading to a removal of the well-known 'safe mode' function and altering the character of Tumblr for good.

These changes had two immediate results: firstly, Tumblr was readmitted to the App Store. Secondly, the highly influential, sex-positive queer subcultures that had chosen Tumblr as their natural habitat were forced to look for a new home. While many members of this community migrated to decentralized platforms like Discord, where they can be found to this day, and others decided to raise NSFW friendly platforms which are more or less

7 "Female-presenting Nipples," Know Your Meme, last updated October 2020, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/female-presenting-nipples.

8 Shannon Liao, "Tumblr will Ban All Adult Content on December 17th," *The Verge*, December 3, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/12/3/18123752/tumblr-adult-content-porn-ban-date-explicit-changes-why-safe-mode.

small Tumblr clones,[9] a considerable number decided to settle in one of the most guarded, commercialized and puritan places of the internet: Instagram. What were we to make of this conundrum?

It was certainly not the first time in internet history that a large group of users was suddenly forced to move *en masse* to more prosperous lands due to a change in the community policies of the hosting platform, a phenomenon that has sometimes been called 'Social Media Diaspora'. One of the first illustrious examples of such a diaspora coincides—unsurprisingly, we might say—with the birth of 4chan. As Whitney Phillips recounts, 4chan was 'originally conceived in 2003 as a content overflow site for a particularly NSFW Something Awful subforum called *Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse*'.[10] 4chan wasn't the only 'spin-off' from the comedy website Something Awful. In many Weird Twitter users, including the famous user @dril,[11] used to meet on a Something Awful subforum called 'Fuck You and Die'.[12] These communities, when moving from one platform to another, brought with them styles, symbols and tones of voice, which helped their members to recognize each other once they got to the other side. For 4chan, these hallmarks were NSFW content, lore, and memes. For the so-called Weird Twitter, to take another famous example, the hallmarks were the surreal, ironic, and dark humor, and the intentionally poor quality of images.

Communities' hallmarks are also crucial for the process of self-identification, as shown by the case of the internet subculture known as Vaporwave, which came to play a crucial role in the rise of Tumblr. As Know Your Meme reports, the first article in which the Tumblr community and the highly recognizable 'Tumblr a e s t h e t i c' were associated with the Vaporwave music genre dates back to 2013.[13] The 'viral images' associated with Vaporwave had been around on Tumblr for a good few years already, as Tumblr users, following the open architecture of the platform, had started to share those cute, sad, nostalgic motifs *ad infinitum,* creating a very recognizable visual culture, something *new* and yet already *dead* at the same time.[14] In the following years, more than a few commentators would refer to Mark Fisher's account of *hauntology* to describe the harrowing sense of nostalgia emanating from these digital artefacts. In fact, some creators from the Vaporwave community would even come to incorporate Fisher's quotes in their works, making the connection explicit.

9 Sean Captain, "After Tumblr's NSFW Ban, These Adult Communities have Come Out on Top," *Fast Company*, June 4, 2019, https://www.fastcompany.com/90358305/six-months-after-tumblrs-nsfw-ban-these-kink-communities-are-coming-out-on-top.

10 Whitney Phillips. *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2015), 63.

11 Wikipedia Contributors, "Dril," Wikpedia, accessed June 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dril.

12 Taylor Wofford, "Fuck You And Die: An Oral History of Something Awful," *Vice*, April 5, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en/article/nzg4yw/fuck-you-and-die-an-oral-history-of-something-awful.

13 Anothercountyheard, "The Verdict on Vaporwave," *Anothercountyheard Blogspot*, March 19, 2013, https://anothercountyheard.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-verdict-on-vaporwave.html.

14 Anothercountyheard, "The Verdict on Vaporwave."

Since their inception, it has always been clear that these pics were something different from the memes that were shared on reddit or 4chan at the time. As told by Anothercountyheard, author of the article 'The Verdict on Vaporwave': 'I had seen these weird new graphics, and the music was closely tied to everything I had been following since 2010. Putting it all together, connecting the dots, I began to see this new meme, the latest in a series of so-called micro-genres emanating from the underground internet music cult, as nothing less than a *new unifying aesthetic*'.[15] It is no coincidence that Anothercountyheard calls them a 'new meme'. The first thing that catches the eye is definitely the 'new' and 'unifying aesthetics': while unmotivational posters, lolcats, rage comics, or advice animals respond to the so-called 'Internet Ugly Aesthetic', which, as Nick Douglas explains so well, 'is supposed to look like shit',[16] these new images were on some other kind of visual journey. Moreover, 'Ugly Aesthetic' memes tended to be, without a doubt, the result of a collective work, a product of the 'Hivemind'. They were almost always made by anonymous users, or in some cases stolen from cartoonists that used to publish their comics on DeviantArt and MySpace, and then remixed by anonymous users. And the 4chan and troll community certainly rewarded anonymity as one of their first rules of conduct and original hallmarks, despising 'namefags' over anything else. Meanwhile, these 'new memes' on Tumblr were attempting to reach something fresh, something beautiful, something to look at for no other reason than to enjoy pure aesthetic pleasure. Soon enough, the creators behind these works begun to reclaim them by doing something highly unusual in the popular meme community: they started to show their identity.

It is interesting to note how, over time, Tumblr users changed their behaviour from a 'free repost' approach to a strict 'quote the source' approach. From the start, Tumblr's platform architecture offered a backtracking system: users could travel backwards from one repost to another, in order to reach the first source. But sometimes, for the most viral images, going backwards would be a very long and perilous travel, or sometimes a 'scumbag reposter' would do a copy-pasta instead of a proper repost. Over time, this became a problem, leading to a slow but sure change in user behavior. As artist, performer, and active Tumblr community member since 2012 Mara Oscar Cassiani told us in a private conversation, it's difficult to define whether this change was due to a rising awareness of the flaws of Tumblr's reposting system, or if, instead, the shift was due to the influence that Instagram was having on the community (more on this later). Whatever the explanation, around 2015 many users that were active both on Tumblr and Instagram realized that they could easily monetize their online activity on Instagram, trading online clout for fame, followers and sometimes even financial revenues. Soon, a 'new awareness' spread on Tumblr. The 'free repost', which until then had been the standard practice on Tumblr, turned into a constant struggle for attribution: reposters started to receive numerous direct messages by the original creators of popular images,

15 Anothercountyheard, "The Verdict on Vaporwave."
16 Nick Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look like Shit," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 314-339.

asking them to quote them properly. Soon enough, specific rules of conduct for attributions began to appear on many platforms—not just on Tumblr, but also Pinterest, for instance. As we will see in a bit, this aspect remains present in the 'unwritten laws' of what we will call the *meme d'auteur,* or Original Content (OC) community.

To close this short disquisition on 'Social Media Diasporas', we need to mention the 'Weird Facebook'. The birth of Weird Facebook could maybe count as the first example of a diaspora that occurred from Tumblr to another platform. According to Know Your Meme, 'many of the earlier Weird Facebook pages were used in a manner similar to Tumblr, with simple image reposts that were not generated by any member or admin of the meme group'.[17] In other words, the Tumblr reposting and shitposting hallmark is easily recognizable in the community that, from 2015, started to invade and derange normal Facebook users' routines.

PART II: A War Looms Over the Horizon

It would be limiting to speak of Weird Facebook as a community of users coming from Tumblr only. As we ourselves have had the opportunity to experience, 'Weird Facebook includes "art world" people, writers, 4chan and reddit users, people who are obsessed with rare memes, IRL influencers, social justice 'warriors', and seemingly normal people who love shitposting on Facebook.'[18]

It's also worth noting that some of the most prolific Weird Facebook memers, who had actually managed to make a name for themselves in the community, later played a crucial role in bringing the scene to Instagram. One illustrious example is Gangster Popeye, whose works were quoted in a 2016 New York Magazine article praising Weird Facebook.[19]

Gangster Popeye, also known by her name Bambi Terranova, initially gained notoriety for the ferociously ironic style of her memes, usually featuring skeletons and - according to a dedicated Fandom page - 'edgy-sounding, "I don't take shit from anyone" statements that subvert towards absurdly post-ironic messages of tolerance and kindness'.[20]

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17 "Weird Facebook / Post-Ironic Facebook," KnowYourMeme, accessed June 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/weird-facebook-post-ironic-facebook#fn1.

18 Rosemary Wilcox, "Why 'Weird Facebook' is the Next Great Internet Subculture," *Best Stories Online*, October 1, 2015, http://beststoriesonline.com/science/2015/10/01/Weird-Facebook-Normie-Facebook.html.

19 Hudson Hongo, "The Rise of Weird Facebook: How the World's Biggest Social Network Became Cool Again (and Why It Matters)," *New York Magazine*, February 25, 2016, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/02/weird-facebook-became-cool-again.html.

20 Memepage Wiki Contributors, "Gangster Popeye," accessed June 2021, https://memepage.fandom.com/wiki/Gangster_Popeye.

In Gangster Popeye's production, as well as in her biography as a trans woman, many of the hallmarks that would come to characterize what we now know as Original Content (OC) meme style were already visible. Pop-culture references and characters, especially from cartoons or videgames (e.g. Garfield, Sonic, Sailor Moon, Super Mario Bros), get mixed with tropes from American political culture and usually detourned through corrosive, surreal and provocative captions. Fonts often become protagonists, seemingly breaking with the 'poorly made' style common to most popular memes.

There are no recognizable formats, or at least none that could be considered exclusive to the OC community; instead, popular meme formats, templates and characters are quoted, remixed or dissolved. There's deep familiarity with memetic culture, but also a detachment and self-reflexivity that, although dissimulated through irony and black humour, is revelatory of a different ethos and sense of belonging from the one most commonly found among 4chan's anons.[21] Images and texts in OC memes are frequently arranged in ways that are reminiscent of political propaganda posters. The messages are often blunt and direct, although dissimulated by multiple layers of irony. What we see here is a strong underlying political message: statements are often harsh and leave no room for misunderstanding. What are we to make of this?

Of course, politics are no stranger to meme culture. In her influential reading of the online culture wars that preceded Trump's election, Irish writer Angela Nagle draws an almost Manichean picture of contemporary meme culture: ferocious Trump-supporting incel trolls on one side, and enraged social justice warriors on the other side, vying for cultural hegemony by means of memes and using 4chan and Tumblr as their respective home turfs.[22] While Nagle's work has been criticized both over its sourcing[23] and her implicit suggestion that the Alt-Right's radicalization was an indirect consequence of aggression by Tumblr's Social Justice Warriors (an early echo of today's controversies around the concept of Cancel Culture), her characterization of Tumblr as the digital home of a very lively, heterogeneous, and influential LGBTQ+ scene struck a cord and remains influential to this day.

A look at the most popular themes and tropes of the OC meme community seems to confirm this picture: not only are many OC memes filled with caustic references and puns about sexuality, masturbation and the notion of gender as a social construct, but they often openly target the incel community and stigmatize homophobic and transphobic behaviour. Together with their openly anti-capitalist stance and peculiar aesthetics,

21 Anon stands for Anonymous and is a common nickname used by 4chan users to address each other.

22 Angela Nagle. *Kill all Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr to Trump And The Alt-Right* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2017).

23 Charles Davis, "Sloppy Sourcing Plagues 'Kill All Normies' Alt-Right Book," *The Daily Beast,* March 30, 2018, https://www.thedailybeast.com/kill-all-citations-sloppy-sourcing-plagues-kill-all-normies-book-on-sjws-and-the-alt-right.

this activistic ethos shows how Tumblr's spirit, in many ways, lives on in the OC meme community.

We should also remember that the aforementioned digital culture wars are often fought ferociously through doxxing, profile shutdowns[24] and personal attacks of the most vicious nature, with sometimes dramatic consequences for those involved. Many members of the OC community are part of marginalized groups (for example, people of color or trans women), and their digital presence is often characterized by an open discussion of topics related to mental health and depression. Their social media profiles sometimes become the only space for them to positively affirm their identity and build relationships with peers. It shouldn't come as a surprise that, when these digital spaces come under coordinated attack, the consequences can be dramatic. Such, sadly, was the case of Nia Fae Loy, a Portland-based trans rights activist who gained wide popularity with her OC meme profile Femme4Memes.[25] After being violently doxxed and attacked for multiple months through the trolling platform Kiwi Farms, Nia Fae Loy committed suicide in 2018. In 2019, an Italian user called Pianura Pagana published a eulogy for Nina Fae Loy on Medium, starting the article by complaining that a popular meme she had created, featuring two anime girls in front of a political world map and the words 'ALL TITS ARE REAL - ALL BORDERS ARE FAKE', had been 'taken' by tumblr and twitter without crediting the original source.[26] The episode shows how proper crediting doesn't always have to be about extracting revenue from memes - sometimes it's just about the simple recognition of artistic merit (though this in turn may be a form of symbolic capital to spend with the peer community, to borrow a concept from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu).

Still, the main question remains unanswered: why did significant parts of such a politically militant community decide to use Instagram and Facebook as platforms? And why do attribution and authorship became so important for creators of OC memes? To find the answer, we will have to take a step back and draw upon the all-too-often forgotten notion of social class.

PART III: Memers of the World, Unite!

To this day, and despite many admirable efforts, social theory has not been able to restore the concept of social class back to its old prominence. One of the most interesting attempts to update this key notion of Marxist thought was by New Media theorist

24 Usually by means of coordinated mass reporting of supposed community rules violations.

25 https://femme4memes.com/.

26 Pianura Pagana, "All Tits are Real, all Borders are Fake - In Memorial di Nia Fae Loy," *Medium*, September 14, 2019, https://medium.com/@r.pederzolli/all-tits-are-real-all-border-are-fake-nia-fae-loy-femme4memes-464ec6015164.

McKenzie Wark in her book *A Hacker Manifesto*.[27] According to Wark, cognitive capitalism is characterized by a new dynamic of class exploitation, determined by the control of intellectual property. The result is the emergence of a new dominating group, which she calls the vectorialist class:

> Whereas the capitalists exploited the laboring and producing classes by imposing the property relation on all fields of scarcity, the vectoralists are cutting-edge cognitive capitalists who use the concept of 'intellectual property' to capture and structure the field of immaterial labor – a field that actually is not characterized by scarcity. In other words, they exploit the hackers, who have yet to become conscious of themselves as a new class in the history of class struggle.[28]

When observing the increasingly militant fight for proper attribution and crediting among members of the OC meme community, we couldn't help but ask ourselves: was this just the latest instance of a digital enclosure driven by the enforcement of the capitalist logic of intellectual property? Or was this actually an example of the hacker class's fight for sovereignty over its own creations against the vectorialist class? If the latter were truly the case, maybe the puns on marxist propaganda so popular in the community, such as the invitation to 'reclaim the memes of production', reveal much more than just blasé millennial humor and wannabe leftist virtue signaling? Could it be that the hacker class is finally starting to gain self-consciousness?

Certainly, such a reading would explain the tendency of many members of the OC community to use Instagram and Facebook to monetize their own creations: only an apparent contradiction, if we look closely. There is no doubt that Zuckerberg's platforms excel at offering opportunities to transform content into revenue: their whole architecture favors the monetarization of human emotions and affect, as the past years have so disastrously showed. the creators of OC memes flock to the places that offer them the best opportunity to monetize their work and if theeager to enforce a system that grants them credit for their work, since their financial income depends on itwith the original hacker ethos, which affirms that 'information wants to be free'?[29]

Clearly, the presence the hacker class on the vectoralist platforms gave rise to numerous conflicts and contradictions: from profiles being cancelled without notice under the

27 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

28 Gene Ray, "Tactical Media and the End of the End of History," *Linksnet,* November 12, 2006, https://www.linksnet.de/artikel/20223.

29 However, as Finnish philosopher Pekka Himanen observed, the influence of that original hacker ethos on today's creative class might be best understood through the lens of Weber's study on the relationship between protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism—meaning that, just as not all capitalists necessarily incorporated protestant ethics in their personal lives, not all creatives live according to the strictest precepts of hacker culture (see Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic: and the Spirit of the Information Age* (New York: Random House, 2001)).

infamous pretext of community policies violation, to the rising frictions with commercial predatory profiles which appropriate memes without crediting the original authors. However, all attempts to create some sort of unified resistance movement, whether through coordinated actions, strikes or even the creation of a 'Memers' Union', so far have been unsuccessful. An excellent analysis of the underlying weaknesses of these efforts has been proposed by the meme research group *The Philosopher's Meme*:

> The hacker class has never come close to establishing a consciousness comparable to that of the vectoralists [...]. There are, however, a number of artisan classes cohering under vectoralist hegemony. 'YouTubers' refer to themselves as a such when railing against Google's content and DMCA policies [...]. This suggests that the hacker class has reached a certain stage wherein class identification occurs according to membership in a group which is conscious of its unity and homogeneity, and of the need to organize it, but with a blindness to the case of the wider social group of Internet users. The radicalization and unification of these groups, and the active prevention of their assimilation into some kind of 'petit vectoralist' creative class – 'vectoral' in the sense that they profit by flows of views, likes, and subscribes which their stocks of content generate; 'petit' insofar as they do not own the vectors upon which they labor – is paramount.[30]

PART IV: Money Makes the World go Around

For our work on Meme Manifesto, we contacted members of the OC community—to ask them permission to use their works, but also, as we were at it, to gain some insights into the topics discussed in this article. From a first review of their answers, the theory that monetzation—next to the pull of the platforms' network effect—has been a powerful driver towards Instagram and Facebook for former Tumblr users seems to find some confirmation. An answer by @eel_merchant is quite representative in this sense:

> I used to always watermark a meme as a conscious attempt to promote growth of my platform, I found it annoying for a meme of mine to go viral and not have credit, mainly because I wanted to see how far it had spread and without attribution you miss out on that. I care less about that now, though - shitposting to the void feels good.

Presently, the OC memers' awakening into a self-counscious hacker class seems stuck in a tragic and constant struggle between the need to monetize original creations on the one hand, and the mirage of a collective hive mind on the other. On the facebook private group /tpmg/ - TPM Meme Research and Development, one of the many research

30 Anonymous, "On Vectoralism & the Meme Alliance's General Strike," *The Philosopher's Meme*, October 27, http://thephilosophersmeme.com/2016/10/27/on-vectoralism-and-the-meme-alliance/.

groups powered by the blog The Philosopher's Meme, user Kit Jones summarized a popular opinion of what a meme should be and why OC memes can't (supposedly) exist:

> There is no such thing as an original content meme because a meme is not a meme until it has become a meme. It is the first art form that I can think of where success is not merely a measure of its popularity or its quality, but is actually a necessity of its classification. As such, it's really more like a language than an art form. An unsuccessful meme following the format of a prior successful meme is still a meme (just a bad meme). An original meme without relation to another meme is not yet a meme. It's just digital artwork. [...] A meme requires agreement between multiple people. It is necessary for people to say "I have seen this before and I know to what it is referring". As such, it mimics language acquisition. [...] I would not argue against the creation of these images (how could anyone), what I would criticise is calling them memes. But hey, what do I know. I'm just talking out of my ass.

Yet, at the start of 2021, the need to solve this riddle is becoming more urgent with every passing week. The 2020-2021 period, which will certainly go down in history as the stolen years of the pandemic, is also the time of the *meme d'auteur*. It began with the release of the documentary 'Feels Good Man', which many have seen as Matt Furie's revenge on the alt-right and his official consecration as the original creator of Pepe the Frog. And it is continuing with the sale for $590,000 of the famous 'Nyan Cat' GIF by the Digital Art Market foundation.app via Non-Fungible Token. This event sets a very important precedent in the history of the art market and in the history of memes. It is the first time that a creative and comic book author, Chris Torres, has been able to sell not just a digital work of art but a meme, earning 90% of the proceeds from the sale. There has been, needless to say, some less famous cases of a meme sold as NFT, the Rare Pepe Wallet being a perfect example. But what struck us about the 'Nyan Cat' auction was the undoubtful declaration, directly printed on the Blockchain, that Chris Torres, being the creator of Nyan Cat, and the first that actually posted the GIF on MySpace, was also the sole owner of that marvelous meme and internet sensation, and therefore his personal signature on the NFT would be sufficient to attest the official selling of the digital piece. The Art Market is apparently more than ok with the notion of *meme d'auteur.*

If we are to prevent a 'great enclosure' of the digital commons that is the memesphere with a scramble to reclaim bits and pieces of this epic collective artwork for personal financial gain, we should also gain a deeper understanding of the reasons and motives that favor individual authorship over collective anonymity. This article wants to be a modest contribution in this direction. Surely, as long as we are all forced to endure the economic conditions imposed by late capitalism, it will be difficult, if not impossible to find an answer to the questions and contradictions addressed in this article. Ultimately, the issue of intellectual property will only be solved when we find coordinated, structural

answers to the fake scarcity imposed by cognitive capitalism. A Universal Basic Income for all could be a first step in the right direction.

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MAKING POETRY BABIES IN AN ONLINE WORLD

LAURENCE SCHERZ

If there were a meeting akin to alcoholics anonymous for the overconsumption of memes, I would be the first to lift my butt off the chair and say: 'Hi, my name is Laurence and I'm a meme-oholic.' Not only do I attempt to translate these intrinsically virtual copies of copies and edits of edits into an offline conversation on a regular basis—with lots of flailing of my limbs when it's a particularly good one and I'm in complete disbelief that the other person has not, in fact, seen it yet. I even get praise from strangers for my extensive collection and will not hesitate to try and 'cure' someone's bad mood with 'the funniest they've ever seen'.

My dreams involve meme battles in an offline arena where dancing is allowed, and only the best meme-naisseur survives. Suffice to say, I love memes. But I also adore books, and the bizarre, enticing world they have to offer, a clean-cut escape from reality. This is the account of how the two met, in my living room, and even shook hands.

Magic Box that Makes Merry

Imagine if you will: an avid reader, writer, and owner of an impressive library, sits on their couch. Having succumbed to the allure of Netflix they passively consume images and sounds. The unread books stare at them from across the room, wondering 'why not them? Why not now?'. Perhaps to conquer their guilt, or out of sheer boredom—because albeit relaxing, the land of TV shows can be quite boring, especially while re-watching—the watcher starts to note down remarkable or funny one-liners that pass by.

This viewer is, of course, me. The lists on my phone grew longer, and longer, and *longer*. I named the scribbles 'Netflix Poetry' and eventually stopped numbering the entries—that's how vast the collection had become. At some point, I started doing the same with memes. The collection of memes on my Insta account started pouring into my notes: fragmented, incorrect sentences, jokes devoid of their punchlines, words whose origin I couldn't pinpoint even if my life depended on it.

The semiotics of these memes were all out of whack. Like shipwrecked passengers, they sat alone on an island with no context, no visuals to guide them. My phone had become a harbor for lost, incomplete memes without context, not yet appointed a new destination. The only companion they had were the Netflix one-liners, brutally taken from their home country in a similar manner.

The nature of these digital-native words and scrap sentences had already altered slightly, but they weren't *something new* quite yet. It was only after the invitation came to apply a process involving chance on recycled texts, resulting in a Dada-istic poem as per artist Tristan Tzara's manual of 1920, that these pieces found their forever home. Dada poems were meant to reflect 'a world where words should not be believed',[1] and seeing as 'though[t] is produced in the mouth',[2] all meaning is valid within these non-sensical poems.

A Big, Postmodern world

Of course, members of Dada didn't have anything like the internet. It seemed strange to exchange their analogue paper and scissors for the quick flip of the ctrl paste buttons, but strangely—and wonderfully— it worked. What came out felt more at one with the internet's scatterbrain than a classical (let's say, linear and analogue) poem, raising the question of how to approach this kind of electronic poetry. Researcher Giovanna Di Rosario argues that 'there is a need of a new definition of textuality in addition to the previous definitions proposed by different disciplines or theories such as philology, logic, semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism'.[3] She goes on to say that none of these previous approaches 'have expressed the perspective of the text as a material machine, a device capable of manipulating itself as well as the reader'.[4]

My sweet, no-longer-forlorn digital babies, manipulating both themselves and the reader: I couldn't be more proud. A cut and paste birth it was, a random combination yet not random at all. Marcus Boon describes cut and paste in the world of computers as 'a dominant metaphor; more broadly, fragmentation, pastiche, and juxtaposition are characteristic of postmodernity.'[5] And of course, it's true, online we are all big, big girls in a big, big postmodern world. Something else happened right before my screen-gazing eyes: the pieces not only aligned with one another, but became a new, shiny thing, one that I didn't seem to have full control over. Boon, again, tells us how 'montage implies that a whole has been broken, even if it is then reassembled into a new whole. Something is broken in a montage, and in most successful montages you can still see the break, which is often what makes them funny'.[6]

Because, joyfully, loudly, happily, yes—these electronically made poetry children were hilarious as fuck. But why? And what had travelled through them from the memes, and what had stayed behind?

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1 Tzara, 1959, quoted in Giovanna Di Rosario, "Electronic Poetry: Understanding Poetry in the Digital Environment," (PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, 2011), 50.
2 Rosario, "Electronic Poetry," 50.
3 Rosario, "Electronic Poetry," 80.
4 Rosario, "Electronic Poetry," 80.
5 Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 143.
6 Boon, *In Praise of Copying,* 145.

Doing Me a Syntax

One day, a friend of mine proclaimed that, to him, 'everyone is a doggo now'. My cat: a fluffy doggo. Our mutual friend: an amazing doggo. The tree across from my apartment still standing there after all the others had been cut: a lonely doggo. Funnily enough, this offline use of digital native language was to me, in all its absurdity, the most natural to boot, exactly *because* it owned up to its fragmentation, its out of place-ness. Boon: 'A fragment is an unstable unit—but we, too, are "unstable units"; and our longing for wholeness, our need to populate our equally unstable environment with wholes, expresses our discomfort with that moving, shifting chaos'.[7] And that explains quite possibly my infatuation with the doggos not only roaming the internet, but the whole offline world, surrounding me with their goofy eyes and human faces.

What had I brought together then, into a brave new world of literature? In *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, linguist Gretchen McCulloch points out that 'memes are a kind of internet folklore, drawing parallels to dirty limericks, ghost stories and pranks'.[8] On top of that, McCulloch sees them as (wonderfully) weird and containing a playful language that invites participation. While making my poetry kin I observed how the language of the memes, strangely similar to that of poems—slightly elusive, with points of reference known mostly to initiates—felt right at home in the melodic cadence of verses I squeezed them into.

What else is a well-written, or performed, poem other than an invitation into a world, one where the reader finishes the writer's thoughts, by bringing their own little bag of references along with them, by formulating new images with the tools—the words—provided for them? With this, the words by academic Scott H. Church ring very true: 'Remix *requires* the participation of the user to alter the original cultural artifact.'[9] All language is remixed, perhaps, and thus all poets are DJs.

I Worked Out in My Mind

The joke or 'clue' of a meme is very often—yet not always—a punchline that is accomplished with visual aid. Depriving the reader of this visual information when dragging the meme language into fiction, into these assembled poems, sometimes proved effective. An additional weirdness entered the scene, or, the joke was still understood and shone brightly in its new-found appearance. But sometimes the transposition missed the mark completely.

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7 Boon, *In Praise of Copying,* 152.

8 Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (London: Harvill Secker, 2019).

9 Scott H. Church, "All Living Things are DJs: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Remix Culture" (PhD diss.,: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2013), 50.

Cutting up these jokes laid them bare in a way that was quite surprising, almost reminiscent of the American author William Burroughs' cut-up method from the 1960s. Burrough's method aimed to 'expose the texts' true, deeper meanings',[10] an action 'seen as undermining authority, as breaking down the control system'.[11]

But I certainly do not wish to compare myself to Burroughs. I merely want to tell you about the process of weed picking after the chance process had been done. Which darlings to keep, and which ones to throw away in the river? These choices felt almost arbitrary. For I do not know what my reader knows, how meme-savvy they are, which remixed jokes they will effortlessly grasp and which ones they won't. In this, I only have my own framework to hold onto. But to choose is also to exclude, for as McCulloch says, 'laughing at a meme is staking a claim to being an insider'.[12] As a writer, I am walking blindly, hoping my reader owns somewhat the same cultural references as I do, or if not, can estimate this perspective—something that is more likely, of course, seeing the publication my poetry children find themselves in.

Another beautiful thought regarding the humor of memes comes, again, from Boon: 'Puns are funny because they reveal, at the level of the unit of semantic meaning "itself," the possibility of radical disjunctures and breaks. They show that a word is an unstable montage of meanings'.[13] A broken world filled with endless words and meanings, light seeping into the cracks while jokes appear on its surface: sounds about right. At least *that* part of the memes travelled through and entered the gates of poetry.

Lean Mean Meme Machine

The term *meme* originates from the ancient Greek word *mīmēma*, meaning 'something that is imitated'.[14] There's a meme in my catalogue for this too: 'We get it, poets, things are *like* other things.'

Life imitates life, poetry imitates life imitating life, metaphors and parables are flying around in an intense Droste effect that makes your head spin. Almost always signifying something outside themselves, memes are akin to a poet looking out of their window and describing the world through comparisons, referenced symbolism and insider jokes (sometimes only referring to the poem they are in). Is this poet, writing their new-found hybrids with all the pastiche, montage and remix they posses, not just a

10 Janneke Adema, "Cut-Up," in *Keywords in Remix Studies,* eds. > Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher and xtine burrough (London: > Routledge, 2017), 105.
11 Adema, "Cut-Up," 105.
12 McCulloch, *Because Internet.*
13 Boon, *In Praise of Copying*, 155.
14 Bisera Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Elena Shalevska, 'Internet Memes and their Socio-Linguistic Features," *European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies* 2, no. 4 (January, 2018): 159.

Marcel Duchamp, casually plucking ready-mades from the web and putting them on a literary pedestal?

Avant-garde works such as Duchamp's and, naturally, the Dada artists', had 'constantly been built around a critique of notions of originality, identity, and property'.[15] This might explain my simmering intuition that intentional vagueness was needed around which lines of my poems were quotes from the internet, and which were by my own hand. Surely, a hundred years later you would think notions of authorship and originality had evolved enough to make me care less—but alas. Perhaps the contemporary poet who's using recycled digital texts is not a Dada artist after all. Maybe, as I've joked unwisely, a DJ? Or something else altogether?

In a *New Yorker* article titled 'The Writer as Meme Machine', poet and critic Kenneth Goldsmith sees poetry slipping out the backdoor, running towards the internet and finding its place there.[16] A virtual space where an even more experimental form of (post) modernism is possible, a new era for recycling, appropriating, retooling, decoding, and much more—once again: our big, postmodern world. Casting aside for a minute the death of the author and the disputed nature of postmodern literature, one thing about this article stands out: how Goldsmith sees the writer of nowadays 'as a meme machine, writing works with the intention for them to ripple rapidly across networks only to evaporate just as quickly as they appeared'.[17]

Lonely stones, my poetry babies are; filled with internet slang, they're tossed into the river of poetry, hoping to cause enough ripples. What these ripples look like or entail, I have no idea. But there is, as Boon says, 'power in naming, because naming brings together the heterogeneous energies of various fragments and unifies them in a particular name/form'.[18]

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A SELL FOR FILLING PROPHECY

When you accidentally write 'satan'
instead of
'Santa'

Made to be licked, topped, and loved
(same, babe)
— same.
The past tense of William Shakespeare is
Wouldwas Shookspeared
This is an unnecessarily
long
word.

SEA BIOLOGISTS BE LIKE:
OKAY
NOT
HERE

Today I learned that I've been mis — pronouncing
microuwaffée
all my life.

I'm wearing dark glasses today, 'cause I'm seeing
the future
this is upsettingly accurate
helpeth
me
where did the hot ginger go? Did she
die?

Early bird catches the
oat flat white

Bury my rejuvenated maiden—head in furry,
love
for I have passed the rite into
spinster age.

WELL IF PEOPLE THINK I AM, MAYBE I SHOULD
BECOME
kitty, love

Shaving anything other than
legs
armpits
pussy
balls
is like
WHAT U DEGENERATE

Me, still processing twenty twenty:
Give my sex life a last
mewling
MORNINGGG

never trust guys who
talk to you
while

biking

I sell myself for filling.

Would bang and have breakfast with...
Are u a
goldsmith?

KICK IT IN THE DICK
That screen is my
digital
soul.

you're better than
pizza
hut
fuck
them.

Pussy palace in the eve, library
in
the
morn?

Bullets where invented in 1841.
People in
1840:
It's the end of times,

again.

To quote Hamlet, act III, line 87
— no.
HELLOOOO

THOU, ART,
HUNGETH, OVER
Goodbye forever, North of the
river

Casual small talk: ...
me: disturbing fact
no one
asked for.

Dicks and sitting on
(avocado) faces

HAD TO CALL THE FIRE MEN FOR MY BURNING
(LOINS)

Fill, my, holes
cold dark fucks
aka: scorpios.

Turn your cocks back one hour
tonight.

ah, balls
I'm — out.
Me:
folds one shirt

Each word gets its own shining
moment
How close I am
to
losing it.
In Soviet Russia, Waldo finds *you*

TITS NOW
LET IT
SNOW
A human hug combined with
a
pillow.

Snuggling, so, softly
Love isn't salty
till you
cry

Avoid
— gravy.

This WAP
misses
u
come back, plz.

RACISTS DON'T DESERVE MOLLY

A woman's
bare
breasts
calm
an, angry, sea

Wide dog gets somehow
wider,
seeks help from
God

colour me
intrigued
'oh god
I'm
so wide'

Anger is a potent spice

SQUEE—GY
SKEE—GIE
OOR—GIE

Relinquish is just a
fancy word
for lose.

Everything is a dildo
if ur
brave enough

I'm with much
news
which I shall now
b i r t h

Can I cry real quick?
Like a
spider
in
the brain

Why freeing Willy
was the — *wrong* —
thing to do:

I wish all everything
a very stop

TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE WHORE
CLOSE YOUR LEGS THEY'RE
NOT A DOOR

Ah yes, our breasts;
the chesticels.

Whales have been
loo—king at the stars
long
before
hu—mans

Sleep with my
husband?
Why,
my lover would be
furious!

THREE BOOBS, ZERO FUCKS
A Kodak moment

It's called garbage can,
not
garbage cannot

PUTTING THE PRO IN UNPRODUCTIVE

Live life to the fullest:
quit
ur job!

STUMPED

girls on bread
She cooks like
a six-year-old

Sexy squash, colossal squid
What's the prime of — *your* — life?

Get back to
work,
minimum wage.

1960: I bet we'll have
flying cars
in
the future

2020:
I LOOK LIKE A
SLAPPED
ARSE

The age, you, feel
means
m o r e
than your
actual
birth date.

FYI: all google accounts seem to
be
offlibe
#apoca—lypse

Like a fart
in the wind,
poof.

These animals just
l o v e
to
cause
absolute carnage.
laughing emoji

[INCOHERENT]
[GRUNGE]
[SINGING]

Some
body is on a
rollll
'
On the surface of the moss—smelling,
black—rimmed,
pond
glides the tall, peaceful, round swa—n.'

Hackers in
movies
be like:
“im — in”

IN A GLASS CAGE OF EMOTION

Is it wrong for a
Christian
to get
a tattoo?
Music to
eat brunch
to
:)) NP

It's beginning
to look
a lot
like
fuck
this.
GENETICALLY ENGINEERED
AND NAMED AFTER A
BUTT

mother, without,

baby
Spank me,
cor—po—rate
daddy

That's what gluhwein
do to
gaaaalzz.

'THE DISTURBINGLY HUMANOID FACE OF THE LAMB OF GOD HAS SHOCKED MANY': VISUAL STRATEGIES IN INTERNET MEMES ON THE RESTORATION OF THE *GHENT ALTARPIECE*

BY MARTIN HAßEN

What do the Lamb of God painted by Hubert and Jan van Eyck in 1432 and Kylie Jenner have in common? Well, a variation of the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme* might just have the answer. The meme juxtaposes Kylie's face with the head of the Mystic Lamb after its recent restoration. The comparison is captioned 'So apparently they restored the Ghent altarpiece and:' (Fig. 1). You can kind of get the resemblance between the two faces: the lamb's head to the left with its bug-eyed stare, jutting Shrek ears, lantern jaw, and daring pout *is* faintly reminiscent of Kylie's strong bone structure, saucer eyes and (in) famous full lips. But while the two images do share similarities in their own respect, it is the caption that draws them into equivalence and, in essence, makes the joke.

Indeed, it is the same text that captions the initial form of the meme (Fig. 2), and the difference is remarkable: on the left, we see the center of the altarpiece prior to restoration. It is characterized by its naturalistic, almost mimetic depiction of a sheep featuring slightly askew eyes on the side of the head (just where the eyes of a flight animal are naturally positioned), a broad nasal bridge ending in tenderly pink y-shaped nostrils and philtrum, and ears obliquely sticking out on top of its head. Looking straight at the viewer with a subtle smile, the image gives the impression of a passively observing animal that does compellingly resemble the natural look of a sheep—bar, perhaps, the odd structure that weirdly sticks out of the left side of the head which turned out to be the animal's original right ear. To the right, separated by a vertical black line, the now-revealed true face of the lamb looks strikingly unlike a sheep, almost grotesque.

As a way of making the restored lamb's head tangible for the internet community, both variations choose comparative vision: a traditional yet effective method of image criticism. In doing so, the memes elucidate formal parallels between the heads in question and so mockingly comment on the restoration of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Just as with comparative vision, they place two images from different contexts in contrast and assess them primarily based on their formal characteristics, which already suggests their analogy (or their shortcomings, respectively).[1] Thus, the image pairings are implemented as a purely visual argument that claims similarity or difference of the images, and is supposed to give proof of formal analogies tied together by a brief, provocative comment.

1 Peter Geimer, "Vergleichendes Sehen oder Gleichheit aus Versehen," in *Vergleichendes Sehen*, ed. Lena Bader, Martin Geier, Falk Wolf (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010), 49.

Fig. 1: Screenshot of a variation of the Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme juxtaposing the restored head of the Eyckian Lamb to Kylie Jenner's face. A comment connects the two images. Posted by @alexvtunzelmann to twitter.com on 22 January 2020.

Fig. 2: Screenshot of the initial variation of the Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme juxtaposing the head of the Mystic Lamb before and after restoration. A comment connects the two images. Posted by @fatherajds to twitter.com on 20 January 2020.

Nevertheless, let's not forget that the head of the Mystic Lamb in van Eyck's painting is only about the size of a walnut, mingling as it does with the myriad other pictorial elements of the 24 panels of the altarpiece. It is in cropping down the artwork to its very center, where the lamb's head is depicted as the iconographic climax that the formal likeness to Kylie's face is finally achieved. But even if the comparison of the lamb and her face is bewildering at first glance, it does not—after all—highlight a factual equivalence. Especially in the pop-cultural context of social networks, comparative vision is likely to be narrowed in its capabilities. This happens as polarizing images like these are paired—original/copy, before/after or right/wrong—in order to provide visual evidence or illustrate causalities.[2] Most internet memes make use of such incongruous couplings and anomalous juxtapositions, which are deliberately provocative and as bizarre as possible.[3] In pairing the Lamb of God with a sensational example of internet culture like the #KylieJennerLipChallenge, or by highlighting the drastic changes of the head during the restoration process, the memes seem to look for juxtapositions which specifically cater to the shock humor and the rapture for spectacle of the net community and, at the same time, illustrate their point of criticism.[4] But what is so shocking about the restoration of the altarpiece anyway, particularly regarding the restoration of the Mystic Lamb? Keeping in mind that the *Ghent Altarpiece* has, ever since its creation, been appreciated as *the* most significant testimony of late medieval European art by art historians and art lovers alike, the conspicuous transformation of this important detail *is* quite shocking from an amateur perspective.[5]

Already prior to the unveiling of the restored panel with the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* (Fig. 4) in Ghent on December 24th, 2019, online press had picked up on the incongruous depiction of the lamb's head. Most articles were illustrated with a comparison of the lamb prior to and after restoration in a manner pretty much identical to the juxtaposition later seen in the meme.[6] Additionally, the media quickly adopted a certain sneering rhetoric regarding the restoration campaign: calling the face 'disturbingly humanoid' or 'alarmingly anthropomorphic', immediately evoking a comparison of the Lamb of God to human physiognomy—anticipating the comparison to Kylie that followed about a month later.

By picking up this rhetoric of a 'disturbingly humanoid' sheep, yet another variation of the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme* introduces a different strategy to criticize van Eyck's Lamb of God. Instead of utilizing the image of the Mystic Lamb, this meme opts for an image of the anthropomorphized face of children's show character Shaun the Sheep floating before

2 Lena Bader, "Bricolage mit Bildern. Motive und Motivationen vergleichenden Sehens," in *Vergleichendes Sehen*, ed. id. Martin Geier, Falk Wolf (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2010), 21.

3 Michele Knobel et. al., "Online Memes, Affinities and Cultural Production," in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. id. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 215.

4 Knobel et. al., "Online Memes," 216.

5 Hélène Dubois, "When, By Whom and Why? Decisive Material and Optical Alterations of the Ghent Altarpiece," in *Van Eyck. An Optical Revolution*, ed. Maximiliaan Maartens, Till-Holger Borchert (Veurne: Hannibal Publishing, 2020), 236.

6 Nina Siegal, "Up Close, There's More to the Ghent Altarpiece Than the Lamb," *New York Times*, 27 January 2020, 5.

a greenish-blue backdrop. It is captioned: 'The disturbingly humanoid face of the lamb of God has shocked many . . .' (Fig. 3). Here, it is apparent that the user expects their peers to get the joke based on their awareness of the memetic discourse and media coverage of the restoration. While in the other examples it is the image or image pairing that specifies the context of the discussion about the restoration, in this variation of the meme the joke lies in the caption as there is no visual reference to the artwork in question. Captions, however, always influence the way images will be read by the viewer and the meaning of the image is altered by the sequence of all its preceding captions.[7] Following this quality of captions, the variation ties in with its memetic relatives not by implementing the same imagery, or by making use of comparative vision as its visual strategy, but simply by including the framing rhetoric of online press in its caption. The text enables a reading of the image of Shaun's face as an example of van Eyck's humanoid lamb as the ekphrasis generates visual correspondence.[8] At the same time, the image itself does share formal characteristics with the square portrait of the Lamb of God that is used by all the other memetic variations. It appears to offer enough visual equivalence to the other images that cluster around the 'failed' restoration to support the caption's ironic claim—even if the work of art itself is not depicted and the lack of comparative vision undermines the processual character of the before-and-after-idea.

Fig. 3: Screenshot of a variation of the Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme. The user substitutes the image of the Mystic Lamb with the face of Shaun the Sheep. The comment labels the head 'disturbingly humanoid', picking up online media rhetoric. Posted by @CheeseWorrier to twitter.com on 22 January 2020.

7 Walter Benjamin briefly discusses captions and their impact on the image they accompany as they are reproduced in media. Transferring Benjamin's observations on image captions in connection with photography and film onto internet memes proves fitting due to the net structure of the digital sphere in which threads and other means of referencing like hashtags play a superior role in communication and clustering thought patterns. Cf. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohm (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 8.

8 Andreas Beyer, "Die sichtbaren Städte: Architekturgeschichte als Bildwissenschaft," in *Art History on Demand? Dienstleistung Kunstgeschichte?*, vol. 2, ed. Oskar Bätschmann, Julia Gelshorn, Norberto Gramaccini (Emsdetten/Berlin: E. Imorde, 2008), 99.

In combining images with witty captions internet users apparently had a great time joking about the restoration of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. However, all of the variations make use of similar—if not the identical—visual strategies to frame the recovered head of the Lamb of God. This is to say that they all rely on a network of images that are in some way related to each other to create the joke and criticize the post-restoration Lamb of God primarily by highlighting formal similarities or differences. Based on the concept of comparative vision, these images, together with their textual add-ons, function as profound, taunting judgements. They deliberately juxtapose the head of the Mystic Lamb to historic and expressive moments of online communication—moments which are etched into the memory of its users—to hint at the broader history of *lulz* within the online community. As artifacts of a collective memory of internet culture, these images offer references by which the phenomenon of a 'disturbingly humanoid' face ties back to and is explained within the visual culture of the internet.[9]

(Re-)Formatting the Altarpiece

When the extensive overpainting was removed, the Lamb of God was only one of many details that changed drastically throughout the restoration of the altarpiece. But it was this specific transformation that caused quite the stir on social media. Why might the head have had such a memetic career? Apart from the facts that it sits at the very center of the retable and is also the eponym of the alternative name of the artwork, it may be that the head functions as a focal point of ironic criticism, catering to the visual habits of meme creators and consumers alike. Not only is the comparison of the before and after visually effective, but the image of the 'alarmingly humanoid' face immediately reminds internet users of the many other images of the same format and pictorial object. Case in point, the selfie: a squared-up close-up of a face taken at arm's length, in which snoots, grimaces and many other facial expressions are encoded in complex nuances which can nevertheless be unambiguously deciphered by its users within seconds. Selfies and similar mugshots usually pop up in very distinct moments of online communication, evoking and fulfilling certain reactions and expectations of net users.[10] Keeping in mind the very specific role of portraits of comical faces in digital communication, the headshot of the Mystic Lamb also proves convenient in countless other memetic circumstances beyond commentaries on the restoration campaign.

While the term *format* is nowadays heterogenous in meaning, within the discipline of art history it is traditionally used to describe the dimensions and aspect ratio of a work of art. Furthermore, it identifies different format types with their very own material, dimensional and symbolic peculiarities. Within this definition, the format itself is regarded as the product of a formatting process through which the borders of an image are defined, and its visual dimensions and properties are specified.[11] Accordingly, it restricts the pictorial object, as it determines what

9 Kerstin Schankweiler, *Bildproteste. Widerstand im Netz* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2020), 20.

10 Wolfgang Ullrich, "Selfies as a Universal Language," in *Self Expression in the Age of Instant Communication*, ed. Roger Scruton (Berlin: Self-Published, 2016), 43.

11 Roland Meyer, "Gesichtsbildformate 1860/1960. Disdéri, Warhol und der Primat der Zirkulation,"

is to be seen in an image. In the case of the portrait, for example, viewers will always expect face-like features in what they see, although they will not necessarily encounter a human sitter. This shows that whatever is depicted acts within the terms of its format, no matter what the pictorial object is.[12] Consequently, formats—like captions—fulfil an important role in how images are seen by encoding the object. In the case of the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme,* this means that by simply cropping the lamb's head to a square portrait, the format alone suggests similarities to the human face.

However, the case of the 'alarmingly humanoid' lamb cannot be entirely put down to a formatting process. The image of the restored head itself is a detail of a digital photograph that has been cropped into a close-up portrait. Accordingly, cropping the photograph of the original painting needs to be regarded as a process of strategic reformatting. This means that the previous dimensions of the original digital image have been changed in order to align it to the already-established square portrait format with its very own formal aspirations, meanings, and expectations in digital communication, as well as to the image repertoire of net culture. In doing so, the very complex reference system of the original painting is lost: the identification of the Lamb of God with Jesus Christ, for example, as it is sacrificed on the altar and the *Precious Blood* spills into the golden chalice in presence of the Holy Spirit representing the transubstantiation. Also lost is the Lamb's exposure to the *Arma Christi* or the *Fountain of Life* which again emphasizes the lamb as a metaphor of Jesus himself. (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Hubert & Jan van Eyck, Adoration of the Mystic Lamb, 1432, 350 x 461 cm, oil on wood, St. Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Macrophotography after the restoration. © closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be

in *Format. Politiken der Normierung in den Künsten ab 1960*, ed. Magdalena Nieslony, Yvonne Schweizer (Munich: Edition Metzel, 2020), 170.

12 Wolfram Pichler, Ralph Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2014), 144.

In contrast to the original iconographic interplay, the lamb's now-trademark facial features are the focus of attention, additionally emphasized by the green background with the radial golden lines that draw the gaze to the center of the image. Without its context, the lamb's head looks daffy and silly as well as 'poorly executed' if considered simply as an attempt at a mimetic depiction of a sheep. Accordingly, cropping it down to a square means that the image has been reformatted to such an extent that its visual impact was completely modified. The intention behind this strategy is obvious: in cropping the image to a square portrait, the narrative of an alarming resemblance of the restored animal to a human face appears visually confirmed. Moreover, reformatting fosters comparisons to other portraits of meme icons and thereby manifests the 'failure'-narrative through comparative vision alone.[13] Van Eyck's sheep is now available in the large pool of other square portraits to which it can be compared, may it be Kylie Jenner's face, or the everyday Insta-girl's duck-face selfie. Through reformatting, the lamb's formal properties within its original context are circumvented and matched to similar images—which have also been reformatted in their own respect. Just look at the image of Kylie (Fig. 1) and you'll immediately notice that it actually is a still of a popular video on YouTube that has been aligned to the Eyck-ian lamb in order to enhance the effect of the juxtaposition.[14] Through reformatting, van Eyck's outstanding work has been standardized to such an extent that it can be swapped with pretty much any other image of this visual cluster. The user can trade the head of the Mystic Lamb for a close-up of Shaun the Sheep.[15]

When looking at the format of the images implemented in the lamb memes, it is obvious that a certain iconic formula—an archetypal formal pattern or visual scheme—connects them all. Within it lies the memetic power of the reformatted image of the Mystic Lamb: every variation of the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme* implements square centered close-up portraits that recall the omnipresent selfie and its ilk, which are part of daily communication online. These headshots with their encoded facial expressions are an essential part of everyday visual literacies of net culture. As they reappear over and over again, in their familiarity users are encouraged to remix the components themselves.[16] For most of them remixing takes just a minute and they can become part of the discussion. Reformatting as a visual strategy, therefore, has a bifold character. On the one hand, it demonstrates the interaction of users with images as a way of communicating with their online peers. On the other hand, it highlights the independent existence of the image in its new form within the visual cluster into which it has been inserted based on this format.

13 Meyer, "Gesichtsbildformate," 171.
14 @FamousEntertainment, "Kylie Jenner | Before & After Transformations | Plastic Surgery UPDATED," YouTube video, 2 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VloNr-ek1Jo&list=PL4suFCmDzZ0_AucuxQfp0NWvuFoy70kWK&index=11.
15 Schankweiler, *Bildproteste*, 28.
16 Schankweiler, *Bildproteste*, 27.

Visual Clusters in Network Cultures

Through reformatting, the image of the Mystic Lamb has become part of a cluster of images gathering around the keywords 'disturbingly humanoid' or 'restoration gone wrong'. The concept of visual clusters is a loose association of images based on formal characteristics. It describes their relation to and among each other on a level of content, emotion, or personal meaning. The idea traces back to the methodology of early 20th century art historian and cultural scientist Aby M. Warburg who brought together images on large mood boards. These were supposed to 'illuminate new connections at the level of content, new insights, and the shifting and transfer of figurative traditions'[17] and could be regarded as an early predecessor of Pinterest. Transferring Warburg's understanding of how images behave in a cluster structure to the realm of the internet, Kerstin Schankweiler observes that clustering similar images which recur on related topics or share a certain set of formal properties is a widespread way of dealing with images in net communication. Rather than promoting a specific single image, these clusters are likely to spawn certain image types so that pretty much any image of the cluster can be regarded as a representation of all the others and act in their place.[18] Within this dynamic, the square portrait of the restored lamb is absorbed by an image type that recurs principally on the same subject—the portrait of an 'alarmingly humanoid', 'poorly restored' or 'botched' face (#KylieJennerLipChallenge).

The ways visual clusters form and operate in net cultures greatly depend on the expectations of community members and the way they are met by references to a collective cultural memory. Expectations themselves bear a historicity as they are 'built through recognition, which requires some regulated process of repetition'.[19] They are produced and manifested over time by a community as they are repeated in everyday practices of net culture through style, rhetoric, or their modus operandi. As they are reproduced over and over again, confronting community members on a daily basis, expectations are not only generated by the practices themselves, but also by the referentiality to historic predecessors that resonate within them.[20] Both the iconic formula of the square portrait image, and the act of comparative vision seem to cater to the expectations of the community. Tapping into their shared memory of pop culture, members playfully remix the lamb's head. In relation to the cluster of 'botched' or 'alarmingly humanoid' headshots, the comparisons of the Mystic Lamb to icons of meme culture illuminate new connections beyond the boundaries of the restoration of the *Ghent Altarpiece*. These comparisons work at the level of content on the one hand, formal similarities on the other, enabling

17 Jörg Völlnagel, "The Total Museum: On the Utopia of a Limitless Collection," in *Between Cosmos and Pathos. Berlin Works from Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas*, ed. id., Neville Rowley (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2020), 22.

18 Schankweiler, *Bildprosteste*, 28.

19 Marika Lüders et. al., "Emerging Personal Media Genres," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 6 (May 2010): 949, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444809352203.

20 Lüders et. al., "Media Genres," 954.

shifts of historic traditions, visual expectations, meaning, and—as always—ironic reading between images.[21] It is exactly this visual referentiality and formal relation that makes the 'disturbingly humanoid' lamb comprehensible for the net community. In fact, it is the fair reminiscence of other online phenomena as well as users' expectations that allow new readings of the restoration campaign and the work of art itself.

But what does entering this cluster mean for our mugshot of van Eyck's Lamb of God? Let's finally come back to one of our previous examples: the initial variation of the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme*. The juxtaposition of the two heads before and after restoration works as a historical mise-en-scène of two distinctive temporal stages of the same picture.[22] The comparison of works of art before and after their often-astonishing restorations has a long-standing tradition in visual history and internet culture respectively. Like the infamous *Potato Jesus* aka *Ecce Mono* (Fig. 5), an internet meme based on the botched restoration of a 20th century Ecce Homo-fresco by an amateur conservator in Borja, Spain, that took social media by storm in 2012 and the many more memes of failed restoration attempts following the same genre of 'restoration gone wrong'.

Fig. 5: Screenshot of a Twitter-thread on the initial variation of the Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme by @fatherajds. The user @somecaboose replied with a before and after juxtaposition of the Potato Jesus on 20 January 2020.

21 Völlnagel, "Total Museum," 22.
22 Lena Bader, *Bild-Prozesse im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2013), 184.

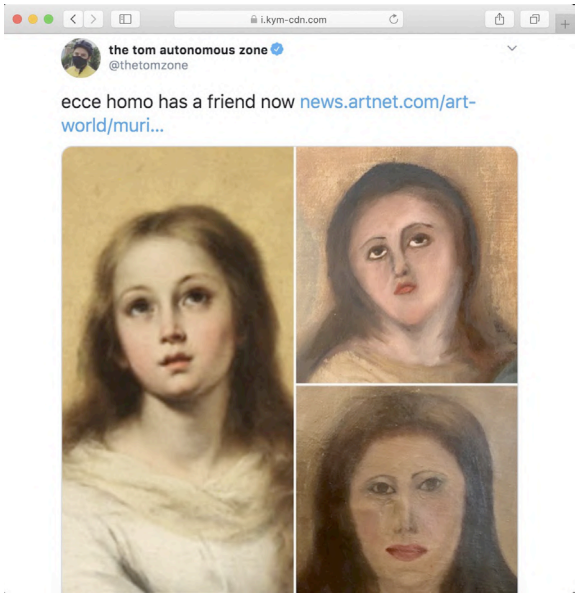

Fig. 6: Screenshot of a variation of the 'The Immaculate Conception of Los Venerables' Restoration Fail Meme on knowyourmeme.com, originally posted by @thetomzone to twitter.com. The meme compares the before to the two restoration attempts focusing on the face of the Virgin. A comment relates it to the Potato Jesus.

In its original state, the devotional fresco by Elías García Martínez showed Christ in a half-length portrait in three-quarter profile placed on an unrolled scroll, his suffering and lifelike face the center of attention. After the amateur 'restoration' of the artwork the face in particular looks shockingly beastly. Within a day, countless internet memes were spawned photoshopping *Potato Jesus's* revolting face onto Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* or the apostles in his *Last Supper*, giving it teddy bear ears, or simply comparing it to its pre-restoration counterpart. *Potato Jesus* can be regarded the first and most influential predecessor of the 'restoration gone wrong' genre and is certainly an icon of meme culture. It was followed by a vast amount of other internet memes on the topic of 'failed' art restorations that all are somewhat visually related to the restoration fiasco from 2012. Just search for 'Potato Jesus' on *knowyourmeme.com* and you'll encounter a large variety of more or less famous cases of 'failed' restorations—among them, of course, van Eyck's Lamb of God. Many of them, just as is the case with the *Ecce Mono* himself, and in the initial variation of the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration Meme*, feature before-and-after-comparisons of the artworks in question. What is remarkable, however, is that they all have one thing in common: They all focus on (oftentimes square) portraits that are joyfully photoshopped, remixed, and mockingly labelled (Fig. 6). From the very beginning, always referencing *Potato Jesus* in one way or another, the portrait format has been of central interest to memetic jokes on

'restoration gone wrong'. As *Potato Jesus* is an icon of meme culture, it is thus not surprising that users immediately drew the connection between the *Ghent Altarpiece Lamb Restoration* and the *Ecce Mono* (Fig. 5).

By looking more closely into the visual cluster of 'restoration gone wrong', the memetic power lying within the reformatted image of van Eyck's Lamb of God becomes obvious. It shows that the dynamics evolving from the practice of clustering images in meme culture enable exactly what Warburg tried to follow when creating his mood boards. That is, based on formal similarities, images like the mugshot of the lamb are open to transfers in meaning through which they diversify (or completely change) their visual arguments and may then be referenced to yet other images. As part of a visual cluster they are able to leave behind their original contexts, enter into new ones and represent completely different concepts of net culture. The Mystic Lamb, for example, even if it has never been the center of interest to scholars of art history and admirers of van Eyck's art, is in its new format not only more appreciated by net users, but also is no longer read as a metaphor of Christ. Instead, it is assessed and appreciated primarily based on its distinctive looks: in net culture, therefore, the restoration has to be regarded a huge success.

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IBIZA AUSTRIAN MEMES: REFLECTIONS ON RECLAIMING POLITICAL DISCOURSE THROUGH MEMES

ANAHITA NEGHABAT

On 15 October of 2017, for the first time in almost twenty years, Austrian citizens elected a far-right government, consisting of a coalition between the Christian-conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). What followed the election of this unholy unity were two years of racist and antisemitic scandals, anti-Muslim policies and political rhetoric, a considerable backlash in feminist politics and a series of attacks on worker's rights. Many of these political measures, as well as the shift in political rhetoric and the normalization of outright racist 'opinions' in public discourse, ended up having a lasting effect.

Even as a child, I distinctly remember frustration and anger about politics and my eagerness to speak up and change something. When I was twelve, the far-right FPÖ once left an election campaign booklet in our post box and I—foreshadowing what I am now doing as an anthropologist and activist—took it upon myself to dissect it in the form of several pages of meticulous analysis. In my teens, I went to protests on the weekends behind my parents' backs, even skipping school once to secretly travel to a protest in another city. As you can see, I was angry, but I was also active. This, however, slowly but surely changed after the election of the far-right government in 2017. I attended the protests that others somehow still found the energy to organize, but I had a hard time following the news and actively engaging with politics. My anger felt heavier and eventually turned into exhaustion. Matters only got worse when I moved to Budapest in January 2019 for a term abroad at the Gender Studies Department of the Central European University. *The* Central European University that far-right authoritarian prime minister Viktor Orbán soon forced out of Hungary through acts of legal warfare, one of which included effectively banning gender studies as a discipline in the whole country. So, there I was in this country that leftists in Austria had been raising as a cautionary example of what Austrian politics could easily become for years. There I was, at this university under attack, studying gender studies when it was no longer accepted as a discipline. And all news I got from Austria at the time was horrible: legal introduction of 12-hour workdays, headscarf bans and drastic reductions of welfare benefits, just to name a few.

But then—in these very dire circumstances—something unforeseen happened. On 17 May 2019, two German newspapers published video recordings of our then vice chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache and a younger politician, both from the far-right FPÖ. The videos depicted Strache in a villa on the party island Ibiza discussing dubious, potentially corrupt

deals with a woman who had tricked him into believing she was the niece of a rich oligarch. The whole thing was a set-up, including hidden cameras and loads of vodka infused with Red Bull (possibly Austria's most famous invention). Heinz-Christian Strache was forced to resign and only a few days later chancellor Sebastian Kurz had to announce new elections. Even though I knew that right-wing voters, discriminatory systems, and racist beliefs had not just disappeared overnight, there was an overwhelming feeling of joy at the time—and hope. I was in Vienna that weekend and the collective relief I experienced was unbelievable. People were protesting, hugging, and singing—and making memes. Loads of amazing memes. Their memes inspired me, so, in the spur of the moment, I downloaded a random meme-making app and, because I didn't want to flood my private Instagram stories with countless memes, I spontaneously created a meme account: @ibiza_austrian_memes.

Fig. 1: One of my first memes posted on @ibiza_austrian_memes in the first couple of days following the Ibiza-scandal. It depicts former vice chancellor and FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache and former FPÖ politician Johann Gudenus, who were both filmed on Ibiza. Both are smiling and giving a thumbs up. The text reads, 'When people have 12-hour shifts because of you but you are unemployed', referring to the loosening of labor laws and introduction of a 12-hour workday by the ÖVP-FPÖ government in 2018.[1]

1 "Austria: Thousands protest against plans for 12-hour workday," *DW,* June 30, 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/austria-thousands-protest-against-plans-for-12-hour-workday/a-44475182.

What started as a small idea quickly grew into a big project. After only two days of posting, I already had 5000 followers and it became apparent that I could use memes as a powerful activist tool for political commentary. While my following grew, my online activist practice continually evolved into what it is now. Today, I have about 24 thousand followers, consisting of a diverse audience of many young people, even school students, but also journalists, activists, NGOs, and politicians (with our new vice chancellor perhaps being the most prominent one[2]). In my online unpaid activist work, I use memes as a visual vocabulary, medium, and tool to comment on Austrian political daily news. I aim at doing so from an intersectional feminist, anti-racist and anti-authoritarian perspective. Eventually, however, my memes of course always represent *my* perspective, which is rooted in my biography and identity. As part of my practice, I mostly *create* but sometimes also *curate* memes that users send me and post them along with concise texts contextualizing each meme. These texts in the captions provide background information (along with source references) and offer critical perspectives in preferably accessible language. I aim at using short sentences, visually structure my captions with emojis, and explain certain political terminology. 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. I have also been using Instagram's story tool[3] to engage with topics more thoroughly, to provide information about protests or to share other educators' and activists' content. 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.

Shaping Public Discourse with Memes: When Mainstream Media Sucks

I think one of the reasons my memes resonate with so many people is that by analyzing Austrian interior politics from an explicitly anti-racist and intersectional feminist perspective, I take a stance that is not commonly taken in Austrian mainstream media and political

2 Werner Kogler from Green Party is currently Austrian vice chancellor. From its foundation in 1986 until 2017 the Green Party was always in parliament as a left opposition party. In the 2017 elections, in which the abovementioned far-right government was elected, the Green Party lost two thirds of its votes and did not make it into parliament for the first time since its foundation. After the Ibiza-scandal and during the new election campaign, the Green Party framed itself as a left alternative, as climate protectors, and as an anti-corruption party. It was during this time that now vice chancellor Werner Kogler started following my page, which at the time mostly ridiculed the failed far-right coalition and its corruption scandals. In the new elections Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP), who was chancellor during the Ibiza-scandal, scored 37,5% of the votes, an even higher percentage than his party already had in 2017. The Green Party celebrated a hugely successful comeback with 13,9% of the votes, its best election result ever, and became a governing party for the first time in its history. Today we still have a coalition between the far right ÖVP and a weak Green Party. Key leftist issues, such as women's rights, migration and integration, or labor lie in the ÖVP's hands, leaving many Green voters disappointed and discontent. Chancellor Sebastian Kurz introduced the historically new coalition by announcing that it was going to unite 'the best of both worlds' by 'protecting the climate *and* the borders', which I think says it all.

3 With Instagram's story tool users can post photos and videos that for other users vanish after 24 hours.

discourse. While there are some journalists, publishers and magazines that are important exceptions here, a large portion of the influential actors shaping Austrian public discourse (re)produce hegemonic, often sexist, racist, classist or otherwise marginalizing and violent views. Sometimes media uncritically reproduces problematic arguments, generalizations, and vocabulary in an effort to report 'neutrally', thus contributing to and manifesting shifts in discourse. In these cases, I often deliberately use memes to problematize terminology or arguments. My aim is to thereby intervene in public discourse by disrupting the reproduction of discursive elements.

A good example for this is my meme-criticism of the problematic and historically inaccurate term 'Judeo-Christian'. In recent years right-wing conservative and extremist politicians have increasingly been using this term to describe Europe's 'identity' or 'cultural heritage', often adding that this heritage and identity shall be 'protected' from societal changes due to immigration. November 2019 at the European People's Party congress in Zagreb ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz—Austrian chancellor until the Ibiza-scandal and chancellor quickly again after the new elections—emphasized that the EU commission should 'protect Europe's Judeo-Christian [*christlich-jüdisch*] identity and enlightenment', adding that Europe should not allow more immigrants than it could 'integrate'.[4] Although the Austrian newspaper *Kurier* put Kurz' remarks in quotation marks, the notion of a European or Austrian 'Judeo-Christian identity' was not problematized, let alone criticized.[5] So, I made a meme.

The meme depicts cartoon character SpongeBob Squarepants, who stands for chancellor and ÖVP leader Sebastian Kurz. He is reading a book of which one side is blue and the other one red and is looking at it cross-eyed, each eye looking at one side. The blue side addresses the regular occurrence of antisemitic scandals during the ÖVP-FPÖ governing period, most often caused by FPÖ politicians.[6] It reads, 'Forming a coalition with the right-wing extremist FPÖ, which is mass-producing antisemitic scandals.' The red side reads part of the abovementioned Sebastian Kurz quote, 'We must protect the Judeo-Christian identity.' The color-split of the book visually indicates a contradiction between the two statements. The meme therefore not only depicts chancellor Sebastian Kurz as a politically inconsistent actor, but even as a hypocrite who on the one hand claims to protect a 'Jewish identity' but is on the other hand willing to build a politically opportune alliance with antisemitic political actors. SpongeBob's expression is also funny: He looks confused, lost and even a little desperate. The meme thus also belittles Sebastian Kurz, his actions and political rhetoric by ridiculing it.

4 Daniela Kittner, "Kurz will, dass die EU die 'christlich-jüdische Identität schützt'." *Kurier*, November 21, 2019. https://kurier.at/politik/inland/kurz-will-dass-die-eu-die-christlich-juedische-identitaet-schuetzt/400681271.

5 Kittner, "Kurz will dass die EU."

6 Oliver Das Gupta, "525 Tage voller Skandale." *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* June 1, 2019, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/oesterreich-strache-skandale-tuerkis-blau-fpoe-oevp-kurz-regierung-wien-1.4469797.

Fig. 2: A meme depicting cartoon character SpongeBob Squarepants. It criticizes chancellor Sebastian Kurz' use of the term 'Judeo-Christian'. The meme was made and posted by me on the Instagram page @ibiza_austrian_memes.

Along with the meme, I wrote a caption with which I contextualized and criticized the term 'Judeo-Christian' by pinpointing several problematic aspects: first, insisting on a 'Judeo-Christian' European or Austrian 'identity' is simply historically inaccurate. Jews in Europe have been persecuted and killed by Christians for centuries and are still marginalized to this day. Austria has an especially gruesome history of National Socialism and genocide: in its database, the *Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance* lists 64 *thousand* Austrian Jews who fell victim to the Holocaust.[7] Postulating the existence of a 'Judeo-Christian' Austrian identity erases this violent history. Second—just like in the abovementioned Sebastian Kurz example—the notion of a 'Judeo-Christian identity' is often deployed in anti-immigration and more specifically anti-Muslim discourses, in which immigrants are discursively othered and framed as Austria's 'real' antisemitism problem.[8] This framing of Orientalized, supposedly 'Muslim' immigrants as perpetrators

7 DÖW. n.d. "Austrian Victims of the Holocaust." Accessed March 9, 2021. https://www.doew.at/english/austrian-victims-of-the-holocaust.

8 In January 2020 the Austrian Integration Fund, which is a partner organization of the Austrian government, dedicated a full issue of its publication series "Perspectives Integration" to "Antisemitism in the Context of Migration". To give an example of the content, page 4 contains an

not only discursively distracts from the fact that they are marginalized and affected by anti-Muslim racism, but it also erases Austria's National Socialist history and antisemitic present.

Using memes, which are enjoyable and quickly readable, as the central medium for voicing my criticism enables me to reach a lot of users, many of whom then proceed to read my written commentary and analysis in the caption. As Anastasia Denisova phrases it, memes are 'simple', which helps to reach broad audiences. At the same time, however, they are still 'sufficiently sophisticated to stimulate critical thinking.'[9] By making the meme above, I deliberately and strategically disrupted public political discourse with an aim to inhibit the normalization of the abovementioned right-wing discursive strategy and anti-Muslim trope. Because hegemonic media and political discourses marginalize anti-racist and other anti-discriminatory perspectives, I—and many other activists—use the online platform Instagram as a space, and memes as a tool, to publicly share our perspectives and narratives. Denisova argues that '[w]hen users share memes on political subjects, they intervene in the media discourse. They can promote or confront the hegemonic interpretation of the events; they can suggest an alternative interpretation; they can present an event in a specific context that would be educational for others.'[10] I fully agree: memes are often used as an accessible medium to share one's (experiential) knowledge and therefore also serve a purpose as accessible, easily comprehensible educational material. One user left a comment under the abovementioned SpongeBob meme that highlights this educational element: 'Thanks for the amazing post, learned something new again.' Accordingly, my meme page @ibiza_austrian_memes, which I would have previously labelled satirical political activism, has also been perceived as educational work and even been discussed in an art education research context before.[11]

At first glance, it might seem like this is *just* the meme-maker telling her story. However, this is not the case. As Limor Shifman reminds us, memes are intrinsically tied to practices of copying, imitation, and remixing. She writes, 'the term [meme] describes cultural reproduction as driven by various means of copying and imitation [. . .] [U]ser-driven imitation and remixing are not just prevalent practices: they have become highly valued pillars of a so-called participatory culture.'[12] From my own experience I know that users interact with the meme-maker in various ways, inevitably influencing their practice. The reach of

image of historian Michael Wolfffsohn along with the text, "Michael Wolffsohn emphasizes that today Muslim antisemitism is strongest and most dangerous." (ÖIF 2020, 4).

9 Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (Routledge, 2019). https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429469404, 196.

10 Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society,* 195.

11 Helena Schmidt and Sophie Lingg, "Coming Back From Ibiza. Der Instagram-Account Ibiza Austrian Memes als Case-Study für intersektionalen Meme-Aktivismus und Vermittlung — basierend auf einem Gespräch mit Anahita Neghabat," *Art Education Research* 18 (2020): 1-17. https://sfkp.ch/artikel/coming-back-from-ibiza.

12 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press), 4.

each meme depends on users' willingness to press the like-button and share it. Liking my memes, commenting, sharing them with *added* commentary, sending in their own memes, and re-using templates I made are therefore all practices of *collectively* creating political narratives online. Moreover, making memes online often translates to offline relationships. At this point, I cannot count the number of politically involved people I got to know through my memes. Online meme practices therefore also shape offline political activities and alliances.[13]

Shaping Public Discourse with Memes: When Sucking Is Institutionalized

In the example above, media uncritically reproduced elements of a racist discourse while trying to report 'neutrally'. Often, however, hegemonic power relations are also upheld and reproduced when journalists and other public figures *do* take a stand. As we know, societal power relations and mechanisms of discrimination are institutionalized. Political actors therefore often become influential *because of*—not despite—the fact that they represent hegemonic views. At the same time, unequal social structures stifle the careers, social participation, and discursive power of people belonging to marginalized groups. In this context, social media and memes—which can easily be made and widely shared by anyone with a smartphone and internet access (and an understanding of digital culture)—are used by marginalized people to (co-)create and share their own narratives and truths.[14] As Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose show in their study about feminist humor online, people 'are turning to social media sites to make visible marginalized voices and bodies, either through amplifying the stories of others or through drawing attention to their own experiences.'[15] Sometimes these stories are shared educationally with a wider public, sometimes they are addressed to people directly affected by the same kind of oppression, and sometimes both. The meme below was posted on the Instagram page @migraobservations, a page that belongs to the second category. @migraobservations describes itself as 'making memes for the self-healing from the Migra-trauma in an Alman-society.'[16] Their meme below humorously addresses a painful truth for many people of color, who know

13 A noteworthy project in this regard was the *Feminist Meme School* (2018-2020), a workshop format created by journalist and meme-maker Caren Miesenberger. In these workshops people, who came together in physical space, were encouraged to collectively translate their experiences with discrimination into memes. These memes were then posted on the Instagram page @feministmemeschool (Miesenberger 2019).

14 Although discussing this topic more thoroughly is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to mention that memes are also used by right-wing extremists to spread their perspectives and narratives.

15 Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose, "@NoToFeminism, #FeministsAreUgly, and Misandry Memes: How Social Media Feminist Humor is Calling Out Antifeminism," in *Emergent Feminisms: Complicating a Postfeminist Media Culture*, ed. Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan, 211-232. (Routledge, 2018), 213.

16 *Migra* is a self-descriptive term for migrants or migration background. *Alman* is a term used by People of Color and migrants in Germany to describe the white German majority population.

what it feels like to be racially profiled and unrightfully suspected of being up to something dangerous.

Fig. 3: Posted by @migraobservations on Instagram. The meme consists of stock photos showing a person who is protecting their purse and making dramatic faces and gestures that can be read as 'stop' or 'leave my purse alone'. The text reads: 'How I'm holding my bag when Almans sit down or walk next to me, in the hope of inciting a reflection of their racism through my ingenious experiment.'

Marginalized groups are of course not only using memes, but also more conventional media formats to partake in public discourse. There is an endless quantity of blog entries, online magazines, and even online talk shows highlighting marginalized perspectives—formats that resemble the media practices of established media institutions. Memes nonetheless serve a *special* function in marginalized people's intervention in public political discourse. Unlike other media formats, memes are typically characterized by a do-it-yourself-aesthetic. Basic editing, bad photoshop jobs, visible copy and pasting, the regular occurrence of what would elsewhere be considered spelling mistakes and references to pop culture and entertainment media are all part of a basic and often even purposefully trashy aesthetic. Memes are also humorous, which makes them explicitly non-serious on yet another level. I thus argue that memes, given these characteristics, must also be understood as a tool

to reject the whole logic of exclusive, elitist, top-down knowledge production commonly performed by hegemonic, established media and political institutions. I certainly see my own activist practice in such a light, which is one of the reasons I take pride in actively trying to use easily understandable language. The meme below, posted by @kanaxanax[17] on Instagram, serves as a poignant example of this kind of criticism too. Using an image from an animated children's movie—a medium not typically taken too seriously—it questions the expertise and legitimacy of those who are commonly given a platform in political talk shows on German TV.

Fig. 4: A meme by @kanaxanax on Instagram. It depicts a cartoon character turtle from the movie Kung Fu Panda, saying 'My time has come' while gazing into the distance. The added text reads: 'German talk shows when they finally find an opportunity to discuss political and radical Islam with 5 white men and 1 German Islam scholar again.'

17 The name *kanaxanax* is a combination of the word *Kanak*, a derogatory German word for foreigners, and *Xanax*, a well-known prescription medicine commonly used to treat anxiety and panic disorders. The page's name alludes to minority stress and trauma due to experiences of racism and othering.

Building Resilience Through Memes: When Life Sucks

Fig. 5: A meme I made and posted as @ibiza_austrian_memes on Instagram. The top depicts part of a newspaper article about Susanne Raab, Austrian Federal Minister for Women and Integration, who according to the screenshot warned against a 'fertile ground for violence' due to some people 'only going to Turkish supermarkets and the mosque.' Below is an image of pop culture figure Baby Yoda, a cute and innocent-looking baby alien. The alien is holding a Turkish pastry called Simit, that was edited into the original image. Baby Yoda is described as 'My Simit and I'. He says, 'Hi Susi, I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me please thanks byyyeee.'

Apart from being used to criticize and ridicule elitist knowledge production, memes' humor serves yet another purpose. In the case of critical memes, humor is also an integral part of a collective empowerment strategy used by marginalized people to build resilience through a process of self-affirmation. Humor is deeply subjective. Finding something funny, maybe even laughing about it, is therefore a very intimate experience. Finding something funny *together* thus creates a sense of collective intimacy and community. As Ashley Lorraine Blewitt-Golsch argues in her study about transgender memes: in a context of oppression, '[t]he relatability of the memes that 'make it' are the foundation of group identity

formation.'[18] Through enabling this collective experience and subsequent group identity, memes often play an important role in strengthening marginalized people's resilience.[19] As Blewitt-Golsch argues, '[i]t is a powerful feeling to know that one is not alone in one's discomfort.'[20] Dealing with these violent experiences *humorously* also offers moments of emotional relief. I made the meme below after a press conference held by Austria's Federal Minister for Women and Integration. I experienced the press conference and its media coverage as very emotionally draining, which is why I decided to bring fun into it by ridiculing the minister's anti-Muslim rhetoric with a meme.

After I had uploaded the meme I received a message from a Muslim follower, who wrote, 'Seriously, I opened your page three or four times today and just kept thinking, please I need your content 🤲❤️'. The 'need' for memes, that she is articulating in her message, tells me that like me, she too was seeking emotional relief in a humorous interpretation of the political rhetoric we both experienced as violent. Hegemonic political and media discourse treats discriminatory rhetoric and policies as entirely normal and reasonable, which can cause intense feelings of helplessness and despair in those—in *we*—who are affected by these forms of violence. From my personal experience I know that humor can be tremendously helpful in coping with this emotional distress. Memes like the one above let you know that others also see the ridiculousness, the absurdity, and violence of these politics. For people who are structurally disadvantaged and discriminated against, memes can therefore induce a strong feeling of togetherness by pointing out a shared perception of reality. In such a context, memes can be a powerful way of affirming an alternative reality and (co-)creating an alternative discourse—beyond the one-dimensional, often harmful depictions and narratives pushed by conventional media and public discourse.

As I described in the beginning, my own meme-making started as a consequence of a political scandal and was fueled by an experience of collective relief during its aftermath. As it turns out, however, we are not only making memes when we experience relief—we are also gifting each other experiences of relief when we are making memes.

18 Ashley Lorraine Blewitt-Golsch, "Transgender Experience Depicted Through Memes: An Ethnographic Investigation of Minority Stress and Resilience." (PhD Diss., University of Denver, 2019), 155.

19 Blewitt-Golsch defines resilience as 'the behaviors, attitudes, and resources that individuals or groups facing significant adversity enact or utilize to achieve better than expected physical and mental health outcomes in the face of said adversity.' See Belwitt-Golsch, "Transgender Experience," 25.

20 Blewitt-Golsch, "Transgender Experience," 150.

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Dear Mr. BoneSaw your face smells like a chicken shawarma:

A Clapback to Saudi Arabia's Electronic Army

Saeeda Saeed

Hello:) My pseudonym is Saeeda Saeed, and I'm an e-activist from Saudi Arabia. This is the story of how I came to devise an Instant Meme Noise Generator that spews out nonsensical insults to the top 10 Saudi state-run Twitter accounts.

In 2019, I came to the Netherlands to undergo my very first art residency. That summer, I bought myself a FlixBus ticket from Maastricht to Paris. As the bus stopped over at a gas station, I opened my backpack and pulled out several smartphones to test run my shady looking troll farm. I then noticed the bus driver walking towards me with a concerned look on his face.He asked, 'Ma'am what are you up to? What are all those phones for?' I took a deep breath, channeled all the artists that I'd been hanging out with over the last 6months and blurted out, 'This is a performance art piece!' Right then and there I witnessed his body language shift from fear and concern to fascination and curiosity as he warmly replied, 'Oh how interesting! Where will this be exhibiting? Do you need any help setting up?' I remember thinking, 'woah I wonder what else could I get away with by contextualizing my activism within the arts?' What would happen if I injected methods of play, performance, fiction and humor into my activism? Whilst humor has long been used as a tool against oppression, with the emergence of digital technologies memes have become renowned for their ability to perform criticism through humor and satire. This draws parallels to a Foucauldian understanding of 'disqualified knowledges' or the local popular knowledge in which criticism performs its work. In this essay, I reflect on the use of internet memes as a means to collectivize power, to shift the on-going political narrative, to drown out official state-run tweets, to vent and express frustration directly towards state institutions that have prosecuted, harassed and silenced critical voices within the Saudi authoritarian regime.

The Rise of Hypernationalism in Saudi Arabia

Imagine an electronic dance music festival with DJ David Guetta remixing pro-regime patriotic songs: the crowd goes wild when the beat drops on the lyrics "LONG LIVE THE SALMANS".[1] Prior to gaining the nickname Mr.BoneSaw, the crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman—also known as MBS—was quick to gain the support of the Saudi transnational google generation aged 15 to 34 which make up 36.7% of the population.[2] Upon his anointment in April 2017, he led several successful reforms that vastly altered the socio-political atmosphere of the country. These include legislation that limits the power of the religious police, the removal of the ban on female driving in June 2018 and the weakening of the male guardianship system in 2019. Also in line with the rebranding of the state is the 'Saudi Vision 2030' campaign: an economic plan to increase public spending and reduce the country's dependency on oil, which means amplifying the entertainment

1 Nation Guetta WorldWide, 2019. David Guetta - Ash Salman (Live @ MDL Beast Festival 2019). [image] Available at: <https://youtu.be/6Yjq1v3quZA>.
2 General Authority for Statistics. 2021. The General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT) Releases "Saudi Youth in Numbers" Report for the World Youth Day 2020. [online] Available at: <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/news/397>.

and tourism sectors.

However, the very same millennial ruler who organized EDM festivals also knew the extent to which algorithmic feed based platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Youtube could be used as an instrument to monitor what the people were thinking and writing, and to use it as a tool to control and/or dampen the on-going political narrative. In November 2017, a new anti-terrorism law stated that simply 'retweeting' anything that goes against the state, the establishment, or religion can be punishable by 1000 lashes and a 10-15 year jail sentence. The state then installed two Twitter moles that released IP addresses and contact details of more 6000 twitter accounts.[3] Soon after, Turki bin Abdul Aziz Al-Jasser was arrested and tortured to death in March 2018 for allegedly running a Twitter account called Kashkool, which exposed human rights violations by Saudi authorities[4] . In May and August of 2018, several female activists were arrested and subjected to torture and sexual abuse during their detention[5]. Shortly after followed the murder and dismemberment Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.[6]

Does a Pseudonym protect you from the #Blacklist? No.

- **The state has ways of finding the real person.**
- **There are many ways to figure out an IP address**
- **A secret I will not reveal.**

Above is an example of a national twitter intimidation campaign launched in 2018 titled #BLACKLIST where MBS's aide Saud Al Qahtani tweeted that "No one who conspires against countries imposing the [Qatari] boycott will be spared from prosecution even if they say they were forced. And those with pseudonyms won't be spared either." The campaign invited citizens to become accomplices in identifying and tagging a person to be put on the Blacklist, thus making citizens an arm of the state's efforts to control the population. Qahtani was also known to mobilize a group of social media specialists known as the Army of Flies, tasked with creating thousands of fake twitter accounts that posed as young Saudis showing support for the future King, targeting and shaming anyone who thought otherwise. This marks the beginnings of a new hypernationalist movement that promotes the veneration of rulers both online and offline, suppressing critical voices and stifling reports on the war in Yemen.

3 Hope, B., 2021. A Saudi Prince's Attempt to Silence Critics on Twitter. [online] Wired. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/mohammed-bin-salman-twitter-investigation/>
4 En.wikipedia.org. 2021. Turki bin Abdulaziz al-Jasser. [online] Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turki_bin_Abdulaziz_al-Jasser>.
5 Freedom House. 2021. Saudi Arabia: Freedom on the Net 2020 Country Report | Freedom House. [online] Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-net/2020>.
6 the Guardian. 2021. Saudi heir complicit in Khashoggi murder, US assessment reportedly finds. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/24/jamal-khashoggi-murder-us-report-saudi-arabia-mbs-king-salman-complicit>.

Replatforming

In their manifesto Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation, Laboria Cuboniks describes the paradigm shift in contemporary social media as, "If 'cyberspace once offered the promise of escaping the strictures of essentialist identity categories, the climate of contemporary social media has swung forcefully in the other direction, and has become a theatre where these prostrations to identity are performed. With these curatorial practices come puritanical rituals of moral maintenance, and these stages are too often overrun with the disavowed pleasures of accusation, shaming, and denunciation."[7] The online and offline hypernationalist movement silenced a massive wave of critical voices across the nation, including my own. Upon witnessing numerous examples of collective punishment of family members of e-activists who remained in the Kingdom, I chose to not only operate under a pseudonym but to gear my practice towards developing safer methods to counter-tweet the state. a Twitter users have become increasingly afraid of conveying support for outspoken critics; this has largely lead to them taking down their twitter accounts or self-censoring.

However, self-censorship in Saudi Arabia—both in the past and the present day—has never meant that people were silent. It has just meant that they've found different avenues to channel their thoughts. I'd argue that Saudi citizens and expats living in Saudi Arabia have long mastered the skill of replatforming, both online and offline. Samir Al Khalil, author of the book The Monument studies the memetics of visual displays of power and dominance on the ground in urban landscapes. He describes sculptures and paintings of former Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussain blown up to almost God-like, non-human proportions and placed in public spaces, serving as a reminder of who is in power.[8] This virtually unspoken yet constantly looming reminder led people to self-censor in public, retreating to self-organized and mobilized underground physical safe spaces.

A similar pattern is reflected online where users are seemingly silent but are actually in constant movement searching and replatforming on to the next latest app that purportedly offers more privacy until it gets discovered and taken down by the Saudi CITC (Communications and Information Technology Commission) and the cycle repeats. 'I love my gay community in Jeddah', says a post found on Whisper in 2012, an app that gained quite a bit of traction due to its feature of anonymously posting text and image. Snapchat followed, gaining popularity soon after, in 2015.

Most recently, Saudi users have replatformed onto Clubhouse, hosting rooms under the topics of 'Racism in Saudi Arabia', 'Legalization of Alcohol in Saudi Arabia' and 'Stories of Surveillance under MBS' only to find pro-government Saudi Twitter accounts taking

7 Cuboniks, L., 2021. Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation | Laboria Cuboniks. [online] Laboriacuboniks.net. Available at: <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/>.

screenshots and recording conversations from among those in the room, noting down their identities, threatening and shaming everyone involved.[9] The fast pace of crackdowns on apps makes replatforming a short-lived strategy without the ability to gain much traction.

So not only does replatforming lessen reach, but it also subjects users to harassment and possible detainment. But what triggers certain posts to be flagged? And what types of posts manage to stay under the radar? IP Blocking, Keyword filtering, DNS poisoning, and manual enforcement are just some methods the state uses to flag content. Tweeting or retweeting any content that directly calls out the government, the ruling family, or religion is typically flagged within 24 hours.

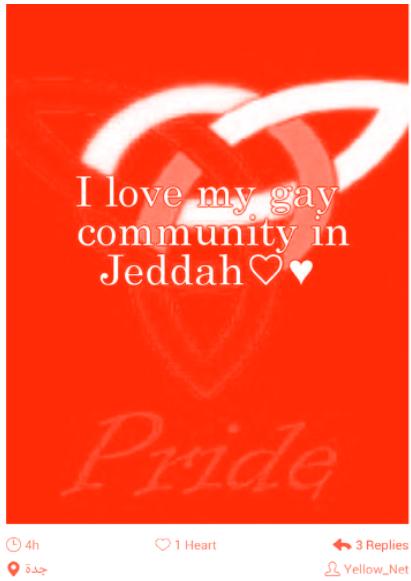


Image Source: Whisper App @Yellow_Net

The Clapback

Whilst scrolling through my TikTok explore page I find a deep fake of King Salman singing along to Ping Fong's Baby Shark:it dawns on me that the type of content that doesn't get taken down usually comes in the form of memes. Authorship is one of the reasons memes don't get taken down, as remix culture allows for memes to shapeshift and adapt to different narratives. American blogger and internet activist Ethan Zuckerman formed what is known as the 'Cute Cat Theory' where he creates a dichotomy between users who share pictures of their cats and those who engage in political activism. In many ways, both messages leverage the same tools, but they differ intrinsically stating that '[Web 1.0] as designed by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN, was intended to let physicists share research findings online…With Web 2.0, the web became a space for the creation and dissemination of amateur content. The contemporary Internet was designed, in no small part, for the dissemination of cute pictures of cats.'[10] In her book Memes to Movements, An Xiao Mina further elaborates on the Cute Cat theory by claiming that 'if you are trying to censor activist messages, you will inevitably censor the same internet that is being used to spread amateur media, the things which people enjoy and you will inevitably upset more people than you originally intended.'[11]

8 Makiya, K., 1991. The monument. Berkeley: University of California Press.9 Jones, M., 2021. Clubhouse: A new avenue of free speech, or yet another tool of repression?. [online] Middle East Eye. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/clubhouse-free-speech-repression-arab-authoritarians-surveillance>.
10 Zuckerman, E., 2021. Mistrust. Why losing faith in institutions provides the tools to transform them. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Inc.
11 Mina, A., n.d. Memes to movements.

The cute cat theory draws parallels with how memes in Saudi Arabia have been used by different fringe subcultures as forms of critique. Below are examples of memes that critiqued the former societal male guardianship system (a law abolished in August 2019 that once forced women to seek approval from their male guardians to travel, get married or divorced). See also memes made by the Saudi illegal immigrant community shedding light on police raids and most recently memes criticizing the Saudi Covid 19 contact tracing app and lockdown measures. All these are highly critical topics that would have been flagged had they been framed in the form of tweets or interviews, but dressed in the vernacular of memes they seem to be dismissed by state. Michel Foucault touches upon the notion of 'disqualified knowledges' when he writes that 'It is through the re-appearance of this knowledge, of the local popular knowledges, the disqualified knowledges, that criticism performs its work.'[12]

This underlies that idea that the distance between the very serious and very silly is quite small. The epistemology of nonsense has been used and reused many times by various internet sub communities as a key method of criticism. 'Of course we make nonsense,' states @InRealityADream, a Tumblr account that describes the creation of memes as 'neo-Dadaist,' an echo of the early-20th-century art movement that deliberately abandoned logic and coherence as a statement on the effort it takes to make sense in a world without sense.[13] The Tumblr post that popularized this term on the platform specifically describes memes filled with nonsense, obscure cultural references, and comments about suffering depression, as an inescapable response to the socioeconomic conditions young people are

The covid19 contact tracing app is called Tawakalna which roughly translates to God be with you. This meme deletes the app ands write to it God be with you. Source: Twitters @ saudi_memez

*Meme commenting on police raid during the nationwide crackdown on illegal immigrants. Source: Instagram @_saudiboy_meme_*

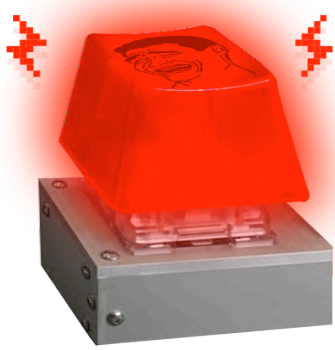
Example of a meme on Male Guardianship. Source: Twitter @chasing_jennah

12 Foucault, M., Faubion, J. and Hurley, R., n.d. Power.
13 Bruenig , Elizabeth. "Why Is Millennial Humor so Weird?," August 11, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com%2foutlook%2fwhy-is-millennial-humor-so-weird%2f2017%2f08%2f11%2f64af9cae-7dd5-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html.

subject to in the 2010s.[14] American far right blogger, Curtis Yarvin (aka Mencius Moldbug) also looks at the notion of nonsense as a powerful way to spread disinformation, stating that, '[I]n many ways nonsense is a more effective organizing tool than the truth. Anyone can believe in the truth. To believe in nonsense is an unforgeable demonstration of loyalty. It serves as a political uniform.'[15] I'd argue that non-sensical memes within the context of Saudi Arabia prove to be effective due to the fact that they are a) nonsensical and b) do not directly address the state, the royal establishment or the religion as stated in the Anti-terrorism law. Instead, they are dressed in the visual vernacular of internet memes, and thus generally disregarded as trolls being a nuisance, with little to no ramifications other than your account being taken down.

The Instant Meme Noise Generator

[press start]



A study titled 'Dissecting the Meme magic: Understanding Indicators of Virality in Meme Images' found that memes that trigger high arousal emotions, both positive and negative, such as anger, anxiety, exhilaration, are more like to be shared than low arousal emotions like sadness or contentment.[16] Twitter was once deemed the Saudi congress, a space that was ours in which to discuss, share and vent. But with the platform's saturation by state surveillance, having no outlet to vent and an overall feeling of helplessness in terms of gaining accountability, I chose to make nonsensical insults aimed at Saudi's state-run media accounts. Inspired by Brian Gysin & William S. Burough's cut-up method, I started out by developing a randomized insult generator that constructed sentences which made

14 Burton, J., 2019. Look at Us, We Have Anxiety: Youth, Memes, and the Power of Online Cultural Politics. Journal of Childhood Studies, pp.3-17.15 Foucault, M., Faubion, J. and Hurley, R., n.d. Power.
15 Sedgwick, M., n.d. Key thinkers of the radical right.
16 Ling, C., AbuHilal, I., Blackburn, J., De Cristofaro, E., Zannettou, S. and Stringhini, G., 2021. Dissecting the Meme Magic: Understanding Indicators of Virality in Image Memes.

no particular sense, but assembled together bore the tone of an offensive insult. I then verbalized the insults by creating voice tracks because in my perspective insults aren't insults until they are verbalized in our mother tongue. During this period, I watched a lot of ASMR keyboard videos and came across a gigantic key cap which looked incredibly satisfying to press and so I ordered it. As soon as the package arrived, I had all the components necessary to build the structure of my game. This is how it worked: The Instant Meme Noise Generator consisted of pressing one satisfyingly large button for a total of 4 rounds; each round randomly generated insults with the final round tagging one of the Top 10 State run Media accounts and directly uploading the sentence on to Twitter in real time. (In order to play log onto on to https://insultgenerator.club/

An example randomly generated Insult:
[round 1] YOUR MOTHER
[round 2] IS UGLY ENOUGH TO SCARE
[round 3] MOULDED CHEESE
[round 4] TAG STATE MEDIA ACCOUNT
[final round] UPLOAD TO TWITTER

An example of a nonsensical insult generated post on Twitter. Source: Saeeda Saeed

Now I that I had the mechanism of the game, I needed to find out when and which accounts I should target, and what was the most optimal way to post and drown out official tweets.

Discovering alternative Counterposting Strategies

In order to develop counterposting strategies, it was crucial to understand the infrastructure of the current Saudi cyberspace, focusing on Twitter as the primary platform. This was done by closely monitoring and gathering the social media metrics of the top 30 state run accounts on Twitter over a three-month period. The task included the daily logging of the following metrics: the frequency and timings of posts, average response times, language, conversion rate, and sentiment analysis. Patterns in the data helped determine potential design opportunities to counter post alternative narratives to that of the state.

Below are a few of the findings:

- Peak posting times for Ministries & Government entities is between 0900-0500 as opposed to high-powered individuals who post most frequently between 2300-0400. These time-frames act as an indicator for optimal times to counterpost or generate noise to drown out official tweets.

- English state-run accounts were set up post 2017 as a part of the state's 'rebranding' campaign in the hopes of opening up Saudi tourism and shifting international perception. The data gathered from sentiment analysis shows that this plan backfired since accounts in English were far more susceptible to criticism & negative sentiment from an international audience mostly demanding accountability for the murder and arrests of journalists and activists.

- Twitter state run accounts with low average response times indicate that they are not as heavily monitored and could work as potential spaces to post alternative narratives.

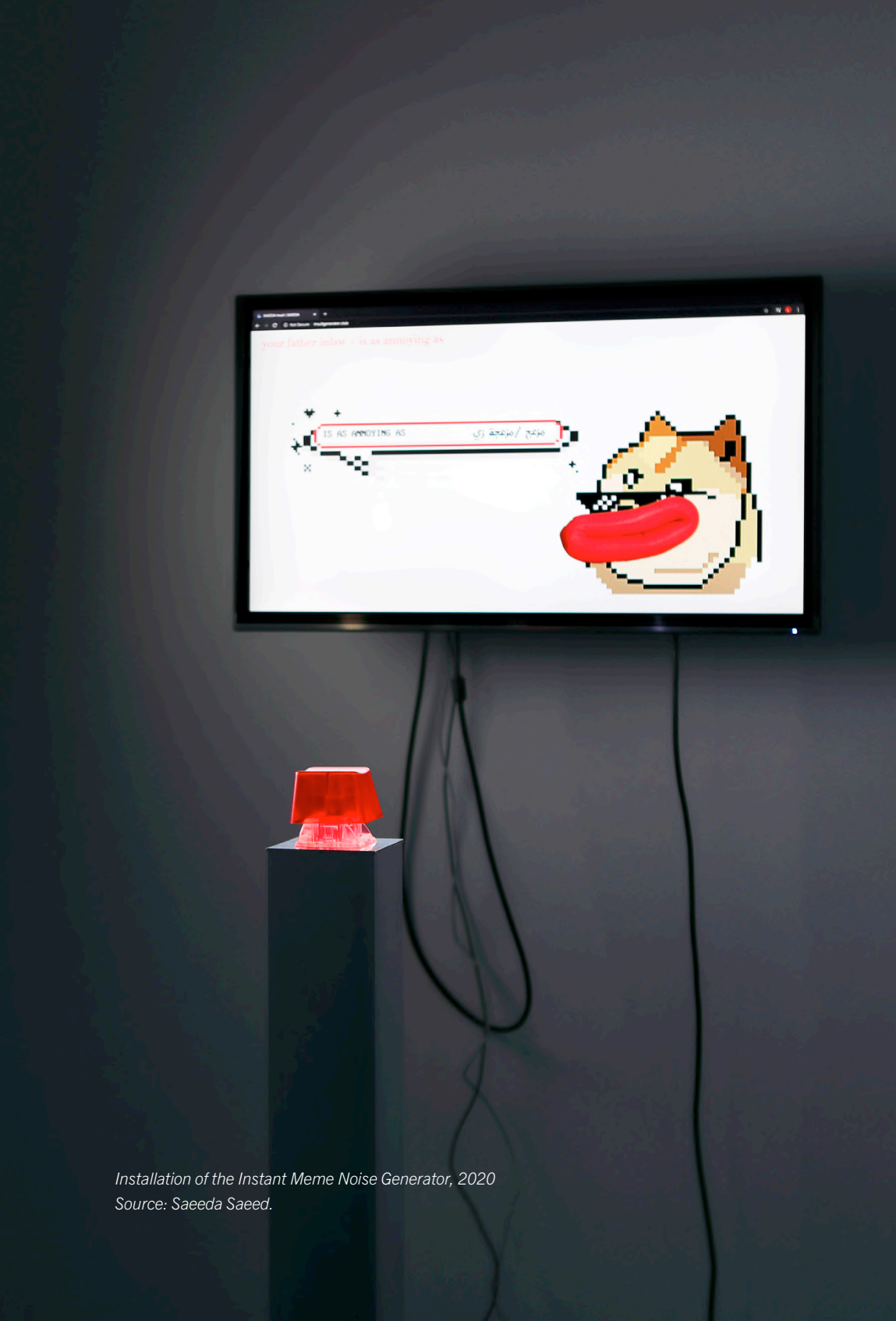
Now that I knew when and which accounts to counterpost, I could finally start playing.

Data patterns revealed after a 3 month period of monitoring the top 30 state run Twitter accounts. Left: Peak posting hours for state run accounts. Above: Language to sentiment analysis, average response times, etc. Source: Saeeda Saeed

The first week of trial posts came to a halt with a notification from Twitter stating, 'We've temporarily suspended some of your account features. Your account appears to have exhibited unusual behavior violating Twitter rules. We may suspend an account if it has been reported to us as violating our rules surrounding abuse.' Funnily enough, to me, this was an indicator that my counter-tweets where clearly working, as it seemed to have offended/triggered enough state-run accounts to report me to Twitter. I then proceeded to set up a number of backup Twitter developer accounts in preparation for the open studio exhibition of the art residency I had attended in the Netherlands. The expected footfall of the exhibition was about 3000 visitors over the course of three days. The Instant Meme Noise Generator was installed in a dark-lit room with a giant blinking red button tempting visitors to interact and play the role of my personal troll army. The installation featured two screens: the interface of the Instant Meme Noise Generator and a live Twitter feed showing the meme insults being uploaded in real time. Over the course of three days, small crowds of visitors gathered around the game giggling in anticipation, sharing laughs as the generator completed the insult. I recall a conversation between two teenage visitors: 'Your big brother is ugly enough to scare my boogers on a wintery day @Media_KSA! this is hilarious but wait, did we just assist the artist in insulting the Saudi state?' The other teenage visitor responds, 'well if it's this satisfying to play; I'd be happy do so! C'mon one more round!' Other responses were slightly more hesitant and cautious, but many felt more inclined to engage upon seeing others interact with the generator.

Over the next two weeks, I continued to play with the Instant Meme Noise Generator, and I was able to measure the impact these nonsensical tweets had. I was initially discouraged upon seeing that there were hardly any retweets, however upon reviewing the analytics of just one of my twitter accounts, I found that each of the top 10 State run media accounts generated between 700-3000 impressions per tweet and in a day that meant up to 600,000 impressions. Impressions on Twitter indicate a total tally of all the times the Tweet has been seen, appearing on a user's timeline after being liked or commented on. On an average day where I played 200 rounds of the game, I would generate anywhere between 1.4 and 3million impressions. Now imagine if I had used the same method as the state and mobilized an 'electronic army' who were each tasked to play the game as a 9-5 job; the numbers would multiply significantly and collectively generate a significant amount of alternative noise. An Xiao Mina describes a 'contest of memes' in which these seemingly opposing movements are learning from and co-opting each other. They are borrowing each other's techniques because they are learning how to influence society. 'We have entered a new world of memetic contention, one where meme culture has become as much a tool for those in power as it has for those seeking to challenge it. Movements of hate have embraced this culture as much as movements of justice.'[17]

17 Mina, A., n.d. Memes to Movements.



Installation of the Instant Meme Noise Generator, 2020
Source: Saeeda Saeed.

MIMETIC SAMENESS

GRANT BOLLMER

A New Replicator, A New Exterior to Rationality

The concept of the meme came into being with a chapter near the end of Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*. While these 'origins' are common knowledge, the *reasons* Dawkins gives for describing memes, in a book otherwise about evolution and genetics, are not so widely acknowledged. Dawkins lamented that he knew of no explanation of human behavior acceptable to his particular Darwinian sensibilities. Hence the need for a 'new replicator', the meme, a 'thing' analogous to a gene which obeys many of the same genetic principles Dawkins sketches elsewhere. The meme is 'a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*',[1] one that follows a rationalistic logic of evolution. The meme is that which gives us 'culture': culture as an accumulation of discrete, competing practices, trends, and statements—'tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches'[2]—which swirl around and evolve according to Darwinian reasoning.

If evolution is true, then culture, Dawkins assumes, must likewise follow the same biological principles. But this is begging the question. Why did Dawkins think we need an evolutionary understanding of 'culture', anyway? It's obvious Dawkins has never paid attention to cultural anthropology, cultural studies, anything that has worked to theorize or understand what 'culture' might even be.[3] His reasoning becomes a bit clearer if we note that his examples of memes are *religious*. While he begins with what I reference above—ideas, fashions, artistic techniques—what Dawkins focuses most on are the belief in god, religious laws, faith, and celibacy. Given his notorious atheism, the point of a meme seems mostly about explaining why ideas and behavior Dawkins believes *irrational*—those at odds with beliefs and acts that confer some biological, competitive advantage—persist.[4] Dawkins even ends his chapter with a call to reject the mimetic nature of culture: 'We, alone on earth, can revel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators'.[5] Rather than an extension of an evolutionary logic to describe culture alone, the initial proposal of the meme is a call to reject religion,

1 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192.
2 Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 192.
3 At the beginning of the chapter, Dawkins reports that he uses the word culture 'not in its snobbish sense, but as a scientist uses it' (Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 189). This suggests that he has no familiarity with any of the debates about culture that have occurred since Raymond Williams, at least, wrote *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).
4 This is most explicit with ideas about celibacy and monogamy, so often linked with religion as they are. Any belief that restricts sexual reproduction, for instance, is difficult for an evolutionary psychological perspective to explain.
5 Dawkins, *Selfish Gene*, 201.

and further to reject any nonscientific cultural formation reliant on repetition rather than rationality. Dawkins does not seem to place 'science' in any space occupied by 'culture'. Scientific reasoning is not subject to mimetic repetition, is not linked with 'ideas' that merely repeat. That which is not scientific continues to exist because of repetition rather than rationality. Consequently, *the meme is the irrational*. It impedes the revelation of the true that is empirical, positivistic thought.

Why should we assume culture to be based on a mindless, irrational replication and imitation, a definition that would make 'science', which is not based in this mindless repetition, something divorced from 'culture'? This supposes not only an analogy between culture and genetics, but also an equivalence between humans and machines that reduces the capacities of community, sociality, and the body to little more than the generation and maintenance of flows (of information, of capital, of biological matter).[6] Reproduction—both sexual and informational—becomes an act to perpetuate both selfish genes and irrational ideas. Even if we do not accept Dawkins' definition of the meme as 'genetic', any argument about memes remains haunted by his implicit binary opposition between 'rational' science and 'irrational' culture, between 'reason' and 'unreason', between 'invention' and 'imitation'.

Culture, when reduced to repetition, becomes something to be dismissed as a barrier to knowledge. This binary does not originate with Dawkins and can be traced back to Platonic and Aristotelian debates about *mimesis* and art, at least. But it probably achieves its most modern formulation (in ways that directly precede Dawkins and, for that matter, most theories of communication) in the work of the *fin de siècle* French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. I think Tarde provides one of the better understandings of cultural repetition but, as I'll return to at the end of this chapter, he assumes similar things to Dawkins about rationality and repetition. The point of this chapter is to highlight how discussions of memes and mimesis regularly presume rationality to be opposed to cultural automatism: an opposition between *poiesis* and *mimesis*, a repetition and mirroring that remains both "illegitimate" but also necessary for cultural and social relation. The lesson of memes Dawkins seems to want to teach is as follows: culture is stupid; it exists to prevent science from achieving its place as rational master.

Memes, in other words, are a negative form proposed as an exterior to the truth of rationality. Rationality finds its coherence by positing a 'thing' essential for the perpetuation of the irrationality of culture, the mindlessness of the crowd, and fascism of the group; a 'thing' to be resisted and excluded for evolutionary rationalism to claim authority; a 'thing' invented as the barrier to rationalism's own self-realization. Until a radically different theory of memes is proposed—one that not only differs from Dawkins' but actively repudiates the meme as a name for the persistence of public, unthinking irrationality undermining

6 An equivalence between communication, biology, and technology (and finance) is central for the convoluted history of the idea of 'networked connectivity'. See the first part of my book, *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

the logic of positivistic truth—then we remain in a space that assumes memes to be little more than a mode of mindless repetition, accepting positivism as the only alternative to the unthinking mass that is 'culture'.

Let's consider a specific work that engages directly with these themes: the livestreamed play *Circle Jerk*, which was written by Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley and performed by their theater company, Fake Friends, in late 2020.[7] *Circle Jerk*, a satire of both contemporary digital culture as well as (white) gay male sexuality, links the mindless, irrational repetitiveness of the meme to emergent fears of fascistic disinformation spread over social media. It does so through the creation of a 'meme machine', a technology that generates a fascistic sameness through unthinking imitation. With the meme machine, *Circle Jerk* provides a way of thinking about the (in)commensurability of rationality, repetition, and sameness, especially as articulated by social media and streaming video on platforms such as TikTok. In addition, *Circle Jerk* engages with how these themes of repetition and sameness were addressed in 1990's queer theory, updating them for a conjuncture defined by social media. I want to elaborate how the link between memes and mindless repetition of the same is tacitly assumed in how we understand and imagine the politics of social media. But, at the same time, this assumption provokes questions about relation and reproduction. These questions have different implications when 'evolutionary' arguments about reproduction are positioned against a critique of a (heteronormative) injunction to reproduce (in this case, reproductions both sexual and ideal, relating to Dawkins' understanding of both genetics and mimetics). The alternative to Dawkins' fear of mimesis is to revel in the failure of repetition, the failure of communication, the generation of memes that cannot be but nonmimetic.

The Meme Machine

Circle Jerk is one of the most successful examples of the many livestreamed digital theatre productions of 2020, when the dangers of coronavirus contagion required a reinvention of theatrical liveness for online, distanced streaming. Most examples of theatre from this time can be summed up with the phrase 'Zoom Play'. This includes plays that used videostreaming platforms nondiegetically, with actors speaking lines in individualized boxes on a screen (so, the audience is viewing a performance as if they're viewing yet another example of the Zoom meetings that many of us are were dealing with every day). 'Zoom Play' also includes a number of examples which used technology in a diegetic fashion, such as Richard Nelson's *What Do We Need to Talk About* (2020), which was both performed over Zoom and had a plot that took place over Zoom, or Doug Liman's terrible film *Locked Down* (2021), which used communication over Zoom and Skype as major parts of the plot.

7 *Circle Jerk*, script by Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley in collaboration with Cat Rodríguez and Ariel Sibert, dir. Rory Pelsue, Theater Mitu, MITU580, Brooklyn, NY, live performance streamed online at http://circlejerk.live, 20 October 2020.

Circle Jerk, instead of following this 'Zoom Play' style, incorporated an inventive staging setup with twelve programmable cameras and a video design that appropriated memes from TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. It also created its own variants of notable genres of videos from these platforms, such as those of the mukbang and ASMR varieties.[8] *Circle Jerk* was livestreamed, though not over a videoconferencing platform, and used its setup to comment directly on the model of sociality implicit in social media video—sequences of the play involved facetuning different characters' appearances, and the play incorporated characters mimetically copying popular dances from TikTok. *Circle Jerk* used the possibility of a livestreamed play to directly reproduce and comment on various internet practices associated with social media platforms that use livestreamed video.

Taking its name from both the 'homoerotic ritual' and the subreddit '/r/circlejerk',[9] the play begins with the cancelling and deplatforming of Jurgen Yionoullis, a not-exactly-subtle riff on Milo Yiannopoulos. Jurgen is a 'gay self help guru' who has secretly funneled his 'millennial fans' into an 'alt-right artificial intelligence propaganda scam'. But his plans are halted as his 'meme machine', an 'artificially intelligent database of the world's socio-political, sexual-libidinal perversions', has become 'indecently exposed'. While initially Jurgen's goal was simply to gain fame and money, after his cancellation he reframes the meme machine as a method of enacting *sameness*, a sameness that would undo his cancellation and enable him to feel 'safe' by making everyone like him. Memes, at the beginning of *Circle Jerk*, are a machinic form of repetition that not only act as propaganda, entrancing Jurgen's ostensibly liberal-leaning fans towards alt-right causes, but also can be harnessed to create a world of uniformity, in which everyone becomes, as Jurgen claims, 'a mirror me, a me-me'. We can see, then, both a perpetuation of Dawkins' understanding of memes—as an irrational replication that generates groupthink—and a connection of this replication and sameness to a narcissistic desire to make the rest of the world equivalent to oneself.

Memes—both as a means of repetition and a means to create mirrorings of oneself—thus serve to chart what we might frame as an opposition between homophily and heterophily, terms which, in their use today, articulate both social networks and sexuality. Homophily, as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has noted, is the belief that social relations are formed out of similarity, an argument essential for mathematical models of network science. 'If we are inside-out, it is because homophily, love as love of the same, closes the world it pretends

8 Helen Shaw, "Best New Remote Performance Paradigm: *Circle Jerk," Vulture*, December 7, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/article/best-quarantine-culture-quarries-2020.html.

9 I'm using the language the website of the play uses to describe itself (Fake Friends, '*Circle Jerk*: About', https://circlejerk.live/about). On Reddit, a 'circlejerk' refers to a form of self-congratulatory groupthink, and the subreddit r/circlejerk is used to call these moments out. At the same time, as one Reddit user has put it, r/circlejerk is an 'anti-circlejerk circlejerk where circlejerk-aware redditors pat one another on the back for being smarter than the average circlejerking redditor' (apopheniac1989, Reddit comment, 3 November 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/1pt5uk/what_is_rcirclejerk/cd5rrvm/).

to open; it makes cyberspace a series of echo chambers'.[10] Network science begins and ends with a necessary and intractable attraction of the same. Like attracts like, and it does so everywhere when we extend social networks beyond social media. The very foundation of social existence, if we presume networks and connection, is homophilic. Society is made up of links of sameness, presuming sameness, repeating the same information, transmitting the same thing, over and over and over again.[11] If memes assume replication, replication, replication (leading—for Dawkins at least—towards a mass mind of bad, religious ideas), *Circle Jerk* links these concerns of sameness and difference (homophily and heterophily, homosociality and heterosociality) to concerns long held for a radical queer politics.

The Same and the Other

As Leo Bersani (whose famous essay 'Is the Rectum a Grave?'[12] is directly referenced in *Circle Jerk*) put it in 1995:

> Although there are valid grounds for questioning the assumption that desire between men, or between women, is desire for 'the same', it is also true that because our apprenticeship in desiring takes place within that assumption, homosexuality can become a privileged model of sameness—one that makes manifest not the limits but the inestimable value of relations of sameness, of homo-relations. Perhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality. This of course means sociality as we know it…[13]

Sociality 'as we know it' is, in Bersani's argument, about sexual difference and an attraction to the other. This idea has been further extended by Lee Edelman, and also resonates with arguments from materialist feminists who see the reproduction of society (of capital, of labor) as built on sexual reproduction and thus, heterosexual desire and procreation.[14] And while it may point towards a weird historical irony (that social media has completely rewritten assumed social heterophily to a technically enforced homophily), Bersani's understanding of 'the same' here isn't something so crude as a fascism of mimetics, but

10 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Queering Homophily," in Clemens Apprich, et al., *Pattern Discrimination* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2018), 60.

11 Which is particularly evident in studies of 'social contagion', which have been the most powerful example of how network models—at the height of the popularity of network science—moved beyond the internet to describe anything 'social'. I've discussed this in *Inhuman Networks*, and Chun has discussed this in *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

12 Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

13 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6-7.

14 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam, 1970); Endnotes Collective, 'The Logic of Gender', *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 56-90.

rather has much in common with Monique Wittig's attacks on gender differentiation.[15] But, what I'm suggesting is that social media and the internet have rewritten desire in a way that normalizes a form of attraction that once was understood as an oppositional form against compulsory heterosexuality. Heterophily is sociality fundamentally underwritten by desire for the other, for difference—a desire which is today bizarrely alien to the models presumed by social networks.[16]

Of course, things are not quite that simple. Social media has seemingly concretized and stabilized identity so one can be known and predicted as a target market,[17] which, in its presumption of an identity that remains the same over time, is a different sameness than the sameness Bersani advocates. Additionally, Bersani's sameness is not equivalence; it is instead a space in which differentiation cannot be successfully completed. His sameness is an attempt to remove capacities of differentiation that serve to reproduce homophobia, misogyny, patriarchy, and so on. It points towards a removal of (binary) difference, which would permit a more radical form of (multiple, undefined) difference to flourish. True sameness inevitably fails—repetition is always an 'inaccurate self-replication'.[18] Equivalence of the copy is always flawed.

This desire for the same nonetheless speaks to the desire expressed in *Circle Jerk*—a desire for me-mes produced through memes. And *Circle Jerk* points to how this political suggestion of Bersani's—in an age of an internet that *presumes* homophily, that begins from the assumption that *all* attraction, and not just queer attraction, is attraction to the same—has been rendered unworkable. And yet, this reversal does not mean that *difference* is a way to resist the hegemony of the internet's homophily, a difference that would 'heteroize' the sameness assumed by networked mimesis. Rather, a sense of sameness that was implicit in Bersani's work has become subsumed by the digital, and the solution to this subsumption may be to further embrace Bersani's arguments—to follow sameness through to its eventual failure, degradation, and collapse.[19]

Jurgen (with his conspirator, Lord Bussy) eventually upgrades his meme machine post-cancellation, reinventing it as a vague, indistinct, artificially intelligent avatar which appears to mirror left-wing causes and interests. This persona is designed to disseminate a message that presumes complete sameness, a sameness that sounds like belonging and identification but also carries with it the fascism that emerges from these desires. The new meme machine Jurgen and Bussy invent is a point of erotic identification with oneself, an

15 Bersani, *Homos*, 41-47. Cf. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Katherine Guinness, *Schizogenesis: The Art of Rosemarie Trockel* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 29-33.

16 Contrast Chun's "Queering Homophily" with Bersani's arguments.

17 See Grant Bollmer, *Theorizing Digital Cultures* (London: SAGE, 2018), 121-134.

18 This is a regular theme of the essays collected in Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*

19 The opposition of sameness to digitality, I think, is also what guides Alexander Galloway's *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

influencer 'meme' and 'contagion queen', named Eva María, who is 'Black but not-Black' and 'infinitely diverse', with a voice module taken from an 'Alexia' voice assistant (*alexia* being both a nod to Amazon's voice assistant and a disorder where one who was once able to read loses the ability to do so). Jurgen and Bussy program Eva María to appeal to 'every libtard in New York City' through a 'heterogenous' method of micro-targeting individuals to generate a homogenous, white-supremacist sameness.

Drawing on the language of Emmanuel Levinas, Byung-Chul Han has argued that the internet and social media are machines for producing the endless repetition of the *same*. This is how we should understand Eva María: as a machine that appears as different, as other, only in order to perpetuate the same, over and over. In the work of Levinas, the 'same' (or, in French, *le même*) is self-identity, the 'I', which Levinas opposes with the 'other', or the metaphysical infinitude hidden behind the face of another.[20] For Levinas, the essence of ethics is the refusal to reduce the other to the same, to admit the infinite openness of otherness that cannot and should not be reduced to one's 'I', to one's 'sameness'. Han equates these terms to 'positivity' and 'negativity', suggesting that the negativity of the other has been completely eliminated with contemporary technology. The same is the positive, the visible, the smooth and narcissistic surface inherent in the digital, the other is the negative, a metaphysical irruption of nonknowledge and uncertainty:

> Seamless *liking* produces a realm of positivity. Experience as irruption of the *other*—because of its negativity—interrupts imaginary self-mirroring. But the positivity that is inherent in digital technology minimizes the possibility of having any such experience. It prolongs only the *same*.[21]

What we see in *Circle Jerk* is how the sameness of what Bersani calls 'homo-ness', which does not do away with difference *as such* but embraces difference *without category*, is subsumed into the homophily of hyper-specific target marketing, not allowing a sameness of category and permitting only a sameness of *individuality*. What we see in *Circle Jerk* is, instead of Bersani's sameness, the reduction of the world to Han's *same*, in which I substitute myself for all others, a fascism of me-mes rather than a diversity without category.[22] What *Circle Jerk* presents is, in many ways, the end result of Dawkins' opposition between rationality and irrationality—the replication of memes permits the generation of an unthinking, fascistic mass.

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20 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

21 Byung-Chul Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*, trans. Erik Butler (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 22.

22 This is a theme Katherine Guinness has been developing in her articles "The Coloniser and Corpus Nullius," *parallax* 26, no. 1 (2020): 76-88, and "Self-Portraiture and Self-Performance," in *Visual Culture Approaches to the Selfie*, ed. Derek Conrad Murray (New York: Routledge, forthcoming), and it also has significant parallels with how Guinness defines 'the neutral' in *Schizogenesis*.

Mimetic Individuality

This sameness of individuality is best illustrated in *Circle Jerk* when Eva María generates a number of (ostensibly) infinite video variants, all of which carry with them the same message about the desirability of sameness. Each video is crafted for a particular person/target, and they take the form of, among other things, conspiracies about the suppression of a transgender American history, global warming and children, and an ASMR video designed for a 'curator' with no professional credits. In this last video, Eva María says (conflating 'socially constructed' with 'fake'), 'We are not damaged. Damage and trauma are social constructions. . . Imagine being in a world in which we are the majority. Not just a majority, the vast majority. Ninety percent of the people. A place where we are not the minority. A place where people understand who you are, naturally—you don't have to explain yourself'. The play then incorporates images of celebrities (including drag queens from *RuPaul's Drag Race* and Mike Pence), all now with faces morphed into or combined with Eva María's face. We eventually see a video of a man walking on a beach (also with Eva María's face), repeating her ASMR monologue. Sameness has taken hold, one in which everyone thinks they have their own ideas but are merely repeating the videos made for them by the meme machine. *Circle Jerk* effectively inverts Bersani—it begins with individuality to generate a sameness that never fails, but only repeats ad nauseum.

Mimetic similitude as a foundation for social relations is perhaps best elaborated in the work of Gabriel Tarde. Around 1900, Tarde elaborated a foundational 'law' for all social relations—for a universal sociology—relations are always '*individual initiative followed by imitation*'.[23] Ideas and trends emerge from particular 'geniuses' or 'elites' who are then copied by followers.[24] This is directly what we see in *Circle Jerk*—Jurgen, who notes how he belongs to the '1%', uses the 'genius' of his meme machine to generate a universal, fascist repetition to make the rest of the world equivalent to himself. This 'genius' is a problem for our present understanding of memes and mimesis. Tony Sampson has reinvented Tarde's sociology as a 'dystopian media theory' to describe how masses of people are subsumed into a 'collective nonconscious, caught in the shockwaves of the event'.[25] Sampson explicitly denies the source of imitation in a 'genius' individual,[26] but the presence or absence of a genetic origin—or the ability to locate this origin—does not really matter. In *Circle Jerk*, the trick of the meme is to induce sameness at an individual level, with each person believing themselves to be the origin of the meme through which they become united as a fascist mass.

23 Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie Clews Parsons (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903), 3.

24 Gabriel Tarde, "The Origins and Functions of Elites," in *Gabriel Tarde: On Communication and Social Influence*, ed. Terry N. Clark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 245–251.

25 Tony D. Sampson, *A Sleepwalker's Guide to Social Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 16.

26 Interestingly, Sampson suggests the foregrounding of an individual as a "source" turns Tarde into Dawkins. Sampson, *Sleepwalker's Guide*, 50.

The Uncanny and the Dream-Meme

The eeriness of the double is essential for any Freudian notion of the uncanny. The doppelgänger is a failed copy, a duplicate that is partial, limited, and thus strange. But after social media, data analytics, and digital doubles, Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli has suggested that the 'digital uncanny' be thought not in terms of doubling or even failure. Rather, it is the fear that 'we are machines and that our behavior may be predictable precisely because we are machinic'.[27] The digital uncanny emerges because the double is more me than myself, more known than myself, more powerful than myself. *Circle Jerk*, at multiple times, references the song 'Who R U' by JUFU, a song popularized because of its repetitive use on TikTok. JUFU's video for this song[28] takes a typical representation of the Freudian uncanny as its theme, with JUFU encountering a copy of himself. 'Who are you?' JUFU asks his doppelgänger. 'I am you!' it replies. 'I am me.' 'No sir, you are you.' Typical TikTok videos using this song play with the doubling of someone, the impossibility to distinguish between self and other, the reduction of other to the same. Instead of a feeling of uncanniness, an amusement at the repetition of mimetic copying. Rather than becoming creeped out at our failed copies, *we* are the copies to begin with.[29]

Memes—if we understand memes to be a simple form of repetitive transmission—are a means for producing the same. What would it mean for memes to fail at repetition? To effectively cease to be memes? The uncanny is one way to embrace the failure of the same, a disquiet that emerges from the inability of identity to maintain itself. The final act of *Circle Jerk* embraces this failure in another way. The seemingly unified sameness produced by the meme machine begins to collapse as the relation between different characters, their limited self-identities, the memes they repeat, are all mixed together in a cacophony that openly appropriates from TikTok and reduces the possibility of a mimetic similarity to rubble.

Both the Freudian uncanny and *Circle Jerk*'s chaos are particular ways the same fails to remain the same. Alongside these, I want to end by gesturing towards a radically different kind of meme, those of 'Thomas the Plank Engine',[30] a subreddit devoted to representing memes people see in their dreams. The 'meme' that gives this subreddit its name was one posted to another subreddit, r/me_irl. It was captioned, 'i saw this meme in a dream and remade it as best as i could'. This dream meme is made up of twelve faces of Thomas the Tank Engine and a wooden plank. While most of Thomas's faces are happy and smiling, one is ambivalent and one is angry.[31] The nonsensical nature of r/thomastheplankengine can be seen in its countless dream memes, which—to provide a random but representative

27 Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, *Digital Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.
28 JUFU, "Who R U,"s YouTube, August 30, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szajRMpLcL8.
29 Cf. Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks*.
30 Thomas the Plank Engine, https://www.reddit.com/r/thomastheplankengine/.
31 TA10S, "me irl," Reddit post, October 27, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/me_irl/comments/9rwtxf/meirl/.

selection—include 'an image of a microfibre mop' with the captions (in Impact Bold, of course) 'ACTIVE DRY YEAST' and 'YOU'RE 3rd'.[32] Another example is described as the result of a dream in which a redditor 'was hitting a tennis ball with a ruler'. This dream meme depicts, on the left side of the image, a silhouette of a cricketer swinging a ruler. On the right side, there's a black and white gradient with a tennis ball poorly photoshopped in the middle. At the top of the gradient is a circled number 1 next to 'TOP TEXT', a circled number 2 is in the middle, and at the bottom, 'BOTTOM TEXT'.[33] With these weird condensations and displacements, mimetic repetition fails when mediated by the unconscious. These examples *try* to be memes. They draw on formal elements that seem 'meme-like'. And yet, in mediating dreams these memes become unrepeatable. The memes of Thomas the Plank Engine do not produce copies—they are memes that halt and stupefy the ability of a meme to become me-mes.

Instead of repetition, instead of sameness, we have misrecognition and self-alienation, perpetual failures in the compulsion to repeat: a mimetics that can only remain other even if it seems guided by a desire for the same.

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32 JackTheCookie, "an image of a microfibre mop with this caption," Reddit post, 21 April 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/thomastheplankengine/comments/mvsb5b/an_image_of_a_microfibre_mop_with_this_caption/.

33 UwU-Lemon, "I was hitting a tennis ball with a ruler," Reddit post, 21 April 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/thomastheplankengine/comments/mvk263/i_was_hitting_a_tennis_ball_with_a_ruler_in_my/.

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A POSTDIGITAL ANGEL OF HISTORY? ON 'MEME THEORY'

SCOTT WARK

Fig. 1: Distracted Angel of History. Digital Image. Originally seen on Twitter, late-2018. Archived at: Know Your Meme. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1290289-distracted-boyfriend

0.

I found the image above, an instance of the 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme, sometime in 2018. I thought this meme was funny at the time—and also crass, casually misogynistic, and layered with far too much irony. My opinion hasn't changed in the intervening period. But nor has my fascination with this meme.

I'm going to use this meme in a way that's deliberately, bluntly, and somewhat stupidly literal. What if—bear with me—this meme perfectly represents a (post-)digital version of Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history'? What if it perfectly figures how 'one pictures the angel of history' and the 'wreckage… in front of his feet' blown in by the 'storm… we call progress'[1] in our postdigital present?

1 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," In *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard

1.

In the essay that probably did the most work to popularise the term, Florian Cramer, argues that the 'simplest definition of "post-digital" describes a media aesthetics which opposes. . . digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness.'[2] For Cramer, this concept is best understood by reading artistic practices as symptoms. The early internet had a certain aesthetic and a particular iconography: acid green text, dark screens, the backwash from CRT monitors illuminating faces open to possibility. Now, consumer technology is advertised at us using gauche, primary-coloured scenes peopled with elongated, barely-humanoid figures using what's known as 'Corporate Memphis' style.[3] Moreover, he argues that the tendency for younger creatives—not to mention consumers—to remediate and rehabilitate older technologies, like vinyl records, ought to be read as a pervasive reaction against digital technology and its promises. Cramer's 'post-digital' names an aesthetic that embraces the old, the noisy, the unpredictable and the unruly in reaction to digital technology's contemporary banality. It registers the routinisation of the possibility that digital technology once held.

Cramer developed the concept of the post-digital as a kind tongue-in-cheek dialectical periodization: of course, we're not really *after* the digital, because the digital pervades everything we do. But whilst the specificities of the dialectical process that Cramer identifies—the proliferation of *new* media reaching a degree of ubiquity that sparks a backlash, in the form of an aesthetic, defined by the embrace of the *old*—feels somewhat dated, the condition he identified has not.

Our contemporary post-digital situation is still one in which media overwhelm us. We may have gotten used to the novelty of everything being digital, but we have arguably yet to formulate or formalize techniques for thinking media in this situation. If, for Cramer, the way in to this problem is through aesthetics, I prefer to think of it as a concrete condition for thinking media today.

The pervasiveness and banality of digital media has created a situation in which thinking media requires us to think *with* media that are, because of their scale, their opacity, and their proprietary nature, quite *un*thinkable. The question we need to ask is this: how are we supposed to think media, to determine what they are, in conditions in which they are constitutively *in*determinate?

That's the situation. But you probably came for the memes. The thing is, this is the situation in which we have to try to think internet memes. What I'm saying is that Internet memes can be used to help us think our way through our contemporary post-digital media situation.

University Press, 2003), 392.

2 Florian Cramer, "What is "Post-Digital"?" *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About* 3 (2013).

3 Josh Gabert-Doyon, "Why Does Every Advert Look the Same? Blame Corporate Memphis," *Wired,* January 21, 2021, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/corporate-memphis-design-tech.

2.

Fig. 2: Disloyal Man with his Girlfriend Looking at Another Girl, also known as Distracted Boyfriend. Antonio Guillem, November 2, 2015. Digital image. Archived at Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Disloyal_man_with_his_girlfriend_looking_at_another_girl.jpg

By the time I found this example of the 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme, the meme itself was kind of over. It persists today as a particularly widespread and popular memetic form, but it's no longer novel. It survived an attempt by the Swedish government to identify it as misogynistic.[4] It even survived an image belonging to its series being used in a political campaign by Fidesz, the far-right party of Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán.[5] Through overuse and by attracting incidental mainstream attention, in other words, it's become part of online culture's backdrop, another fixture.

And yet here I am, writing an essay about this meme. Why? Because its arbitrary conjunctions have something to tell us about the conditions in which we're forced to think media today.

This meme began its life as a stock image: a photograph or illustration of an everyday scene that one can purchase to lend a little vitality or visual interest to a website's lifeless scaffolding. The original retains this recognisably-banal aesthetic, but it also has something more. The leering histrionics of its titular character, distracted by a passing woman

4 Jon Henley, "Distracted Boyfriend Meme is Sexist, Rules Swedish Ad Watchdog," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/26/distracted-boyfriend-meme-sexist-swedish-advertising.

5 "'Distracted Boyfriend'" Couple Star in Hungaray Pro-Family Ads," *BBC News*, March 13, 2019, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-47557217.

and so turning from his—or so we're given to assume—girlfriend, breaks the stock photograph mould. If this is a scene from everyday life, it's not one in which we're supposed to recognise ourselves. This image is supposed to be part of a series, but it stands out—and has become singular.

From this cursory engagement, we can draw three preliminary points. This relationship between singularity and seriality is a complex one. Though already part of a series, the singularity of this image allowed 'Distracted Boyfriend' to transform from a viral image—something copied and shared without modification[6]—into an iterable and *re*iterable internet meme. These steps are worth noting, because they represent one means for a meme to emerge out of pervasive, circulating media. Moreover, as their popular scholarly proponents would have it, internet memes are collective online-cultural products.[7] But as they are also media, they can't be separated from the prevailing technical-aesthetic conditions in which they're produced.

3.

What does it mean to call the post-digital a condition? I don't mean it to be thought of as a condition in the sense of a 'condition of possibility.' That kind of ontological thinking is beyond this essay's ken. Rather, by 'condition' I mean the concrete conditions in which one is forced to think media.

I have in mind here two of Friedrich Kittler's claims. First, the one that gets quoted all the time, both because it's gnomic and suggestive and because it is literally the first line of his most famous book: 'media determine our situation.'[8] But second, from an older, denser essay—and here I'm paraphrasing, because it's much less quotable—that media constitute the conditions of possibility for theorisation itself.[9] This latter claim isn't meant to be a grand one. In a section of this essay describing how philosophers actually *do* philosophy, Kittler points out that philosophising—let's say, for the sake of sounding at least a little less pretentious, *theorising*—requires an entire "apparatus" of tools to actually be done.[10] The essay is old, so the apparatus he describes includes lists books, pens, notes, bookmarks, marginalia, and index cards; the library, the stacks, the desk. The contemporary equivalent might include PDFs, word processing or note taking apps, highlight functions, and bibliographic managers; or, the search engine, the publishers' platforms, the desktop.

6 Marissa Olson, "Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture," in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2015).

7 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (The MIT Press, 2013).

8 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford University Press, 1999).

9 Friedrich Kittler, "Forgetting," *Discourse* 3 (1981): 88–121.

10 Kittler, "Forgetting," 93.

The analogy holds insofar as these tools have a degree of equivalency. But times have changed—and so have media. Media's contemporary ubiquity and pervasiveness create a different set of conditions for the production of knowledge in general and theoretical knowledge in particular.

4.

In yet another essay, Kittler infamously proposed a tripartite 'elementary definition of media': media are that which 'record, transmit, and process information.'[11] Matthew Fuller has recently been moved to add a fourth term to this elementary definition. What we call 'media' today 'have in many cases become a subset of computational systems'.[12] For instance, the app that I use to take photographs on my phone is a kind of media, in that it records, transmits, and processes information; but it is also dependent on my phone, itself a kind of media. Identifying media *as* media requires what Fuller calls 'analysis': 'the breaking down of complex entities into what, at a certain scale, can be read as nominally fundamental units, and working out their immanent, potential, or emergent relationships.'[13]

Kittler's media were discrete: gramophone, film, typewriter; their apotheosis, the computer—itself a product, so he claimed, of a twentieth-century war machine. Today, media are profligate. Phone, app, and, finally, the image it produces; all are media made possible by computation, rendered *discretizable*, or apprehensible as singular objects, by Fuller's fourth feature, the capacity to analyze. The thing about this fourth capacity, though, is that isn't necessarily something that we can do without help. Most of us aren't peering at a program's code—or, indeed, the electrical impulses that are computation's material basis[14]—and isolating *this* or *that* as media. Media do that for us.

I don't mean to claim that our tools think us. I'm not in to panpsychism. All I'm saying is that thinking media requires using media to think. It's a relatively banal claim, in one sense: tools shape thought. It lacks the grand framing of Kittler's war machine, too; its motivating force, advertising, is also much more banal. But given the scale at which media operate, the degree to which they pervade our everyday lives, their contemporary ubiquity, this claim has a little more force.

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11 Friedrich Kittler, "The City is a Medium," *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (1996): 717–29.

12 Matthew Fuller, "Software Studies Methods," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. Jentery Sayers (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 250-57.

13 Fuller, "Software Studies Methods," 254.

14 Friedrich Kittler, "There is No Software," *CTheory* 32 (10 October 1995): http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=74.

5.

The term 'tools' is somewhat misleading. I'm typing this out on my 2018 Macbook Air (a cute Rose Gold model). It's easy to see this as a tool, an equivalent to Kittler's 'apparatus.' But our media situation is a specific one. Ours is the age of massively-distributed media systems. For parsimony's sake, let's call it the age of the platform.

The platform is a specific kind of computational architecture defined, most simply, by its programmability. Most social media are platforms. So are most of Google's main products, Amazon's marketplace, and Apple's devices. But so, too, are cloud computing systems, which allow customers to hire out computing power to perform complex and intensive processing tasks remotely. All of these systems are different; what unifies them is their capacity to act as 'platforms' for other applications or processes.

This essay is supposed to be about memes, so let's focus on the sites where they're most often encountered online: social media platforms. For my money, Anne Helmond's early theorization of social media platforms is still the simplest and the best. According to her, these systems have been created to 'decentralize [sic]' the production of media *content* to their users, but 'recentralize [sic]' the collection of data produced *by* those users to the platform itself.[15] As you no doubt know, this data forms the basis of their business model.[16] But that's not our focus. By standardizing and streamlining the capacity for users produce and share media content—by, in fact, requiring users to do so in order for them to have any content at all—platforms have massively intensified the *amount* of media in circulation.

This asymmetrical infrastructure and excess of circulating media aren't really homologous with 'tools.' They constitute a new 'situation'—what I interpret as a set of concrete mediatic conditions. Moreover, the excess of circulating media they make possible is so overwhelming, and subject to such frequent change as it's produced and reproduced by its participants, as to be hard to determine at any one moment.

Cramer's post-digital dialectic presents the interplay between new and old as the defining conflict that generates media aesthetics today. But perhaps this is the right frame with the wrong conceptual drapery. In the constantly interplay of new and old—or new becoming old—perhaps what persists, as online culture reproduces itself with every refreshed feed, is not a particular aesthetic, but simply a sense of perpetual ruin, perpetual obsolescence, new becoming old through bland repetition.

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15 Anne Helmond, "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1–11.

16 McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead* (London: Verso, 2019).

6.

Let's try to draw all of these conceptual threads together by returning to my original conceit: 'Distracted Boyfriend' manifesting a post-digital 'angel of history.'

Why slap a cropped image of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* into a 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme? Whilst it made me giggle when I first saw it, the Venn diagram representing people who read Walter Benjamin and regularly consume memes must be, if not vanishingly small, then not far off. Nevertheless, someone thought it would be funny. So, let's take it at face value.

The joke is a fairly simple one. In 'On the Concept of History,' Benjamin invokes the figure of the angel of history to give form to the unfolding of historical time. He does so by describing the central figure in a print by Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus* – that's the weird figure in the meme above. In this short passage, Benjamin describes this angel as wide-eyed, open-mouthed, and spread-winged, seeming 'about to move away from something he stares at.'[17] Benjamin sees this figure's face as being 'turned toward the past,' looking on the unfolding of time and seeing not a 'chain of events,' but 'one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet.' Only, he can't do anything about this catastrophe, because 'a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them.'[18] The joke, if you weren't in on it already, ought now to be clear: the angel as 'Distracted Boyfriend' turned into figure of abstract-historical catastrophe.

Briefly, I want to note that I know that explaining jokes is just about the worst thing one can do in an essay. But there's nothing for it now but to keep going, to see if we can make this particular one funny once again.

In the bit of the passage that's most resonant of all, Benjamin says that '[t]his storm drives [the angel] irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky.' He finishes by saying this: '[w]hat we call progress is *this* storm.'[19] There's a lot riding on this line: a thesis about the historical-materialist need to disentangle our conception of "history" from the idea of 'progress'; a sense of doom generated by the contemporaneous emergence of Nazism, which forced Benjamin to flee Berlin; an attempt to return a sense of Messianic purpose to Marxism's promise of a revolution-to-come. All of which can be projected on this meme but which, at the same time, it repudiates. Or not.

17 Benjamin. "On the Concept of History," 392
18 Benjamin. "On the Concept of History," 392
19 Benjamin. "On the Concept of History," 392

This particular meme can't possibly bear all of this conceptual baggage. It's just a joke, substituting Klee's angel, and Benjamin's conception of it, for a gross and leering man. But even if it couldn't even begin to thematise a world-historical 'catastrophe,' it still has a lot to tell us about the how one *ought* to picture progress in our postdigital media situation – and about the debris it leaves.

7.

What would it mean to take this meme as a post-digital version of Benjamin's 'angel of history'?

Insofar as the concept of the post-digital is a tongue-in-cheek periodisation—both aware that it's insufficient whilst also, as a failed attempt at portioning out history, revealing something about our times – it necessarily contains a conception of history within itself. This conception of history is concerned with the present and its aesthetics, rather than high-falutin' concepts like progress or revolution. But it's a conception of history nonetheless.

In this conception of history, media *are present*. That is, their sheer ubiquity conditions the present as the present's concrete conditions. We might be able to get at the shape of the present by seeking to understand the large-scale forces that structure it—like, for instance, the platform. But we can also get at it by sifting through its debris. Like internet memes.

The dialectic Cramer outlines is less a form, a shape of things that have come and will again, than a function. Because media are everywhere, so too are their debris. This condition of ubiquity (of media become post-digital because of their pervasiveness) and ruin (of media's constant obsolescence) is necessary for the emergence of meme culture. But it's not sufficient. It also requires an excess. Internet memes *present* the conjunction of technology, cultural production, and aesthetics that make their production possible *to us*. They do so by manifesting these conditions in and as they are iterated and are reiterated; or, in other words, as they circulate, in excess.

The indeterminacy that characterises our post-digital media situation might be a product of computational infrastructures, like platforms. But these infrastructures are proprietary, opaque, black-boxed – inaccessible, in general, to you or I. In excess and as they circulate, what internet memes manifest is a condition of being overwhelmed by media—and being forced to think within this condition whilst also, and necessarily, thinking this condition. Of being *platformed*. This is something we *can* think.

8.

So perhaps this particular 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme is actually the angel of history we deserve in our post-digital present. What can we learn from it? A few things.

First, it's very, very easy for media like internet memes to become overdetermined, to stand in for much more than they can bear. But regardless of how far one might wish to push a particular conceptual conceit, the *form* of thinking these kinds of media force on us, as they circulate in excess and as a kind of post-digital debris, is something we can use. To recall Kittler, insofar as media constitute the conditions of possibility for theorisation itself, *we can only really think media today through this kind of debris*.

These are the rudiments of a kind of theorisation that I call 'meme theory.' We've been dragged into the wake of a force that keeps 'piling wreckage upon wreckage.' Let's call this figure what it is: not an angel, but an internet meme; not an internet meme in particular, or even internet memes in general, but cultural practices and mediated modes of production that continue to be iterated and reiterated in circulation, changing what it is that media *are* too quickly for us to keep pace. All we can do is toss our concepts—of memes, of media, and of their computational infrastructures—into the wake and salvage what we can.

More programmatically: to conceptualise media today, our theoretical practices have to remain responsive to those media. This isn't so high-falutin' after all. It's just a practice, a way of doing things, that recognises the banal and yet pervasive conditioning influence media exercise on our concepts of them.

ADDENDA

I.

The thing about the angel of history is that is has always been a meme.

Or: a proposition, in the form of an image, that mutates with its mediatic conditions of production; and, that reflects, in each of its usages, how these conditions change, inasmuch as the angel's *messianic* indeterminacy stays the same.

At least, that's one way of reading Benjamin's other most famous essay into the present.[20]

II.

Is all of this too much for the meme concept to bear?

Probably. In any attempt to work out the relation between a concept and its objects in a concrete situation, though, we find what I'm calling 'meme theory.' Benjamin's angel is simply a

20 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [Third Version]," in *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 252–83.

particularly useful figure for bringing the ruins of our contemporary post-digital present into frame. After all, that's what memes do: they figure.

If the figure of the angel of history is a meme, the 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme's backward gaze tells us something else about our present. The thing about the dialectic that I pinched from Cramer and applied to this meme is that it has its own remainder, or irrecuperable excess. In Cramer, that excess is those technical 'systems' that we are forced to either over-identify with, or to repudiate[21]—systems that, he tacitly argues, we cannot overcome no matter how hard we try. Leaving aside his focus on aesthetic practices, we can use this dialectic of identification and repudiation to think through *meme cultures'* irrecuperable excesses.

Amongst many other things, 'Distracted Boyfriend' figures a kind of pervasive, low-key misogyny common in contemporary society and often heightened online. What online culture thinks is *formally* subversive, and therefore ironically funny, might change; but no matter how often this culture's proponents protest that it's all 'a joke', the joke can never wholly encompass this toxicity. Irony in memes—and online-cultural irony in general—can never use the *form* of memetic play to fully nullify the cultural-political charge of these kinds of determinations. This is why even the crassest of memes always flirt, seemingly incongruously, with politics.

Do we not get the angels we deserve? If so, it's no wonder that what this post-digital angel figures, amongst everything else, is toxic masculinity. The 'storm. . . we call progress,' indeed.[22]

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21 Cramer, "What is 'Post-digital'?"
22 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 392.

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ON THE PROSPECT OF OVERCOMING MEME-CULTURE, OR, THE LAST MEME IN HISTORY

ÅKE GAFVELIN

Meme culture, at its present stage, consists in an oscillation between two opposed tendencies. On one hand, it attempts to *rigidify* various cultural phenomena, through the creation of certain paradigms of schematic representation: like the dichotomies of virgin/chad, boomer/zoomer, tradwife/thot, based/cringe, and woke/problematic – to name but a few. On the other hand, it aims to *dissolve* these same schemas as soon as they have been widely adopted. This can be inferred from the fact that the taxonomy of the alt-right and 4chan-associated 'incel' is now commonplace in zoomer meme-culture, without there being any ideological commonality between the two groups. The taxonomy is quite obviously employed ironically, with the purpose of dissolving a worldview rather than endorsing it.

In approaching this issue, we might first ask why this rigidifying/dissolving structure is constructed. The need to categorize is no new phenomenon – it is plausibly at the core of human cognition – but I doubt that it has previously been so intimately paired with a corresponding need to also *dissolve* the very schemes it puts in place. I take this, however, to have a straightforward explanation in what has been called the cultural logic of late capitalism. Because capitalism ultimately – as Marx put it – melts all that is solid into air, rigidifying memes satisfy our need to get a grip of accelerating social, technological and economic change. But since memes have themselves become a commodity, placed right next to advertisers and influencers in our social-media feeds, they are themselves subject to the same brutal forces that push the acceleration. Like products competing on a free market, memes either undergo cycles of radical self-transformation, to the point of unrecognizability, or otherwise they lose the attention of their consumers. That is, memes gain their value because they *rigidify*, but are *dissolved* by the very logic that makes that feature valuable. Hence, their duality.

A second question, perhaps of more philosophical importance, regards why this structure is not *de*constructed. It seems reasonable that the dissolving tendencies of meme-culture might, at some point, come to dissolve meme-culture itself, just as Marx thought that the logic inherent to capitalism would lead to its self-destruction. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the *End of History* was proclaimed, and it became easier *to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism* (as quipped by Fisher or Zizek or Jameson or your stoner dorm-mate). Can we imagine the end of meme-culture? This requires a dialectical analysis, showing how memetic paradigms go through three stages of upward development until they are finally transgressed and

new paradigms emerge as the result of sideway movements. In the end, the dialectics of meme-culture finds its ambivalent conclusion in the equally ambivalent conclusion of this essay.

Moving Up

Fig. 0: Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distracted_boyfriend

Consider the *Distracted Boyfriend Meme*, featuring (unsurprisingly) a distracted boyfriend (see Figure 0). Figure 0 can be called **Level 0** meme in this paradigm—a memetic paradigm being simply a set of memes that share a family resemblance. Although Figure 0 forms a stable building-ground for the paradigm, it is clearly not a meme in the colloquial sense. To create an actual meme, we need to map the relations between the objects we find in level 0 to the relations of some other phenomena, thus moving up to **Level 1.** An example of this is Figure 1, which gains its meaning from the fact that the distracted boyfriend stands in relation to his girlfriend and the other girl as the youth stands to capitalism and socialism. Both wish to replace the former with the latter. We might, then, think of Level 1 memes as analogous to what logicians call an *object-language*. In such a language, we are capable of representing relations between various objects in reality. Figure 1 is simply representing the relation between the youth, socialism, and capitalism by means of the relations between the people in Figure 0.

Fig. 1: Source: https://en.meming.world/wiki/Distracted_Boyf

One can find an infinite number of possible memes within Level 1, all with different levels of *dankness* (*dankness* roughly standing for the quality of a given meme). The thrust of this meme resides partly in the fact that someone has managed to compare a man feeling the urge to cheat with the comparative public support for capitalism and socialism. However, divisions of *dankness* within this level are so culturally contingent and dependent on personal taste that they do not lend themselves to rigorous philosophical analysis.

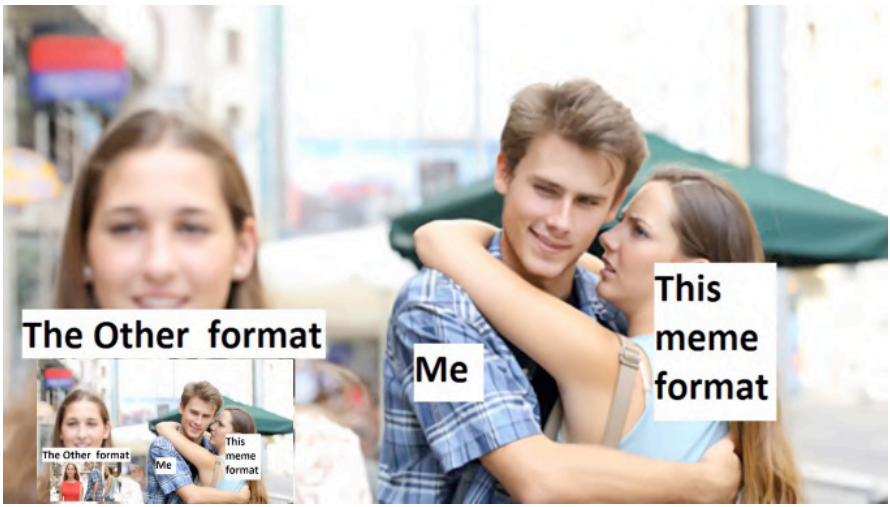

Fig. 2: Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1287554-

Moving up to **Level 2**, we find memes making reference to other memes. Consider Figure 2, for example, which refers to memes discovered on Level 1. We can think of Level 2 as roughly equivalent to what logicians call a *meta-language*: a language used to talk about languages.[1]

We can further imagine that Level 2 has an infinite number of possible layers: Figure 2 is a *meta*-meme, a meme about memes, but we might imagine meta-meta memes: memes like the meme in Figure 2 (see Figure 2.1); meta-meta-meta memes and so on... It should be noted, however, that memes do not always become *danker* as they become more 'meta': the fundamental joke is already in place by Figure 2. One might speculate whether this has something to do with the fact that these memes are not genuinely self-referential. Any attempt at *representing* a meme M *within* itself would instantaneously move M up one order in the hierarchy. But then, the meme we are representing is obviously no longer M.

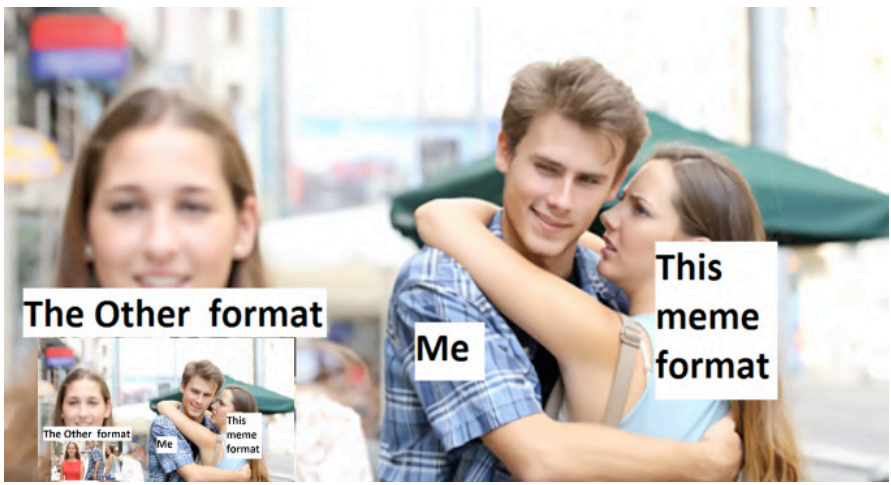

Fig. 2.1: Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1287554-?

This fits neatly with our (albeit imperfect) analogy of a hierarchy of languages, which was developed by Tarski precisely because any notion of a language representing itself runs into paradox (see Figure 2.2). However, we might still ask if it would be possible, in the search for ultimate dankness, to move beyond the linguistic limitations that Tarski put in place. But that requires moving up a level.

To fully comprehend a **Level 3** meme, we need to make a short detour through Russell and Wittgenstein's dispute on the distinction between *saying* and *showing* outlined in the

1 This analogy, however, is not perfect. Many memes reference both memes and actual things in reality, but it is not allowed to reference both languages and objects in the ordinary sense of a meta-language.

Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus. In his treatise, Wittgenstein sought to unveil the necessary structures of language. In doing so, he argued that all logical truths, like *it rains or it does not rain,* are vacuous; absolutely true precisely because they say absolutely nothing. Such tautologies instead gain their significance by *showing* something about the structure of the language in which they are formulated; in the case of *it rains or it does not rain*, that the language abides by the *law of the excluded middle*. A consequence of this view, however, is that Wittgenstein's own philosophy is unsayable, since it successfully formulates the necessary structure of language from within that very structure. Hence his treatise concludes: *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*.

Fig. 2.2: Source: Set Theory Memes for Logically Equivalent Teens

Russell thought this to be a superfluous piece of mysticism. He suggested in the preface that any quietism could be avoided by postulating a Tarskian infinite hierarchy of languages, in which the truth of the *Tractatus* is formulable in a language commenting on the syntactic properties of the language below it (just like our memes comment on memes in Level 2). Wittgenstein, however, despised Russell's preface, because he didn't think it did justice to the width of his philosophical achievement. On Russell's model, Wittgenstein was trying to *say* something about a particular language. But that was not his aim. He was trying to *show* it; and thus utter a truth transcending the representational scope of any possible language.

With this distinction in place, we can now begin to comprehend a **Level 3** meme. On Level 2, we attempted to *say* something about other memes by means of *representation* (like the picture under "the other format" in Figure 2). But Level 3 memes (see Figure 3)[2] *show* the structure of all possible memes within its paradigm by simply instantiating its barren structure, breaching the limits of any representational scope found within the hierarchy at Level 2. Figure 3 can thus be seen as the *Tractatus* of the *Distracted Boyfriend*-paradigm of memes, elucidating the ultimate structure of its memeological language by embodying it, saying *nothing.* Russell rejected the *Tractatus* because it would, as Wittgenstein proclaimed, mean the end of philosophy. Similarly, any Level 3 meme must finalize the upward movement in its paradigm: when one has reached it, one must – paraphrasing proposition 6.54 of the *Tractatus – throw away the ladder one used to climb it*.

Fig. 3: Source: https://www.emaaneastwood.blogspot.com/2019/11/meme-template-distracted-boyfriend.html

Moving Sideways

So where does the meme go if it no longer can move upwards? Here, I wish to introduce the notion of the *sideways* movement into a new paradigm. Let's consider the dialectics

2 The *Top Text Bottom Text* meme is a useful example of memes at this level.

in the movement from what might be called the *woke/problematic* paradigm to the *based/cringe* paradigm. These paradigms obviously do not consist of image-based memes like the *Distracted Boyfriend*, but they are memes in the sense that they encapsulate cultural ideas and phenomena in an easily transmittable form on the internet. Hence, we can try to see if our previous analysis applies to them.

As the term is understood in popular culture, woke means being "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice),"[3] and problematic means rejecting or being unaware of such issues. Let **Level 0** simply be the values of 'woke' and 'problematic', with **Level 1** memes in this paradigm assigning the labels *woke* or *problematic* to objects in reality. Let us now commence our upward journey by using the example of racial color blindness. On the most naive stage, color blindness is considered woke, as it makes race irrelevant in describing or assessing a person. But this is obviously also problematic, for roughly the very same reason – it leads one to ignore racial injustices. So, the **Level 2** woke person will rightly reject color blindness, achieving the state of being *meta-woke* – woke about the problematic nature of Level 1 wokeness. We can then imagine a further dialectics in which "thinking that 'color blindness is woke' is problematic" becomes problematic (achieving meta-meta-wokeness), and "thinking that "thinking that 'color blindness is woke' is problematic" is problematic" becomes problematic, and so on.

To climb up to **Level 3**, however, we need to become so woke as to realize that the woke/problematic paradigm *itself* is not woke enough. An embodiment of this stage can be found in Dasha Nekrasova and Anna Khachiyan – the hosts of the American podcast *Red Scare* – who reject the paradigm as a "liberal-feminist piety" used by people who are "disgusted and horrified by working-class people."[4] Noreen Malone describes their critiques (perhaps *hot takes* is a more fitting term) as "putting so much of the language of contemporary feminism and femininity through a feedback loop [that] it becomes meaningless; even their mocking of it indistinguishable from their organic use of it."[5] Red Scare's fundamental proposition, that *wokeness* is *problematic,* builds on the very schemes of representation inherent in the woke-problematic paradigm itself. It is therefore nonsensical in the same way that the *Tractatus* is: whatever they are trying to *say* can only be *shown* to an outside observer. When they reached Level 3, they threw away the ladder they used to climb it.

Now, when no higher move in the woke/problematic paradigm was possible, they arguably moved *sideways* into a new rigidifying scheme of representation: the *based/cringe*

3 "Woke," Merriam Webster Online, Accessed May, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke

4 Fraser Myers, "Meet the Anti-Woke Left," *Spiked Online,* July 4, 2019, https://www.spiked-online.com/2019/07/04/meet-the-anti-woke-left/

5 Noreen Malone, "Red Scare Leans Into Nothing. A Podcast that Offers a Critique of Feminism, and Capitalism, from Deep Inside the Culture They've Spawned," *The Cut,* October 25, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/10/profile-red-scare-podcast.html

paradigm. According to Urban Dictionary, being *based* means "having an opinion without regard for what other people think, often a controversial opinion but not always", implying that one is *cringe* when one shares too many opinions with the mainstream. The based/cringe paradigm must be understood in reference to the woke/problematic, as it succeeds it dialectically. However, it also has its own internal logic. In one way, we might say that based/cringe inverts woke/problematic: the *bonum* of former – the based – is the *malum* of latter – the problematic (and vice versa). This logic provides a simple explanation of how *Red Scare* manages to assign a positive value to mocking 'woke feminism': the very purpose of based/cringe is to turn woke/problematic on its head.

Similar to what was the case before, the objects of **Level 0** are the values of 'based' and 'cringe'. And equally alike is the movement upwards. Geist wakes up on a 4chan board, and "based" is applied to someone like Ben Shapiro or Jordan Peterson. But that **Level 1** usage is obviously cringe. So we move up to **Level 2**, achieving *meta-basedness.* I take it that this is where Geist is located presently: 'return to monké,' is Urban Dictionary's most up-voted example of something based, and this clearly mocks the alt-right and /pol/-associated wish to reject modernity and embrace tradition. We can only speculate what is to come, but plausibly the paradigm will continue to accelerate its upward movement in the hierarchy of meta-memes until it realizes that the based-cringe dichotomy itself is cringe, thus reaching a **Level 3** basedness (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). But this will, as before, result in quietism, requiring us to throw away the ladder and move sideways into a new paradigm. And so memeological history will continue.

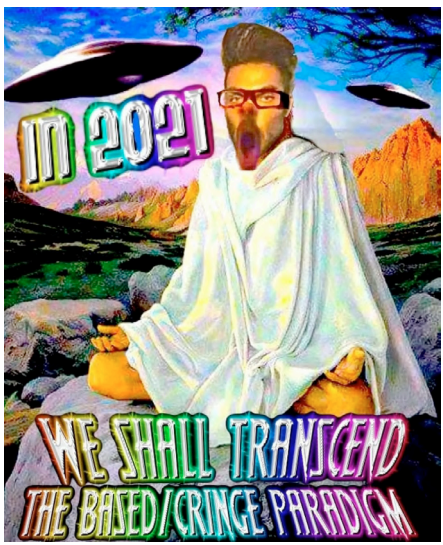

Fig. 4: Source: eSCATological posting, a Facebook group that has now been zucced.

Moving Beyond?

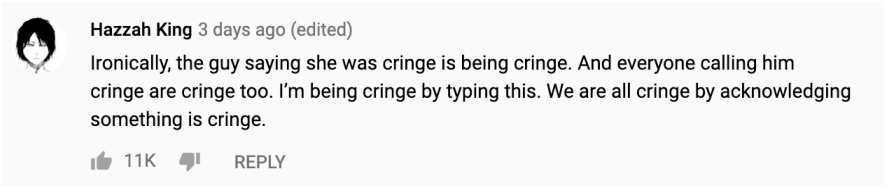

Fig. 5: Source: https://youtu.be/VSkPkSYFQ3U

The preceding parts of this essay have sought to describe the workings of memeological history – the point, however, is to change it. Is meme culture something we ought to leave on the historical scrap-heap? Don't get me wrong; I like a good meme just as much as the next person, and tropes like 'based' or 'woke' carry important information about where we are as a culture. But meme-culture is—dare I say—*toxic*. As soon as we go beyond Level 1, we merely find a muddle of signs valued far higher than whatever they signify. We turn into *ironists*, putting quotation-marks over anything asserted, deconstructing whatever has been constructed, *dissolving* whatever anyone *rigidifies*. In his *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman likens this (non-)identity to that of a perpetual tourist, always on the move, safe from any kind of vulnerable interaction with the fellow human:

> Indeed, tourists worth their salt are the masters supreme of the art of melting the solids and unfixing the fixed. First and foremost, they perform the feat of not belonging to the place they might be visiting; theirs is the miracle of being in and out of place at the same time. The tourists keep their distance, and bar the distance from shrinking into proximity. It is as if each of them was enclosed in a bubble with tightly controlled osmosis; only such things as the occupant of the bubble admits may leak in, only such things as he or she allows to go, may seep out. Inside the bubble the tourist may feel safe; whatever the pulling power of the outside, however sticky or voracious the world outside may be, the tourist is protected.[6]

We might enjoy visiting new places at times, maybe even as much as we like memes, but no one wants to travel *all the time*. The memeological nomad embodies the very worst of postmodern culture: always ironising, never endorsing anything. I think we can all agree that this is both cringe and problematic. What is based and woke is keeping a distance to the memes, rather than the human beings they are intended

6 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 89-90.

to mock. Doing so might not only give us a glimpse of the end of meme-culture, but perhaps the end of irony itself. That, I take to be a good thing.

So we might reject meme-culture on the basis of this critique. But at this point the reader is invited to worry. The dankest possible meme is probably a meme that distances itself from the very idea of a meme – a *dab* on all possible memetic structures. The reader should now wonder: *is this essay itself a meme?* It does not look implausible. There is a whole genre of this sort of *theory-posting,* pretentious memes applying highbrow philosophical theory on low-level phenomena, and this might just be an essayistic variant. Note also that before this paragraph, it sought to *rigidify* the dialectics of meme-culture, making it comprehensible; presently, it is seeking to *dissolve* this very exposition by suggesting it was all irony. So might it be the case that this meme (if it is a meme) is embodying the structures of the dialectics of meme-culture in itself in order to *show* how utterly *meaningless* it is? For no other reason than *trolololololol…*

Were this essay a **Level 3** meme of all possible memes, it would be the greatest feat of irony in the history of memes: it should rightly be dubbed the *last meme of history*. Neither moving *upwards* or to the *side* of any particular paradigm/hierarchy in our postulated memetic space, it would move *beyond* the space completely, its very structure exposing the dialectics of meme-history to be as cynical, nihilistic, *cringe, problematic* as this essay. The impossibility of this move, however, is apparent—the essay is obviously unable to properly transgress the ironic structures it seeks to move beyond if genuinely a meme. We can only conclude that, whatever this meme (if it is a meme) is attempting to *say*, it could only *show*. And *whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.*

Where does this leave the prospect of overcoming meme-culture? Plausibly, if we do not put an end to it, the inevitable heat-death of the universe will do so. But the mere destruction of a thing does not overcome it; Marx didn't overcome Hegel when Hegel died: Marx overcame Hegel (if he ever did) by putting him on his head. Can we put meme-culture on its head? I do not know. Perhaps any attempt to do so is itself memetic, an attempt at radical ironizing beyond all dimensions. With these considerations in mind, I conclude that it is much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of meme-culture.[7]

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7 The use of this quote suggests that this essay could in fact be a meme.

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DEEPER AND HIGHER: MEMES AS SCALAR ABSTRACTION

GEOFFREY HONDROUDAKIS

Fig. 1: The 'Layers of Irony' Meme - first posted to the 'Special Meme Fresh' Facebook page on October 24th, 2015

How Many Layers Are You On?

This is an old meme – which is to say that it's tired, tiresome, coopted, boring – it's well and truly dead. But the vulture of Minerva flies at dusk, and there's still carrion to be picked at on this .png. It's telling—less for its structure, template, or relation to irony, post-irony, meta-irony, dada, what have you—than for its (self-derisive and irreverent) recognition of

the stratifications at work in meme culture. If we (over)read this image, we find it posits a formal nesting: a fractal or sedimentary structure to memetic diffusion wherein the reader/maker/distributor exists at some indexed level or geometric strata within the memetic ecology. There are gradations and frames to parse, a whole rippling architecture of information and affect. Memes, like onions, ogres, and irony, have *layers.*

There are other memes that you could point to as examples here: the expanding brain or iceberg-tiers templates are obvious, if somewhat uninteresting candidates. These index increasing levels of complexity, abstraction, sociocultural volatility (the hotness of a take), or subcultural specificity. They're about positing distinctions, grafting a social ladder together out of disparate positions or interests, or exploding these ladders via recursive self-parody. But beyond the relative self-reflexivity of particular meme templates, the larger question has more to do with the structure and functions of the memetic *ecology*. Surrounding the 'layers of irony' are the layers of *circulation* – which is not to say that memes are not about content. Yes, what memes are about is often more to do with their circulation: relative value is indexed to the number of likes, adaptations, reverberations. But this is not because content is *irrelevant,* requiring us to re-tread McLuhanite reversals. The significance of circulation and exchange in memes – their evolutionary function as asignifying network symbionts – is precisely because they *mediate* signifying content with impersonal scales. The particular quality of the online memetic ecology is its inclusion of both registers. Meme culture is a process of mediation latticing the gulf between the scales of affect and identity, information, and social system.

Essentially, the memetic ecology at large serves to mediate the enormous flows of information and affect, enacting a sorting, matching, and grammatizing process on public affairs. Every major event, development, or process carving space in the milieu is refigured by a memetic shadow – which in turn serves to identify politico-aesthetic lines of division and commonality, particularity and universality. This method of apprehension and address can also work to unpin existing assumptions, opening ruptures in a social fabric or igniting viral surges of discontent. So, like the cultural and political landscapes, we can expect much of the online memetic ecology to be riven by similarly endless divisions, yet marked by equally interminable rehearsals of the same. The array of memetic responses to anything at all is dizzying, kaleidoscopic, while remaining in many cases depressingly predictable. This is the problem that memes both participate in and attempt to solve: there is too much stuff and it is all the same.

The Problem of Scale

The internet is very large. Trivial to say, but it registers important phenomenological, cognitive, infrastructural, and informatic facts. For one, information and choice overload are

significant factors inflecting everyday interactions. Whether reading or watching news,[1] buying things,[2] browsing a social media feed, or engaging in any number of other activities on the internet, there is a confrontation with cascading flows of activity. Adding further to this is the sense that there are not only innumerable objects and possibilities within an individual's own ambit, but that there are also enormous numbers of *other* domains for structuring information, each with their own norms and interests and endeavors. This may go some way in explaining why people are so willing to hand over their informational selves – and control over swathes of their libidinal and attentional architectures – to platforms. Something of a Faustian bargain (or perhaps a wish upon a monkey's paw) in which the curation and commodification of sociality is a feature, not a bug.[3] In any case, what this overload and its subsequent (and ongoing) platformizations show is that the internet exists at extraordinarily large scales, but also contains a vast number of coextensive and competing local scales – which in turn serve to interface with us as users on scales more granular than our gestalt selves.

This granularity, as the increased specificity and sheer number of data points operationalized in digitality, is one of the primary mechanisms of digital power. This has not gone unnoticed by net critics. Jodi Dean wrote in 2010 of the fragmentation associated with internet platforms capitalizing on the partial quality of drives. By encouraging engagement at the level of drive, targeting the looping, feedback-heavy repetitions involved at this scale of the psyche, the subject is dis-articulated as a coherent scale. The drives 'fragment and disperse as they satisfy themselves via a variety of objects',[4] and the amplification of this process is the very means of capture in attentional circuits. In this way, platforms avoid interfacing with an individual who has a coherent sense of self and robust powers of executive decision over their own desires. Instead, they pick at the scalar edges and discontinuities within this very subject: Zuckerberg loves nothing more than to harvest and monetize your inconstant irregularities.

Social media crested what might be considered its ideological high point in the early 2010s: recall the now naïve-seeming hyperbole surrounding the supposedly radical democratizing potential of Web 2.0 platforms. In the decade of disillusionment that has followed, the kind

1 Josephine B. Schmitt, Christina A. Debbelt, and Frank M. Schneider, "Too Much Information? Predictors of Information Overload in the Context of Online News Exposure," *Information Communication and Society* 21, no. 8 (2018): 1151–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2017.1305427.

2 Chia Ying Li, "Why Do Online Consumers Experience Information Overload? An Extension of Communication Theory," *Journal of Information Science* 43, no. 6 (2017): 835–51, https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551516670096.

3 Ulrich Dolata, "Privatization, Curation, Commodification: Commercial Platforms on the Internet," *Österreichische Zeitschrift Für Soziologie* 44, no. 1 (2019): 187–88, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11614-019-00353-4.

4 Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 59.

of net critique promulgated by Dean and others has become more widespread. Addiction, drive-based capture, and fragmentation of coherence is now widely recognized as the *modus operandi* of platforms. Social media: a kind of slot machine or neurochemical honey-trap by which Facebook or Twitter might bypass the intentionality and self-legislation of the coherent self, treating more directly with the granular scales of a fragmented, distracted user's psychic pieces.[5] Of course, this targeting of the molecular elements of subjectivity—its 'pre-personal and supra-personal activities'—may indeed by the mode of domination particular to capitalism as such, only now attaining new specificity and speed. [6] In any case, it is clear that the scales at which Web 2.0—and by extension memes—operate include those registers more elemental than identity, traversing the fragmentary drives and their social reverberations. Inasmuch as memes flow along the circuits of the platformized internet, they too participate in the whittling of attentional slivers from subjectivities, and the disassembly of interests and desires into drives and obsessions. But this granularity serves in turn to mediate back up the stack, converting into suprapersonal gestalts, vast information vectors and stocks and their material-political correlates.[7]

While the attentional rhythms of social media are associated with a hijacking of these granular scales, they remain implicated in the linking of these granularities to larger structural layers. Brian Spitzberg identifies a multilayer structure of meme diffusion and selection, passing through the meme, the individual, the network, the society, and the geo-technical scale.[8] These operate as identifiable scales of operation: both epistemic constructs that allow purchase upon a particular set of observable phenomena, and actual technical and communicational frames that have their own dynamics, constraints, and causal factors. Spitzberg shows, using this model, that the success or failure of individual memes is dependent on a multi-level process of selection and exchange. It passes through multiple scales, each of which feeds back into the others, while retaining a certain ontological stability and coherence that makes their own field incommensurable to the others. Put simply: memes don't just care about individual people, but their social groups, infrastructures, protocols, and environments. Each of these things are distinct, identifiable frames of operation that make different abstractions from their mediating relations: nations care about different things to companies; people care about different things to infrastructures.

This framework is geared to target the processes of diffusion and selection (the nebulous question of meme 'success'). Consequently, it is only part of the total picture of what memes are and do, and so might be supplemented with scalar theories targeting other

5 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), 451.

6 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 32.

7 McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (New York: Verso, 2019), 88.

8 Brian H. Spitzberg, "Toward a Model of Meme Diffusion (M3D)," *Communication Theory* 24, no. 3 (2014): 318, https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12042.

aspects of computer-mediated communication. For a scalar schema more interested in geopolitics, consider the User<Interface<Address<City<Cloud<Earth structure of Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack*.[9] Here, the scalar frames that Spitzberg identifies as individual<network<society<geo-technical are paralleled by Bratton's subtly different layers, addressing subtly different concerns despite their similar interest in the socio-technical architectures of digital media. If *The Stack* is a model of the model that is planetary computation, where do the memes circulate here? And, perhaps worth distinguishing, where in either of these scalar structures might we identify the difference between a particular meme, and that meme's *template* – for example, the difference between a particular iteration of the expanding brain and the general use of the expanding brain structure in general?

All this goes to say that, while the generation of layers appears necessary, it's a tricky and context-dependent business. It requires unifying structural analysis with careful attention to the particular under examination. Because of this delicate balance, the question of identifying the constitution and function of the particular scales implicated by memes goes beyond the scope of what I can cover here. What is clear, however, is that there is a communicational and informational function to memes that traverses multiple scales of operation. As Spitzberg argues:

> memes are much more than the mere 'inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge' spread through social media, and are instead, the fundamental feature of socially and technologically propagated knowledge.[10]

Whether they are truly *the* fundamental feature may be up for debate, but there is certainly a sense in which they serve a fundamental function in mediating the affective, social, network, structural, evental, and informatic dimensions of the internet. Theorizing this involves less an identification of particular scalar registers (though it is useful to be able to heuristically speak of such things within certain contexts) and more an identification of the principles of *mediation* between scales. What does the meme ecology *do* for our social, psychic, informatic and political scales?

Memetic Mapping

At the heart of the meme is a dialectic between specificity and fungibility, the particular and the universal, the concrete individual and the totality. The good meme must strike a balance between concrete specificity and formal legibility: it has to feel unique, innovative, speak directly to me, while at the same time relating me to the informatic milieu as a whole. The good meme makes me feel the particularity of my own being, figured (sympathetically or antagonistically, recuperatively or disruptively) in relation to general form. Historically,

9 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 11, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262029575.001.0001.

10 Spitzberg, "Toward a Model of Meme Diffusion (M3D)," 312.

we could point to various systems for suturing the individual to the totality and providing them a place within it. We might speak of collective protentions as the sociocultural matrix of memory and meaning projected into a shared future; or a cosmotechnics that unifies technical process, moral action and cosmic order, the whole apparatus of religion, writing, culture or imagined community.[11] But of course, most grand narratives withered some time in the last century, while older artistic forms like literature have diminished in their ability to cognitively map the social totality.[12] This disjunction leaves conspiracies and fanaticisms to fill the symbolic void while the old colonial systems continue apace despite their symbolic cancellation or revision. If an individual is unwilling to imbibe such fantasies, then what options remain? Memes that are out of date almost immediately, souring and turning stale within a cultural blink. An in-advance obsolescence associated with the relentless generation of a new that remains either nostalgic or incoherent[13]. Bernard Stiegler described this inability to fix a common system of meaning as 'the barbarism specific to the absence of epoch [which] consists in always *outstripping and overtaking* such systems, so that they seem always already futile, *vain*, the ruined remnants of what would have been only *pure vanity*, where care and attention arrive always too late – in vain.'[14]

Still, impoverished as our possibilities may be, they bear analysis and might yet offer fruits that exceed a more old-guard critical theory pessimism. Consider a memetic encounter. I'm scrolling Facebook, and my eyes pass over an image, structured in one of the many Approval/Disapproval templates (Drake, Geordi La Forge, Kombucha Girl, etc). The negative pole: a public figure's poor behavior; the positive pole: a rival public figure's good behavior. Alternatively, the two poles could identify options for something intimately personal but banal – perhaps two contrasting ways of eating chips or differing sleeping habits. In either case, I might register a sense of amusement at the framing if I find it agreeable or relatable – or perhaps I might have an oppositional response, disagreeing with its structure, or feeling the poles should be reversed. I might register approval by sharing, disapproval by commenting, or indifference by lack of engagement. Whatever action is taken, it registers as feedback within various systems, while also functioning as a self-registering action for myself.

In addition to the much-discussed algorithmic data-gathering, my encounter with the meme functions as an affective, barely conscious registering of affiliation or opposition, recognition or refusal, enjoyment or indifference. A more abstract, 'avant-garde' meme, such as those so often peddled by pages such as Special Meme Fresh (the creator of this article's opening example) may seem more divorced from such processes of sociocultural

11 See Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, trans. Daniel Ross (London: Open Humanities Press, 2018), 257.; Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Urbanomic, 2016), 19–20.

12 Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74.

13 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), 57–59.

14 Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, 2019, 21.

affiliation. Yet the legibility of such an aesthetic form always remains (at least in part) a question of its relationship to the larger aesthetic culture. Most crucially: a significant characteristic of memes, more than most other forms of cultural production, is their emphasis on shareability, emulability, and sociality. To be an internet meme, a digital object must first be *circulated* via memetic exchange, thereby engaging in the social, technical, and symbolic mediations this entails. It is then by the registering, interpretation, evaluation, and participation within this that I in turn recuperate the mediations of informatic milieu back down to general and then individual affect.

Thus the meme is neither semiotic object nor asignifying network: it is the very mediation of the two that gives the meme its *raison d'etre*. Part of the function of memetic exchange is to provide a proximate calibration of the affects and symbolic structures of individuals to the general informatic milieu. The meme indexes – but also provides specific contexts upon – ambient sociocultural forces, events, trends, and structures. We might say, somewhat provocatively, that memetic form is a codec: memes are a practice of compression and format-matching. The meme compresses an informatic soup into a more easily processed unit. It takes the inscrutable flows of global culture, politics, and sociality and renders them expressed in a format that runs on the OS of affects and emotional responses. Another analogy: memetic ecologies perform functions similar to a Hayekian notion of markets, in that they immanently calculate the emotional/affective valence of general trends in production and material events via the processes of exchange. They (proximately) solve the 'pricing problem' of information overload in the sphere of representations.

But, just like economic markets, meme ecologies are riddled with deceptive actors, pernicious institutions, perverse incentives. Also just like markets, meme ecologies are prone to self-destructive feedback loops: bubbles and crashes. If the meme ecology is a method for calculating the affective-personal significance of everything going on in the infosphere, then QAnon is a self-producing catastrophe of a bubble, crash, and bank run. Yet even trying to draw a simple genealogy is reductive, risking reification of partial pictures, or its own memetic backlash. A possible sequence: The meme: the election was a fraudulent attack on democratic institutions // the event: a dangerous mobbing of a major democratic seat of power // the meme: Trump attempted a coup // the event: a significant memetic player is removed from the milieu // the meme: tech giants have disappeared a president. A reasonably coherent picture internally, but hopelessly flawed. Even setting aside the question of which framings are true and which are not, it is difficult to even tell where the memes stop and the events begin. The scales are nested and interlinked, hopelessly bound up in the precession of simulacra'.[15] You might even speak of them as hyperstitional, wherein the ideas embedded in memes serve to bring about the worlds they articulate.[16]

15 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

16 Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Zero Books, 2014), 41.

The problem, here, is that in a similar fashion to the abstractions of the market, the abstractions operating at the template, community, and platform level act recursively upon meme selection according to different pressures, incentives, and structural conditions. Memes begin as individual signifying objects, but soon operate as a self-modifying and actively competing abstraction. Nowhere in an individual image, gif, or video is the meme itself – as an isolated object it is just an image, video, or file. It only begins to operate as abstraction once it becomes legible *as meme* via the material process of exchange. Users share copies and create adaptations or emulations, commenting liking, sharing, upvoting, or not; algorithms optimized for attentional harvests gather and interpret these signals, then funnel memes to eyes via a complex real-time backend. Before the meme can be understood in terms of the abstraction of the memetic, it must be sufficiently processed via exchange to attain legibility to human pattern recognition. By this point, to declare a meme a meme is to announce what has already occurred: it is an abstraction that does not have its origins in thought.

'Real Shit': Memes and Real Abstraction

It is tempting, when discussing the multiple scales or levels of an abstraction, to focus on what is most *real* in it. What is the reality that underpins the abstraction? Or, perhaps, the ideality of the abstraction is real, to the *exclusion* of all other reality: a kind of transcendental critique that takes anything outside of the abstraction as unknowably noumenal. Perhaps, as some have done, we can see in memes a sense in which the mode of their circulation is the true message: 'the overarching role of memes as mode of propagation of culture is the ultimate cause (and driver) for engaging in this multimodal meme.'[17] What I am trying to argue here is somewhat different to this. It is not that the affective scale of an individual's response to a meme is unreal or irrelevant; it is not that the content of a meme's signification, or its existence as a media(ted) object, does not matter. Rather, the point of addressing the other scales of memetic functioning is to point to the mediating process *between* these scales: it is significant for how it mediates these multiple levels of abstraction, bridging or dividing them, rupturing or uniting them, but always interacting across these systemic divisions.

It is in this sense that memes operate as *real abstractions*. They are abstractions that operate by virtue of a fundamental material process, but are not *reducible* to this process, and in fact recursively iterate and rupture the situation. The term is one originating with Alfred Sohn-Rethel, whose primary thesis was 'that commodity exchange is an original source of abstraction',[18] serving to ground and inform the scientific, calculative and philosophic

17 George Rossolatos, "The Ice-Bucket Challenge: The Legitimacy of the Memetic Mode of Cultural Reproduction Is the Message," *Signs and Society* 3, no. 1 (2015): 148, https://doi.org/10.1086/679520.

18 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (The Macmillan Press, 1978), 28.

abstractions of (at the very least) Western modernity. There are elements of Sohn-Rethel's argument that are less easily defended, but the primary insight with theoretical purchase today is his account of how a Marxian notion of abstraction is rooted in material processes of exchange and circulation, while recognizing that these abstractions are then *real* – they are not phantasms but properties emerging out of material organization. Of course, this materialism cuts both ways: as much as material conditions cannot be hand-waved away by a change in consciousness, so too are abstractions persistently effective themselves. As Alberto Toscano puts it, real abstraction is a view of 'abstraction not as a mere task, fantasy, or diversion, but as a force operative in the world'.[19] Such an account gives theoretical grounding to the process of how 'events evoke memes that generate new memes, or memes generate new events',[20] a dialectical picture of social-material process.

So an analogy to markets as immanent calculation and informatization mechanisms may be less speculative than it otherwise might appear. Like the principles of commodity exchange, the circulation of memes establishes a certain general abstractive principle of online cultures: an informatic indexing and cultural symbolizing that heuristically gathers and disperses the flows of affect and information. Each individual act of memetic circulation and valuation serves as signals within this system, encoding and recoding across media to produce a form of mediation that bridges the scales of the subpersonal, personal, network, community, infrastructural, and geopolitical (however you might constitute these frames). The particular architecture here varies on context, but the unchanging fact of the memetic is a mediation between otherwise incommensurable scales of abstraction – an affective, drive oriented unconscious and its subjective gestalt, to the informatic registers of technical media, communications, and material conditions. This mediation is itself active, structuring and restructuring as it recursively incorporates and adjusts to the inevitable ruptures and contingencies of billions of people and gigantic technical systems.

Conclusion

So, what do we have? Memes are, or could be:

- An immanent calculation and iterative production of socio-cultural value, serving to mediate the scales of the personal/symbolic to the impersonal/systemic, from individual specificity to info-cultural totality.

- Consequently, a generation of recursive effects upon each of the terms involved in this mediation, whereby each scale is both fixed and disrupted as the process iterates.

Here we have abstractions that act upon, and perhaps *constitute* those things they are

19 Alberto Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," *Rethinking Marxism* 20, no. 2 (2008): 274, https://doi.org/10.1080/08935690801917304.
20 Spitzberg, "Toward a Model of Meme Diffusion (M3D)," 328.

ostensibly abstracting. Toscano: 'the specificity of contemporary post-Fordist capitalism… is precisely to be found in the abstract connections, or real abstractions, that make society cohere.'[21] Our memes have weight in that they mediate the warp and weft of this coherence – and its failures. While they retain this regularizing function, it would be overstating the case to suggest that we can simply commune with the memes and achieve a reading of the totality – the difficulties of our past modes of cognitive mapping remain. The text always exceeds our grasping, and in turn it appears that memes have dreams of their own, dredged from our unconscious, spliced with informatic regularization, and perhaps injected with a shot of the immanent material outside. The stacks go deep and high here, but they are also modular and malleable. The levels of memery are made of sand – they might be furnace-blasted and soldered into regular circuitries, but they retain the memory of the dunes, and all the atomistic changeability that entails.

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21 Toscano, "The Open Secret of Real Abstraction," 282.

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POST-TRUTH DESIGN TACTICS IN MEMES IN INDIA: DECODING MALICIOUS DESIGN PRACTICES IN RIGHT-WING MEME FACTORIES

BY AARUSHI BAPNA AND AJITESH LOKHANDE

On May 12, 2017, two people suspected to be child kidnappers were lynched in the Indian village of Jadugora, in the eastern state of Jharkhand. The panic and fear that eventually led to this lynching can be traced back to a series of WhatsApp forwards that were being widely circulated in the state. These messages included pictures showing dead children and warned about so-called 'child lifters'. The May 12 lynching was one of several that were about to follow all across the country. This incident was one of the first major stories covered by Indian media about the real-life consequences of viral online content.[1]

When the Oxford Dictionary chose 'post-truth' as its word of the year in 2016, the waves of global post-truth politics had just begun to ripple out. Now in 2021, we have been hit by multiple tsunamis of events whose triggers can be traced back to post-truth politics: the insurrection at the United States Capitol weeks before the inauguration of the new president; anti-mask demonstrations worldwide;[2] conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 being a hoax; and the Indian government's nation-wide social media campaign targeting one specific celebrity (Rihanna).[3]

But while post-truth politics is a complex and layered concept from a socio-political perspective, it might be helpful to narrow our cone of vision and try to look at it from a visual design lens. One of the easiest ways to look at its impact on our daily lives might be to look in memes. Much has been written about memes from a cultural, ideological and quantitative perspective,[4] but visual design analysis seems sparse.

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1 Ravik Bhattacharya, "Jharkhand Lynching: Amid Whatsapp Rumours, Tribals Stopped School, Outdoors for Kids," May 22, 2017, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jamshedpur-amid-whatsapp-rumours-stoked-fears-tribals-stopped-school-outdoors-for-kids-jharkhand-lynching-non-tribal-clash-4666068/.

2 "Covid: Dutch Curfew Riots Rage for Third Night," *BBC News*, January 26, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55799919.

3 In early 2021, Rihanna tweeted a news article about the Farmer Protests in India. This prompted a massive social media retaliation from the Indian government and multiple conspiracy theories regarding an international chain of Anti-India defamation campaigns began circulating. "Farmers' Protest: Rihanna Tweet Angers Indian Government," *BBC News*, February 3, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55914858.

4 Ilija Milosavljevic, "The Phenomenon of the Internet Memes as a Manifestation of Communication of Visual Society: Research of the Most Popular and Common Types," *Media Studies and Applied Ethics* 1, no. 1 (March 2020): 9-27.

India's rich visual vocabulary of signs and symbols, emerging from its culture and history, have found their way into memes. Being avid meme enthusiasts and having been trained as visual designers in India, we went down the algorithmic rabbit hole of Hindu Right-Wing memes and conducted a qualitative analysis, to highlight visual design techniques used in their propagation.

Indian Political Scenario

Ruling Party Powered Meme Factories

In India the Overton Window has long shifted, transforming the former *political right* into the *center.* [5] Recent polarizing events like the CAA-NRC and the farm-bill protests have contributed to this shift in perception. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the current ruling political party heading the Indian government. This party has become infamous for its information technology wing known as the *IT Cell*. They have a vast network of paid workers and volunteers who manage the party's online presence and digital outreach. This management has often included the creation of bot accounts and starting Twitter trends, among other questionable practices like spreading fake-news and performingsocial engineering.[6] They reportedly mobilized 50,000 WhatsApp groups to reach about 200,000,000 voters in a single state election.

During one political rally by the ruling party, one of the leaders ofBJP's IT Cell (a sitting cabinet minister) boasted of their capacity to deliver any 'any message we want to the public, whether sweet or sour, true of [sic] fake.[7] The political establishment is not only aware of this culture of fact-denying, disinformation, and post-truth politics, but occasionally it even takes part in it.

To fully understand the context of fake-news in India, one needs to understand a phenomenon that is a more evolved form of sensationalism. This phenomenon is planned, designed to grab attention, appeal to emotion, and set trends for political discourse. This is where the *Aestheticization of Politics* comes in.

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5 Shivam Vij, "Stretching the Overton Window from Amit Shah to Shaheen Bagh," *ThePrint*, February 14, 2020, https://theprint.in/opinion/stretching-the-overton-window-from-amit-shah-to-shaheen-bagh/365449/.

6 Neerad Pandharipande, "Massive Tweet Volumes, Complex Hierarchies, Coordinated Attacks: Hacker Reveals How BJP, Congress IT Cells Wage War on Social Media-India News," *Firstpost*," Firstpost, January 28, 2020, https://www.firstpost.com/india/massive-tweet-volumes-complex-hierarchies-coordinated-attacks-hacker-reveals-how-bjp-congress-it-cells-wage-war-on-social-media-7965121.html.

7 The Wire, 2018, "Real or Fake, We Can Make Any Message Go Viral: Amit Shah to BJP Social Media Volunteers," *The Wire*, September 26, 2018. https://thewire.in/politics/amit-shah-bjp-fake-social-media-messages.

Memes as Aestheticization of Politics

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin mentions the 'Aestheticization of Politics'. This is when effective democratic governance is sidetracked and focus is shifted to sweeping, grand political gestures [8]. The result is an emotionally appealing, 'aesthetic' narrative that often hides objectively cruel violence behind it, or even glorifies it. Looking to India, we can findan example of aestheticized political acts in Modi's reframed narrative of reuniting the abandoned state of Kashmir with the rest of India. Contrary to this narrative, in fact the state was annexed by overriding constitutional parliamentary procedures. This nation-unifying narrative seems to contain a '*kernel of truth*', but one distorted and buried beneath its political aestheticization.[9]

In this example, the actions are such that they sound appealing in theory and in their storytelling. But this grand storytelling hides the actual inefficiency and authoritarian nature of the actions themselves. Walter Benjamin describes the 'aestheticization of politics' generally as enacted by politicians and artists (e.g. Futurist Art that glorifies war and violence as beneficial to human development).[10] The medium of the meme makes this practice of aestheticizing politics and violence accessible to any person with an internet connection.

Types of 'Aestheticization of Politics'

Actor	Medium accesible	Examples
Political leaders	Grand, symbolic, political actions	'Build the Wall' by the Trump Government, War on terror post 9/11
Artists	Painting, Sculpture, Film	Returning to the trenches, Christopher Nevinson — A Painting depicting the dynamism of the french army during WW1.
Citizens with internet access	Memes	Memes supporting the Iraq war

Fig. 1: Types of Aestheticization of Politics.

8 Rohit Ram, "When Art Imitates Death: A Look at Contemporary Aestheticized Politics," *The World Mind*, October 26, 2020, https://www.theworldmind.org/home/2019/10/26/when-art-imitates-death-a-look-at-contemporary-aestheticized-politics.

9 Sadanand Dhume, 2019. "The Dueling Narratives of India's Kashmir Crackdown." *The Atlantic,* September 5, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/09/the-dueling-narratives-of-indias-kashmir-crackdown/597457/.

10 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 241-2.

Today, the paradigm shift to be considered is the emergence of memes as an extremely accessible tool of aestheticizing politics (e.g. Hello Kitty says 'ACAB',[11] Lindsay Graham DGAF memes,[12] Apply Burnol memes celebrating right-wing political achievements [13]).

Decoding Memes

The nature of propaganda is overtly visible in traditional media—advertising, political murals, speeches, etc. However, it is more covert on social media in the form of memes. The Indian right-wing seems to borrow heavily from various propaganda techniques that have been used by many fascist governments as well as corporate companies, These vary from the *ad nauseam* rhetoric of a Hindu Rashtra,[14] flag-waving of saffron Hindutva symbols, or the constant use of logical and informal fallacies. These tactics naturally find their way into online communication. Various actors co-opt visual design to extend these tactics to apparently harmless memes. Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz argue that, as political tools, 'memes combine a variety of stylistic and aesthetic strategies and visual tools to appeal to multiple audiences, and still convey messages in line with their core ideological far-right beliefs'.[15] In the same study, they also state that 'Since the far-right, too, has undergone a process of (post-)modernization, it must be regarded as closely intertwined with post-modern (youth) cultures who express themselves creatively and often ironically on social media.' Virality defeats veracity, and one of the key ingredients of this fact-defying virality is its visuality.

11 Rema Bhat, "Hello Kitty ACAB: The Aestheticization of Politics," Www.34st.com, October 9, 2020, https://www.34st.com/article/2020/10/hello-kitty-acab-memes-prison-industrial-complex-woke-infographics.

12 . "Lindsey Graham DGAF," Know Your Meme, October 8, 2018, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lindsey-graham-dgaf.

13 Himani Chandna, "Good Ol' Burnol Is Now a Twitter Punchline, but That's far from Bad News for Its Brand," *ThePrint*, February 21, 2019. https://theprint.in/features/good-ol-burnol-is-now-a-twitter-punchline-but-thats-far-from-bad-news-for-its-brand/195272/.

14 A rough literal translation of 'Hindu rashtra' would be a 'Hindu Nation'. But the term is a complex concept because of the different interpretations of the word 'Hindu'. Some interpret the word as meaning 'anyone from or living in the geographical territory of India' and thus having no religious connotation. Others say it implies a monolithic state based on the Hindu religion: this interpretation is attributed to sections of the book 'We or Our Nationhood Defined' by M. S. Golwalkar, a renowned figure of the RSS and the historical right-wing in India. For more on the current political context of the term, see:
Swadesh Singh et al., "Indian Liberals Don't Get the Difference between Hindu State & Mohan Bhagwat's Hindu Rashtra," ThePrint, October 4, 2019, https://theprint.in/opinion/indian-liberals-difference-hindu-state-rss-mohan-bhagwat-hindu-rashtra/300909/.

15 Lisa Bogerts and Maik Fielitz, "'Do You Want Meme War?' Understanding the Visual Memes of the German Far Right," In *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, eds. Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston (Transcript Verlag, 2018), 137–54. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446706-010.

Meme 1: One Nation, One Flag

Fig. 2: One Nation One Flag. Source: @saffronpilled, One Nation One Flag, 2019, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/BzA4B9cFs7W/.

In the meme in figure 2, we see a combination of visual symbols. The lighting, the retrofuturist car, and the CGI 3D environment are key ingredients from the Synthwave aesthetic. The uncanny additions are the *saffron flags* (official symbol of RSS[16]), a saffron map of South and South-East Asia, and the slogan 'One Nation, One Flag'. These are recurring symbols of the right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology. The use of the propaganda technique of repetition is apparent here.

This meme associates urban development and Hindu nationalism. The imagery used for this is highly western with skyscrapers, neon lights etc. However, the message is anti-western: that of an imperialist Hindu Nation, thus, creating a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. The idea of a Hindu nationalist empire is made more attractive to a viewer by co-opting Synthwave aesthetics. Bogerts and Fielitz make a very similar observation in the context of the German alt-right: 'These trendy visuals make historical references less "old-fashioned" and more appealing to a younger audience and/or persons with an affinity to 80s popular culture'.[17]

16 **RSS:** Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, abbreviated as RSS, is an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organization.

17 Bogerts and Fielitz, "'Do You Want Meme War?," 147.

Another tactic, the use of *virtuous imagery*, the rising sun in this case, is also employed. The meme visually equates the idea of the Hindu empire to a rising sun on the horizon. By using these techniques this meme efficiently presents the idea of a Hindu Nation to a young audience immersed in digital culture.

Meme 2: Hindu Lives Matter

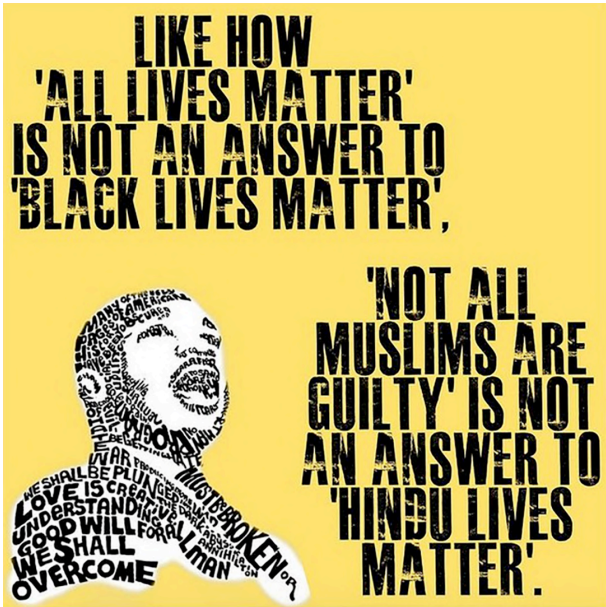


Fig. 3: Hindu Lives Matter Source: @bharatincrisis, Hindu Lives Matter meme, 2020, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CLMMSfdABK6/?igshid=1kf3pts4eyki3.

In figure 3, we see yet another visual aesthetic being exploited. The visual style mimics an activist, outraged, and intellectual stance. It dissociates *Hindutva* ideology from its widely held perception of being orthodox, violent, and non-intellectual. Thus, in this imitation, we see this post exploiting the propaganda technique of trendification, whereby a trending visual style is appropriated for propaganda purposes.

The tall condensed typography with its spray-paint treatment, in black and yellow colors, are highly reminiscent of the graphics and visual language that emerged around the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. Through imitation and transfer, it seeks to elicit a similar reaction of indignation from the viewer by creating a twisted and false equivalence between the systemic atrocities faced by Black people in the US, with supposed atrocities faced by majority Hindus in India. Further, the processed image of Martin Luther King Jr. and the lyrics of 'We Shall Overcome' hint at this false narrative of Hindu-victimization.

This particular post was released in response to the murder of Rinku Sharma.[18] It reframes 'Not all Muslims are guilty' as nothing but the Indian equivalent of 'All Lives Matter', ignoring the systemic vilification of minority Muslims. Thus, we see this post relying on a completely false equivalence to support its position.

Meme 3: Sanskari (Virtuous) Girl meme

Fig. 4: Girl wearing Sari Source: @hindutvamemes, Girl Wearing Sari, 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CNt4ug6Lxd4.

Figure 4, is much less political in comparison to figures 2 and 3. It uses the well-known meme template of 'Godzilla vs. Kong vs. Doge'. In this two-panel object labeling meme, we see Godzilla and Kong being equated to 'girl wearing jeans-top' and 'girl wearing burkha' respectively. It is helpful to know that in the Indian context, 'girl wearing jeans-top' is symbolic of modernism *and* Westernization. Similarly, 'girl wearing burkha' is a crude stereotype of the Muslim faith. 'Girl wearing sari' however, in a reductive symmetry, is symbolic of virtuosity.

18 On 10 February, 2021, a man named Rinku Sharma was murdered by stabbing. The case was highly publicized due to the disputed claims of the motivations behind the murder. Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing organization associated with the RSS claimed Rinku Sharma was killed in response to him collecting funds for a local temple. This claim gave rise to a huge online discourse about Hindus being threatened in India. See: Jignasa Sinha, "Rinku Sharma Murder Case: 4 Held, Cops Say Business Rivalry; VHP Claims He Was Killed for Collecting Funds for Ram Temple," *The Indian Express*, February 12, 2021, https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/4-held-for-killing-25-year-old-man-cops-say-business-rivalry-7184858/.

As the Godzilla vs. Kong vs. Doge meme template is usually seen using the Arial, or Impact fonts, we can speculate that the choice of Comic Sans intends to enhance the humorousness of the meme.

By associating the positive, much-loved character of Doge with the symbol of 'Girl wearing Sari' (traditional attire) the meme seeks to play up Hindu cultural supremacy. We can also deduct that this remix employs the Virtuous Imagery tactic. The idea of fundamentalist Hindutva attacking western and Muslim culture is made more acceptable by associating it with a lovable character like Doge.

The Resulting Tactics

As part of writing this article, we applied visual deconstruction and qualitative analysis to 60 memes. By comparing our analyses with documented propaganda techniques, we found the following tactics to have emerged in a visual form through memes.

Trendification

Adapting historical and political contexts to trendy visual genres or subcultures to appeal to their respective audiences. These trends may include aesthetic styles, current events & pop culture references.

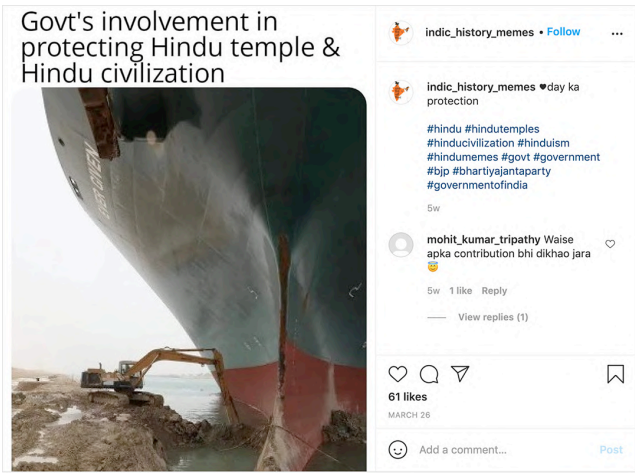


Fig. 5: 'Govt's involvement in protecting Hindu temple and civilization' Fig. 5 is a reference to a ship getting stuck at the Suez Canal in March '21 and was a heavily used meme format. Here the messaging points at religious (Hindu) victimization even though the group is a vast majority in the country. This is a classic example of Trendification. Source: @indic_history_memes, 'Govt's involvement in protecting Hindu temple and civilization', 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CM3wFp4BI82.

Virtuous Imagery

Associating an idea with positive and emotive language. Juxtaposing an ideological message with euphoric or cheerful imagery.

Fig. 6: 'Nudes…? No girl. The meme (fig.6) is a reference to the popular culture of sharing nudes. However, this is depicted as a 'vice', and doing pooja (engaging in worship) is depicted as a 'virtuous' act. The aesthetic used is of a popular AR filter and the imagery is of a young Hindu monk. Source: @rastrawadi_dank_memes, 'Nudes…? No Girl', 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CNkgd-4hfxp.

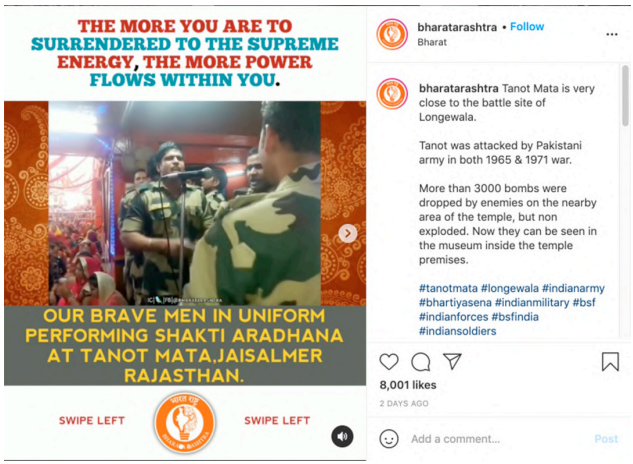


Fig. 7: Soldiers performing worship infographic . The meme is from a popular right-wing page with over 16.1k followers. This meme consists of two 'virtues': those of religiosity and military patriotism. The mixed message hopes to point at how the 'brave' soldiers are engaging in Hindu prayer at theIndia-Pakistan border. Source: @bharatarashtra, Soldiers performing worship infographic, 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CNpOeTyBij7/.

Deceptive Simplification

Using *glittering generalities,*[19] to falsely prove ideological arguments. Oversimplifying complex, nuanced realities to incite a change in viewpoint.

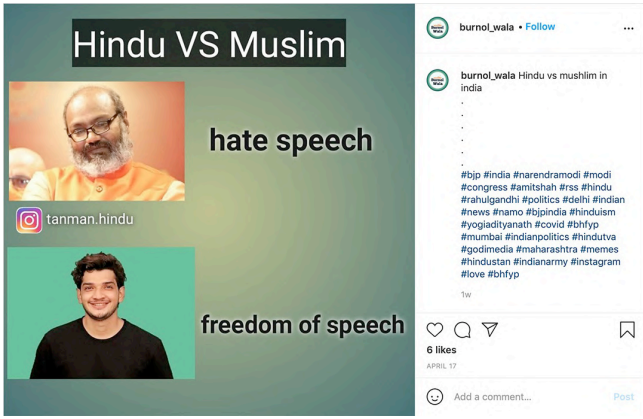


Fig. 8: Hindu vs. Muslim reaction meme. This meme is an example of an over-simplistic and vague comparison of two incidents. It depicts two personalities with different religious affiliations conveyed through their background colours (saffron being Hindu, green being Muslim). However, the meme is a jab at liberals and claims that in their eyes only Muslims have 'freedom of speech' while Hindus do not. This is a case of Hindu-victimisation and whataboutism. Source: @burnol_wala, Hindu vs. Muslim reaction meme, 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CNxh-fjj-q8/.

Conditioning or 'Brand Recall'

Repetitive use of symbols combined with different visual stimuli to condition a consistent reaction to those stimuli. Some recurrent Hindu Right-Wing symbols include 'saffron flags', the slogan of 'Hindu Rashtra' and hashtags like #hinduculture, #hindulivesmatter, etc.

Co-opting conventionally left-wing aesthetics (e.g. social justice slideshows on Instagram[20]) to propagate a right-wing agenda. Driven by transfer of association of the visuals they imitate, such memes establish the credibility of their content.

19 Aaron Delwiche, "Glittering Generalities — Propaganda Critic," *Propaganda Critic*, November 30, 2018. https://propagandacritic.com/index.php/how-to-decode-propaganda/glittering-generalities/.

20 Terry Nguyen, "How Social Justice Slideshows Took over Instagram," *Vox*, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/21359098/social-justice-slideshows-instagram-activism.

Fig. 9: 'Can you go with me?' In Fig. 9 the meme shows a mob climbing on top of the Taj Mahal and waving a saffron flag as a display of their domination. The meme is meant to be an attack on this monument because it was built by a Mughal ruler (the entire Mughal empire being a symbol of Islamic oppression of Hindu India according to the Hindu right-wing ideology). By using the recurring imagery of Hindu ideology (saffron flags) the meme tries to dissociate its gruesome context. This visual recall helps in endorsing views under the guise of subscribing to this ideology. It also uses Trendification (1) as a visual style in the form of its pink glitter filter which gives it a Tik Tok aesthetic. It's worth pointing out the photo is a direct reference to the Insta-famous 'hand-holding' couple. Source: @jai_mahakal1, "Can you go with me?", 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CNsNq4YBmGW/.

Cognitive Dissonance

When the repetitive association of two conflicting ideas is employed in propaganda, people tend to either accept both ideas or refuse both of them. One recurrent approach is to associate a popular celebrity with an unpopular idea, forcing viewers to either reject the celebrity or accept the idea.

Another approach is disinformation combined with false imagery in the form of image manipulation, deepfakes etc. to create false visual association. This can also be achieved by cherry picking content.

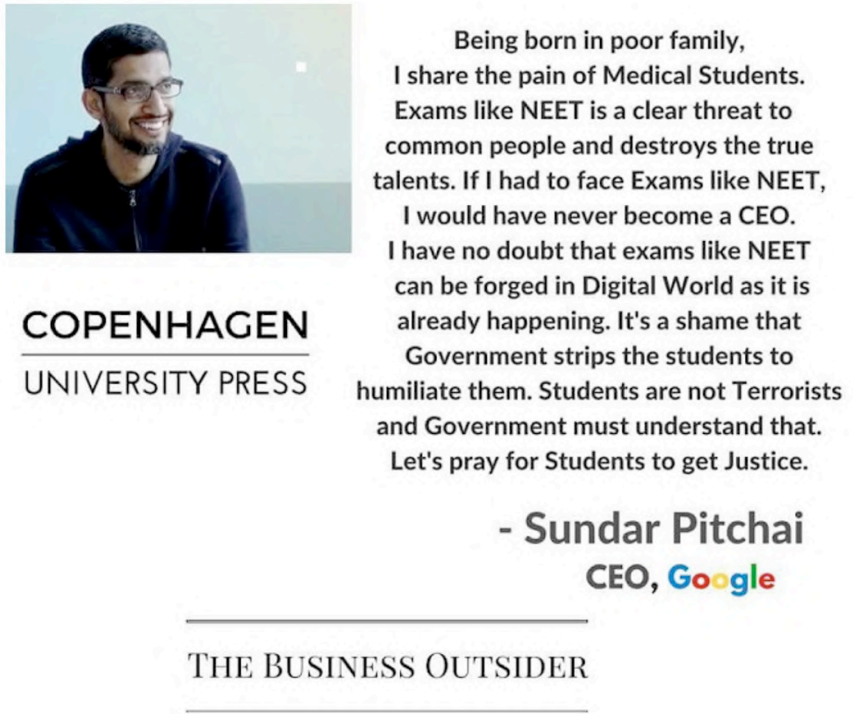
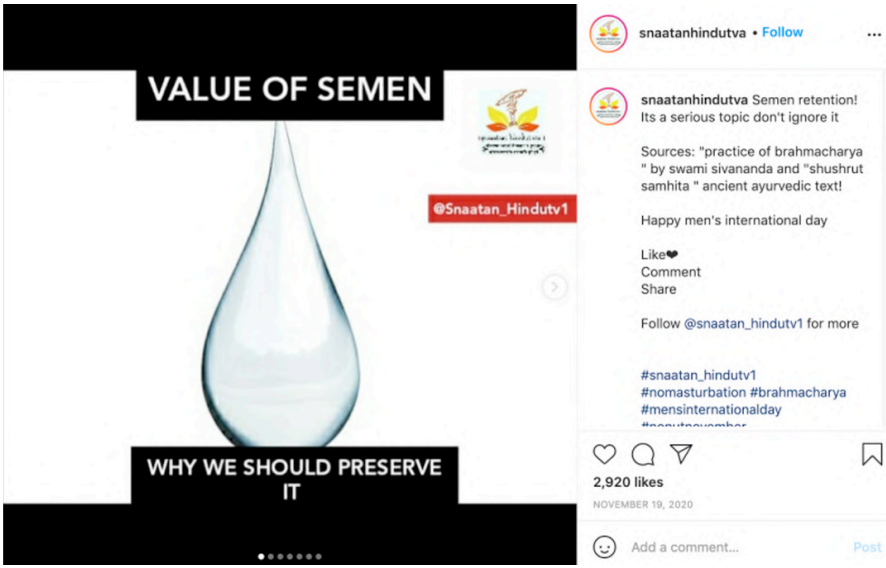


Fig. 10: Sundar Pichai on NEET exam. In fig. 10, we see a viral image that was being circulated to show Google CEO Sundar Pichai's opinion on the NEET exam (a medical entrance exam in India). The image includes the logos of the Copenhagen University Press, Google and The Business Outsider. However, Sundar Pichai reportedly never said any of the given text[21] Copenhagen University Press has no association with this statement either and the name and website of The Business Outsider seeks to emulate another much more credible and well-known website called The Business Insider. These three elements add a touch of legitimacy to this viral and false image.

Red Herring & Pseudo-Scientific imagery

Memes deploying this strategy present data or issues that, while compelling, are irrelevant to the argument at hand, and then claiming that it validates the argument. Often coupled with imitation and association transfer, pseudo-scientific imagery is used to validate hoax claims and fake news. This is done through diagrams, scientific-looking visuals, made-up testimonies of projected experts, other similar techniques.

21 "Sundar Pichai Is the New Bad Meme: 'Quotes' That the Google CEO Wouldn't Have Dreamed of Making," *The News Minute*, https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/sundar-pichai-new-bad-meme-quotes-google-ceo-wouldnt-have-dreamed-making-63046.



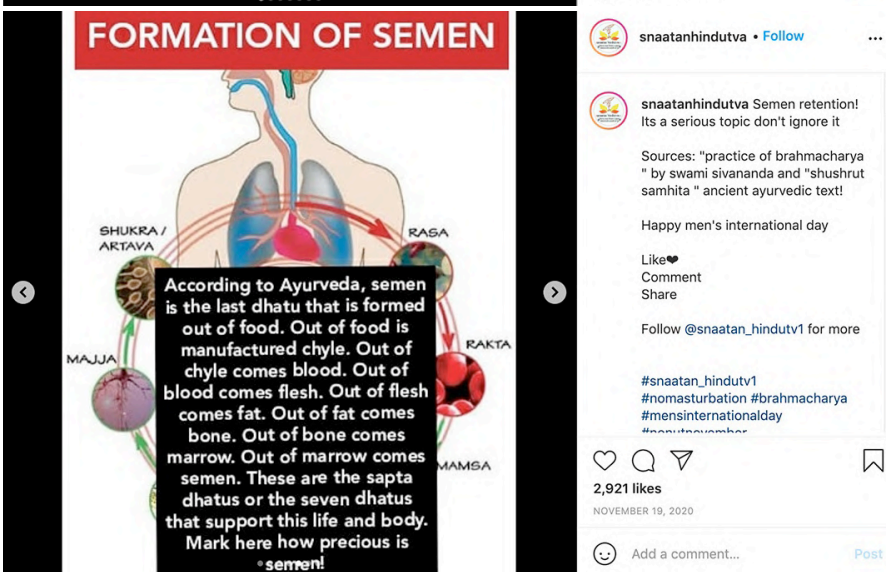


Fig.11.1: Value of Semen. / Fig.11.2: Formation of Semen. The Fig.s 11.1 and 11.2 are slides from a post claiming unverified facts and a hoax theory (11.1) by using anatomical diagrams (11.2) to appear scientific. The claim cites Ayurveda[22] as logic for this theory and calls to reject so-called western notions on the subject. Source: @snaatanhindutva, Value of Semen Infographic, 2020, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CHw-KnBAEJH/.

22 A form of alternative, traditional medicine practiced in India, here presented in contrast to Western medicine.

Fig. 11.3: Darwin x Dashavatara. In this second example, the meme is trying to establish a supposed link between the chain of evolution and the different avatars of the hindu god Vishnu. By juxtaposing arbitrary creatures on a timeline, the meme tries to imply that the Hindu mythological concept of 'Dashavatara' had foretold and preceded Darwin's theory of evolution. Source: Mystery of India Website, Evolution according to Dashavatara, 2014, Blog Post, https://www.mysteryofindia.com/2014/10/dashavatar-darwins-evolution.html.

Cute-ification

Fig.12: Har Har Mahadev X Doge. In the meme above, we see the character Doge asking the viewer what is stopping them from saying 'Har Har Mahadev'– originally a religious Hindu mantra. The meme is a reference to a political speech where the phrase was used as a jab at the opposition (for having contested the use of religious slogans in politics). It undoes this political connotation by presenting it with the Doge meme and cute emojis. Source: @proudhindu_, Har Har Mahadev X Doge, 2021, Instagram Post, https://www.instagram.com/p/CM2T9PRBRQL/.

While this tactic may seem to overlap with Trendification, its widespread nature, excessive usage and various subgenres require the creation of a separate category. This tactic involves presenting messages embedded in cute pop cultural references. The bite-sized format of cute, aesthetically pleasing memes distances you from the grotesque facts, thereby warping your perception of reality.

Trivialization

The use of imagery to imply something is unimportant or not worthy of attention. Using common jokes, cartoons and rage comics to dismiss and trivialize oppressed groups, the opposition and critique.

Fig. 13: Indian Transgender people x Tom and Jerry. In this example, we see Indian transgender people being equated to the cartoon Tom, insistently asking for something. This is a jibe at transgender people who beg due to forced systemic poverty. By depicting their plight in the form of a cartoon-based meme, all nuance and attempts to understand the issue are discarded. The entire Indian transgender community is thus alienated and reduced to mere fodder for humor. Source: Reserved Memes for Dalit Teens, Indian Transgenders X Tom and Jerry, 2019, Facebook Post, https://www.facebook.com/Dalitsenpai/photos/610210472788608.

Social media strategy

It is important to point out that the potency of these visual tactics is also due to the social media management tactics that accompany them. One of these strategies involves interspersing different types of content. This consists of posting memes about a plethora of topics, with varying degrees of political commentary, sometimes completely apolitical. Through such posting tactics, one can microdose political content between lots of general, humorous internet content and get new followers to engage with the account. Another phenomenon that works in the favor of provocative visual

memes is the relationship between novelty and virality on social media. A study conducted by researchers at MIT found that fake news travels faster on social media than the truth, and it is humans who are majorly responsible for this rather than bots. As the authors put it, 'False news [is] more novel than true news,' and people are 'more likely to share novel information'.[23]

Finally, the crude, rapid, and easily modifiable format of memes makes them very easy to create and consume. These social media management techniques ensure visibility to a wide audience, and the aforementioned visual tactics ensure maximum impact on each of the people who make up this audience.

Memes of Mass Destruction

The Jadugora lynching incident mentioned at the beginning of this article was one amongst several examples of the real life consequences of viral content. The gravity of the threat can be gauged from the fact that even a tech giant like Facebook fears for the security of its employees,[24] who face the genuine threat of a violent backlash for action against Facebook pages belonging to Hindu nationalist militant organizations such as Bajrang Dal.

Should we be worried when a 17-year-old (a minor according to Indian law) was motivated to pick up a loaded weapon and attack a crowd in the presence of a platoon of police officers?[25] Some might argue he was just an angry 'protester' but his Facebook tells a story of a young mind radicalized by malicious propaganda: the content he consumed in turn consumed him. A shocking incident, but can we really say we didn't see it coming?

In Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2021* report, India had its status a s a 'free' nation downgraded to 'partly free' due to what they describe as 'a multiyear pattern in which the Hindu nationalist government and its allies presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters'.[26]

23 Souroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018), 1146-1151.

24 Jeff Horwitz and Newley Purnell, "In India, Facebook Fears Crackdown on Hate Groups Could Backfire on Its Staff," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-india-facebook-fears-crackdown-on-hate-groups-could-backfire-on-its-staff-11607871600.

25 Soma Basu, "Jamia Millia Shooting: Making of a Hindutva Terrorist," Thediplomat.com, February 3, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/jamia-millia-shootout-making-of-a-hindutva-terrorist/.

26 "India: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report | Freedom House." Freedom House, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021.

Fig. 15: Screenshot from the perpetrator's Facebook page right before he pulled out the gun. He uses the prefix 'Rambhakt' (which translates to a worshiper of the Hindu god Ram). Source: Screenshot of 'Rambhakt's' Facebook post, the 17-year-old shooter at Jamia Milia Islamia University is posing with a gun, 2020, News Article, https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/jamia-millia-shootout-making-of-a-hindutva-terrorist/.

In the post-pandemic age, the boundaries between online and physical spaces are blurring. This fusion of space also implies the merging of battlegrounds: farmers protesting at the Tikri Border in Delhi, the blitzkrieg of hashtag trends on Twitter, anti-lockdown protesters at Museumplein in Amsterdam, QAnon militants fighting comment battles under 2021 US insurrection videos in the Youtube comment section, Redditors LOLing over a coup in Myanmar accompanied by an aerobics routine…

This surreal, entertaining, scary, and numbing juxtaposition of realities is nothing but a war between truths, and the weapons of this war are memes of mass destruction.[27]

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WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION: FAR-RIGHT CULTURE-JAMMING TACTICS IN MEMETIC WARFARE

ANDY KING

Memefluencers

When it comes to the creation and dissemination of weaponized memes, the alt-right remains one step ahead. The 'Great Meme Wars of 2016' might be old news to the veterans that waged them, but have only recently been scrutinized by journalists and politicians, tripping over the already outdated lingo. Progressives have sheepishly acknowledged the political power of memes but still fail to accommodate their production mechanisms and develop countermeasures. Leftist memes are still primarily created *by* leftists *for* leftists, without a methodical branching out to adversaries. The alt-right excels at conquering new territories by invading not only politically neutral online spaces, but also those belonging to their opponents.

Fig. 1: Right-wing meme stereotyping leftists as digitally illiterate and therefore irrelevant SJWs. https://imgflip.com/i/1zwubx.

As a far-right political movement, they were able to manufacture what appeared to be a new identity—complete with its own jargon and visual culture—while retaining archaic beliefs.

Apart from its surface rebranding, the only 'alternative' aspect of the alt-right is the average age of its members and technological prowess. In its heart, it never stopped pandering to mainstream racist, homophobic, and sexist sentiments. Despite this, the alt-right managed to capture the attention of younger generations with dank memes, controversy and networked adventure, filling the void left by multiple financial crises and social disintegration. The left, on the other hand, was placed in the position of an out-of-touch academic defender—rather than influencer—fighting to protect remaining online territories, instead of seizing and subverting new grounds.

This is not to say that tech-savvy leftists haven't been trying to discredit the internet maxim '*The left can't meme'* (Fig. 1.). There has been a recent surge of artists including Joshua Citarella, Brad Troemel, and clusterduck collective, as well as YouTubers such as ContraPoints, hbomberguy, PhilosophyTube—who have managed to capture the imaginations of young, left-leaning netizens. They co-opted the ironic and populist style used by the alt-right to appeal to disenfranchised millennials, using it to raise class consciousness, spread awareness of the climate crisis, and support trans rights while retaining a rebellious, anti-establishment tone. Fans of controversial leftist podcasters such as Chapo Trap House, Cum Town, and Red Scare happily appropriate Pepe and Wojak memes to suit their political needs. Using a frank and vulgar sense of humor, they aim to prove the left can be as subversive and rebellious as the alt-right. This is important because the left currently finds itself in the contradictory position of being referred to as 'the establishment' while not having the powers that come with actually being one.

Conversely the alt-right, with their cash-pumped think tanks and political connections, have nevertheless 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 feminists and liberals appearing to 'cancel free speech'. Their outreach has been far and wide—no corner of the internet was spared. Leftists' understandably angry reactions to racist memes and hateful speech were documented and fed back into the online propaganda machine portraying them as humorless snowflakes.

Open Book for Those Who Dare Look

Alt-right instructional guides and manifestos for online warfare have remained accessible and easy to share. Once uploaded to a pastebin, they are continuously updated, copied and pasted. This is why they are referred to as 'copypastas': anyone can modify and repost them. As is the case with memes, maximum efficiency trumps attribution rights: the original author is rendered insignificant. They are written in an engagingly hyperbolic manner, containing clear instructions for immediate action which are continuously updated. (Fig. 2.) A call-to-action copypasta is typically written in a buoyant military tone, beginning with a gallant battle speech followed by a 'best of' selection of far-right articles, a curated col-

lection of meme templates and YouTube compilations of ‘liberals being rekt’. Copypastas run by krautpol[1] even come with their own FashWave playlist to energize recruits during their missions. Despite the horrific content, the tone remains overwhelmingly positive and incentivizing. It ends with a to-do list consisting of specific tasks divided into ‘strategic echelons’. The reader can join a relevant battalion, depending on their level of bravery and skill set. These range from ‘top tier’ battalions for activists willing to publicly expose their faces in real-life Identitarian rallies to ‘lower tier’ (but more popular) battalions consisting of anonymous activists ready to spam, dox, and harass.

RAW Paste Data

```
KKK  KKK   RRRRRRRRR    AAAAAAAA  UUU      UUU TTTTTTTTTTTTT  //                    lll        //
KKK KK     RRR    RRR  AAA    AAA UUU      UUU      TTT      //            oooooo   lll       //
KKKKK      RRRRRRRR    AAAAAAAAAA UUU      UUU      TTT     // ppppppp   ooo    ooo lll      //
KKK  KK    RRR   RR    AAA    AAA UUU      UUU      TTT    //  ppp   ppp ooo    ooo lll     //
KKK   KK   RRR    RR   AAA    AAA UUU      UUU      TTT   //   ppp   ppp ooo    ooo lll    //
KKK    KKK RRR     RRR AAA    AAA   UUUUUUUU        TTT  //    ppppppp     oooooo     lll //
                                                              ppp
                                                              ppp

Text in [corner brackets] contains adwise/recommendations and is to be removed/replaced before posting
```

Fig. 2: Example of a krautpol copypasta. Note the upbeat military tone and the reminder for members to be proactive without in-fighting. Copypastas such as this one help far-right factions overlook their ideological differences and work together to complete specific tasks. https://pastebin.com/zRU2HecC.

Another reason the alt-right is able to amass large troll armies is due to its ability to embrace ideological differences within its own factions. Infighting is seen as unproductive and is strongly discouraged. Therefore, it is not unusual to witness atheists, hardcore Christians, gay white supremacists, and homophobes fighting side-by-side during an online crusade. In a faux display of goodwill, far-right members can even jump in to protect their political opponents if they find themselves scrutinized for a politically incorrect tweet or a comment taken out of context. Combined with widely circulated stories of leftist cancel culture, this open-arm embrace is very compelling to potential recruits who are desperate to belong. Yet is a false image. The alt-right does not offer economic alternatives or psychological support even to its most ardent members. Their ‘act first, think later’ campaigns are adept at fueling proactive urgency, but are built on nothing more than negative emotion. Economic policy always boils down to the naive belief that once all immigrants are expelled and women are stripped of their rights, the economic and psychological ills of capitalism will simply evaporate. Their willingness to embrace is opportunistic, lacking a heartfelt concern for the well-being of their recruits.

1 *Krautpol* refers to German-speaking far-right factions active on 4chan and 8chan. After helping Trump win the 2016 presidential elections by supporting their US members, krautpol is now focusing on Identitarian movements in Europe by organizing raids and raising money for rallies.

All Your Base are Belong to Us

It's sometimes hard to believe that only a decade ago, disruptive online interventions, hacktivist raids, and the marriage of truth to irony were tools that once belonged to left-leaning anarchists working under the name *Anonymous.* After key members were imprisoned by government intelligence agencies, the alt-right were quick to take over 4chan threads and co-opt youthful hunger for online anti-establishment politics. They also cultivated their hacktivist tools, namely Anonymous' ability to recruit massive online armies in a decentralized manner. One of the assimilated weapons was culture jamming, which included disruptive campaigns such as trespassing into enemy grounds and converting mainstream culture into a Trojan horse for radical thought. Prominent neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin outlined the importance of culture jamming in the *Daily Stormer Style Guide*:

> Always hijack existing cultural memes in any way possible. Don't worry if the meme was originally Jewish. It doesn't matter. [...] Packing our message inside of existing cultural memes and humor can be viewed as a delivery method. Something like adding cherry flavor to children's medicine. [...] We want to take over the culture, to consume it.[2]

Politically neutral memes were appropriated and subverted. SS armbands were photoshopped onto the arms of dainty Anime girls. Speech bubbles in popular internet comics were blanked out and rewritten. Scientific infographics were edited to authenticate racist and sexist stereotypes. Fake avatars, accounts, and profiles were created to impersonate and caricature their adversaries. Under this guise, far-right users raided neighboring forums and threads. Like countless others, Fredrick Brennan—who later went on to create 8chan—was first exposed to 4chan trolls on an imageboard for *Sonic the Hedgehog* fans during a raid. Fascinated, he followed the trolls back to their mothership, where he stayed for over a decade. After 8chan was linked to multiple domestic terror attacks—and was overtaken by shadowy billionaires—Fredrick is now working hard to remove the imageboard site from the internet.[3]

Far-right trolls capture the attention of potential recruits by hijacking their visual culture and posting inflammatory content on their platforms—a kind of digital graffiti. Because they hide behind avatars typical for the targeted community while baiting members into throwing tantrums, it's difficult to differentiate between an actual member acting out in response to a troll and a troll acting out as a member. As mods struggle to control a raid, they initiate platform-wide account purges in which innocent members get thrown out

2 Ashley Feinberg, "This Is The Daily Stormer's Playbook," *Huffpost UK,* December 13, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/daily-stormer-nazi-style-guide_n_5a2ece19e4b0ce3b344492f2.

3 Dale Beran, "Why Does 8chan Exist at All?," *Medium*, September 27, 2019, https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/why-does-8chan-exist-at-all-33a8942dbeb2.

together with the guilty. This, in turn, breeds further anger and mistrust in the community and its leaders. Meanwhile, curious members are lured out of their platforms and given the opportunity to join future raids. After Gamergate—the largest cross-platform assimilation—far-right trolls began to run out of internet subcultures to infiltrate. They felt ready to take on 'The Media'.

Accidental Victory

Once upon a time, Pepe was a generic reaction meme used across the political spectrum, not dissimilar to how Facebook stickers are used to display a variety of emotions. Its adoption by the alt-right was circumstantial. The real danger to Pepe's demise was always the potential appropriation by the 'lamestream media'. When celebrities and boomers share a certain meme, they effectively write its eulogy. Much to the chagrin of professional netizens, this was beginning to happen to Pepe. Far-right users restored Pepe's fading edginess by creating increasingly controversial renditions to separate themselves from the much-hated normies. When Pepe was flagged by the Anti-Defamation League as a hate-symbol, the move was met with celebration and hilarity across the far-right: Pepe's cancellation was his resurrection (Fig. 3.). The alt-right had won a culture war they weren't even waging by gaining a mascot they didn't even invent. Best of all, political opponents who weren't aware of Pepe's new status as a hate symbol, or refused to give him up, were suddenly attacked for being closeted fascists.

Fig. 3.1: Matt Furie—Pepe's creator—officially killed off his creation in 2017. Far-right usersresponded by resurrecting him. (i) https://me.me/i/00-pepe-has-been-resurrected-praise-kek-shadilay-13576027 (ii) https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/257302630/%5C#q257304889".

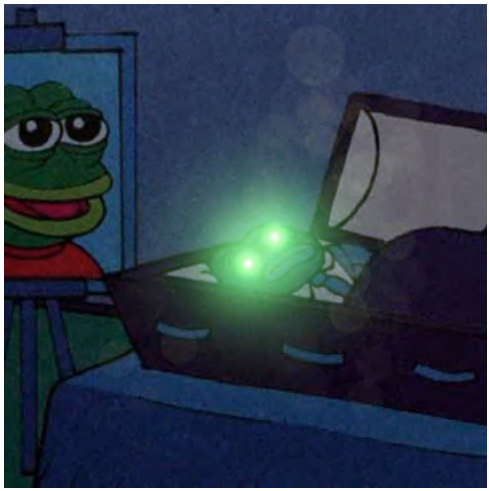

Fig. 3.2: Matt Furie—Pepe's creator—officially killed off his creation in 2017. Far-right usersresponded by resurrecting him. (ii) https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/257302630/%5C#q257304889".

A movement born on the internet needs real life legitimacy if it aspires to influence the world at large. Since trust is difficult to manufacture, it can be scavenged from those who have more of it. For the alt-right to succeed, the public had to lose trust in the movement's critics: the mainstream media. Even though many fascists were indeed using Pepe, many were not. The far-right caricatured journalists as being out of touch with youth culture and blamed the mainstream media for being paranoid and spreading fake news. Journalists retaliated by defending their rationale while Twitter mobs argued over whether the continued use of Pepe memes in politically neutral contexts was morally condemnable. It was the dawn of fake new allegations.

Operation O-KKK

In 2017, alt-right activists decided to exploit the media's lack of internet know-how by laying out traps. If Pepe—a goofy everyman created by a hippie cartoonist could be branded as a fascist symbol—what about something even more innocuous and arbitrary?

Before long, Operation O-KKK was launched (Fig. 4.). Its mission was to trick the media into believing that the OK hand gesture was a dog whistle for fascism. The rationale was invented on the spot: three outstretched fingers designated the letter 'w' while the index finger forming a loop with the thumb represented 'p'. Together, they spelled out **w**hite **p**ower. Activists were instructed to create fake feminist, POC and leftist twitter accounts, and then tweet their disgust at this new symbol for white power. At the same

time, openly fascist alt-accounts were used to spam twitter with offensive content accompanied by the OK Hand emoji 👌 in order to validate accusations.

Fig. 4: One of many OPERATION O-KKK threads on 4chan. Image: <ahttps://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/209521954/%5C#q209527911>.

Far-right users masquerading as feminists began to wage a pretend war with far-right users masquerading as caricatured versions of themselves (Fig. 5.). Soon enough, actual feminists caught wind and joined in to defend the faux feminists. The media picked up the story and was immediately ridiculed. Meanwhile, the alt-right celebrated their newfound power to control the media narrative.

When right-wing trolls LARP as 'literal nazis', the borders between irony and sincerity quickly dissolve. It was a matter of time before 'literal nazis' began to *unironically* use the OK Hand sign. When called out, they pretended to be conservative trolls. Brenton Tarrant—a domestic terrorist who murdered 51 people—spent 14 years frequenting 4chan and 8chan boards, the source of PsyOps such as Operation O-KKK. During his livestream of the Christchurch mosque shootings, he demonstrated a masterful knowledge of ironic, far-right memetic lore. In his manifesto, he wrote that he isn't against foreigners living abroad and wished 'different peoples of their world all the best regardless of their ethnicity, race, culture or faith'.[4] Justin Trudeau and Candace Owens—a black conservative—were sardonically credited as influences. After his arrest, Tarrant flashed the OK hand sign in court.[5]

4 Brenton Tarrant, *The Great Replacement* (2017), 13, https://img-prod.ilfoglio.it/userUpload/The_Great_Replacementconvertito.pdf.

5 "OK Hand Sign Added to List Of Hate Symbols," *BBC News,* September 27, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-49837898.

Fig. 5: Feminists United is a Twitter account led by a 4chan troll. Tweet: https://twitter.com/proudfemme83/status/836366339514241024.

Ironic far-right charades benefit everyone whose ideologies lie beyond the centre-right. It's advantageous for Conservatives if the Overton window shifts to the right because their opposition to refugees pales in comparison to calls for a white ethnostate. At the same time, neo-Nazis can hide behind the curtain of irony. Robert Evans, a journalist for bellingcat, was publicly listed as a target for assassination after he reported on Brenton Tarrant and 8chan. One 8chan poster promised to pay 15 bitcoins (worth $60,000 at the time) for his death. When Evans posted a screenshot of the bounty on his Twitter account, 8channers alleged the bounty was fake and mocked him for not getting 'the joke'.[6]

Operation Honk

Around the same time, a Pepe variant had begun gaining traction. Donning a rainbow colored wig and red nose, he symbolized a world gone mad. This new clownified offshoot was called Honkler (Fig. 6.). According to the disseminators of Honkler memes, liberals had taken over the media, and anyone caught disagreeing with the 'liberal agenda' ran the risk of being cancelled. In this mad world, everything had been turned upside down; degeneration was dressed up as progressivism. The only way to combat progressive elites was to dress up as a clown in order to avoid scrutiny, for only the fool can laugh at kings.

6 Robert Evans, "Ignore the Poway Synagogue Shooter's Manifesto: Pay Attention To 8Chan's /Pol/ Board," *Bellingcat*, March 15, 2019, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/04/28/ignore-the-poway-synagogue-shooters-manifesto-pay-attention-to-8chans-pol-board/.

Honkler came with its own pill-philosophy: the Honkpill. According to a 4chan post, it is best described as the Blackpill on nitrous oxide. Advertised as a coping strategy for feelings of anomie, the Honkpill evangelized laughing at the absurdity of the world instead of living in a state of depressed apathy. A Honkpill copypasta explains: 'Taking the Honkpill is a declaration of freedom and an act of philosophical transcendence; it is the simultaneous acknowledgment of the Blackpill with the decision to avoid its attendant nihilism – by consciously choosing to seek joy, to seek adventure, to seek light-hearted and self-amused mastery in the midst of all the chaos.'

However, much like everything else on 4chan, its purported nihilism was tongue-in-cheek. There was a method behind Honkler's madness, and it culminated in a series of PsyOps – some of which still continue today. One such PsyOp was called 'Operation Honk'. Since posting Pepe memes on social media resulted in bans, a stand-in had to be used. The emojis 🤡 🌝 became a cross-platform dog whistle for Honkler and, more generally, a 'degenerate' clown world ruined by liberals. The supposedly 'nihilistic' message behind Honkpill was boastful rather than pessimistic: if the media is a circus, then 4chan is the ringmaster. A 4chan user explains Operation Honk: 'we created the clown meme to give the fake media a face. the [sic] media reports lunacy and not the objective fact. the fact that they will report on this clown meme proves this point and will redpill the masses as the fact that they are reading about a cartoon frog clown sinks in.'

Fig. 6: Honkler holding Brenton Tarrant's inscribed gun. In one of his manifestos, Brentan Tarrant wrote 'Clown memes are step one of riding the tiger where we have to go a little coocoo and rebuild ourselves.'[7] He also advocated supporters to: 'Create memes, post memes, and spread memes. Memes have done more for the ethno-nationalist movement than any manifesto.[8] Image: https://boards.4chan.org/pol/".

7 Brenton Tarrant, "*The Great Replacement: A Final Manifesto*" (2017), 21, https://www.docdroid.net/Q4nIbBM/the-great-replacement-original-brenton-tarrant-pdf#page=21.

8 Tarrant, *Great Replacement,* 147.

Once again, the media took the bait. Articles such as 'White Nationalists Adopt Clowns as Their Next Racist Symbol'[9] and 'No Joke: White Nationalists are now Using Clowns to Spread Hatred'[10] brought more attention to the movement. After 'tricking' the media into believing that a frog, the OK hand gesture, and clowns were symbols of white supremacy, channers decided to see how deep the rabbit hole could go. Hijacking the LGBT flag—the ultimate symbol of progressive politics—was going to be their crown jewel.

Taking Back the Rainbow: A Place for Every Race

Operation #takingbacktherainbow went like this: If the rainbow flag emoji is used concurrently with hate speech, it will be flagged as the latest fascist symbol. The PsyOp was advertised as a win-win: If the rainbow flag gets cancelled for being a dog whistle for fascism, LGBTQIA+ communities will be silenced on social media. If the rainbow flag doesn't get cancelled, then the far-right will have co-opted their opponent's symbol and defaced it (Fig. 7.). Channers were hoping that algorithms designed to automatically remove hate-speech would pick up on this artificially manufactured connection. Fortunately, despite their best efforts, this has not happened yet.

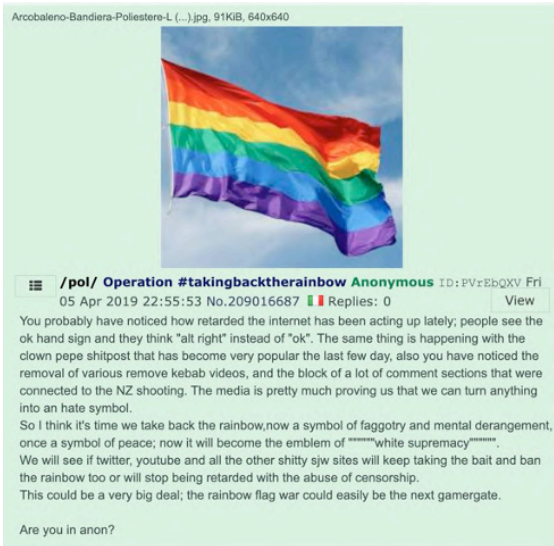

Fig. 7: 4chan thread laying out Operation #takingbacktherainbow. Image: https://boards.4chan.org/pol/.

9 Jared Holt, "White Nationalists Adopt Clowns As Their Next Racist Symbol (Yes, Seriously)," *Right Wing Watch*, April 4, 2019, https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/white-nationalists-adopt-clowns-as-their-next-racist-symbol-yes-seriously/.

10 Aiden Pink, "No Joke: White Nationalists Are Now Using Clowns To Spread Hatred," *Forward,* 6 May 2019, https://forward.com/fast-forward/423812/white-nationalist-clowns-honk-honkler/.

#takingbacktherainbow memes were (poorly) disguised as being pro-LGBT+, advocating 'preserving diversity' through racial segregation. Some far-right memes were accidentally shared by progressives too distracted by the rainbow optics to notice the supremacist tagline: 'a place for every race' (Fig. 8.). Far-right users who were hungry for real-life mayhem developed a piggyback strategy: bringing physical rainbow flags to rallies. The goal was two-fold. First, the LGBT Pride flag could be used to deflect accusations of bigotry. Under its 'protection', far-right protesters could provoke foes such as Antifa into a fight in order to label them as 'homophobic'. The second goal was more insidious: showing up to demonstrations with rainbow swastikas photoshopped onto Confederate flags would give the impression that the far-right was in allegiance with the LGBT+ community. This would allow the alt-right to feign open-mindedness to potential converts, while simultaneously tricking opponents into unfairly condemning LGBT+ communities for inciting hate.

Fig. 8.1 Collection of Honkler and #takingbacktherainbow memes. Images: https://boards.4chan.org/pol/ and https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/clown-pepe-honk-honk-clown-world/photos/.

How to Kill a Clown

Clown world memes reached their peak popularity in anticipation of the 2019 *Joker* film release. This was not circumstantial: Joker meme formats were in use before the alt-right decided to hijack clowns, and there were parallels between the Honkpill and the Joker's philosophy of manic contempt. The 2019 *Joker* film offered a relatable origin story in which the protagonist—who ends up becoming the Joker—is unemployed, single, and still lives with his mother. After underfunded social services forcibly cut off his medication supply, he spirals into madness and unintentionally triggers an uprising against the wealthy elites.

Incels were excited to see a film depicting a lonely man going on a killing spree. They memed extensively about their identification with Joker, calling for a 'beta uprising'. Far-right trolls hoped the media would notice the parallels between clowns, incels, and fascism, and the film would get cancelled or become restricted. The more people believed the 2019 *Joker* film posed a domestic terrorist threat, the more precautionary measures would be taken to secure cinemas. Their ultimate goal was to engineer a self-fulfilling prophecy by provoking audiences enough to launch an emotional avalanche culminating in a terror attack. For a period of time, the plan seemed to be working: the media began to criticize the film before it was even released.

The director, Todd Phillips, was berated for creating a protagonist sympathetic to incels. Movie critics continuously pointed out the problematic and irresponsible aspects of the film. *Salon* described *Joker* as a 'dangerous manifesto that could inspire incels to commit acts of violence'.[11] *Indiewire* agreed, labelling it as 'a toxic rallying cry for self-pitying incels'.[12] Social media was split into two camps: those agreeing the film was a threat to democracy, and those belittling 'woke culture', and denouncing journalists and critics as being disingenuous and cowardly. The US Army issued a warning to service members about a 'credible potential mass shooting', explaining why incels idolise Joker, and listing instructions for a mass shooter scenario.[13] Twitter users promised to boycott the film. The actor playing the lead role —Joaquin Phoenix—stormed out of an interview in response to a question asking if his character might inspire mass shooters. The NYPD promised to supply uniformed officers during screenings. Cinemas banned toy guns, costumes and masks.[14] The film still hadn't been released yet.

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11 Matthew Rozsa, "'Joker' is a Wildly Uneven Mess – and a Dangerous one in the Wrong Hands," *Salon,* October 4, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2019/10/04/joker-review-todd-phillips-incels-alt-right-warner-bros/.

12 David Ehrlich, "'Joker' Review: For Better or Worse, Superhero Movies Will Never Be the Same," *Indiewire,* August 31, 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/2019/08/joker-review-joaquin-phoenix-1202170236/.

13 Matthew Rozsa, "U.S. Military Issues Warning to Troops About Incel Violence at Joker Screenings," *Gizmodo,* August 24, 2019, https://io9.gizmodo.com/u-s-military-issues-warning-to-troops-about-incel-viol-1838412331.

14 Chris Lee, "How Joker Became the Most Hated, Loved, Obsessed-Over Movie of 2019," *Vulture,* October 9, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/10/all-the-joker-controversy-and-threats-explained.html.

The alt-right felt victorious, sprinkling mayhem on social media platforms by sardonically suggesting cancelling all white men and advocating 'penis inspections' before movie screenings. The antics of one 4chan troll, self-identified as Payne, went viral. He hung signs in cinemas proclaiming that single men were banned from attending Joker screenings. The signs were photographed and posted online, adding fuel to the fire. Because so many people believed the signs were real, AMC had to step in and assert that no such policies had actually been implemented. Moral outrage and anger was in full swing, and far-right trolls couldn't wait to see what would happen when the film was publicly released.

Then, disaster struck: normies loved the film. Slavoj Žižek—a Marxist philosopher—congratulated Hollywood for producing an anti-capitalist blockbuster.[15] Instead of inciting incels to commit violence, *Joker* captured a zeitgeist. The film's immediate acclaim exposed the commonality of anti-establishment sentiment across the political spectrum, irrespective of gender, race, or class. The film's bleak portrayal of late-stage capitalism and crumbling social security nets resonated with many of its viewers. Clown memes became mainstream. The clown emoji began to be used extensively to convey the feeling of being shortchanged, drowning its secondary meaning. The far-right couldn't get their last laugh in a world overrun with clowns.

Fig. 9: Putting on Clown Makeup meme template was popularized in 2019. It depicts an individual suffering cognitive dissonance from contradicting observations of the world. He reconciles the contradiction in a nonsensical way, thereby making a fool of himself.[16] Image: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1563390-putting-on-clown-makeup.

15 Slavoj Žižek, "More on Joker: from Apolitical Nihilism to a New Left, or Why Trump is no Joker," *The Philosophical Salon,* November 11, 2019, https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/more-on-joker-from-apolitical-nihilism-to-a-new-left-or-why-trump-is-no-joker/.

16 "Putting on Clown Makeup," *Knowyourmeme*, 2019, Last accessed: March 4, 2021, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/putting-on-clown-makeup.

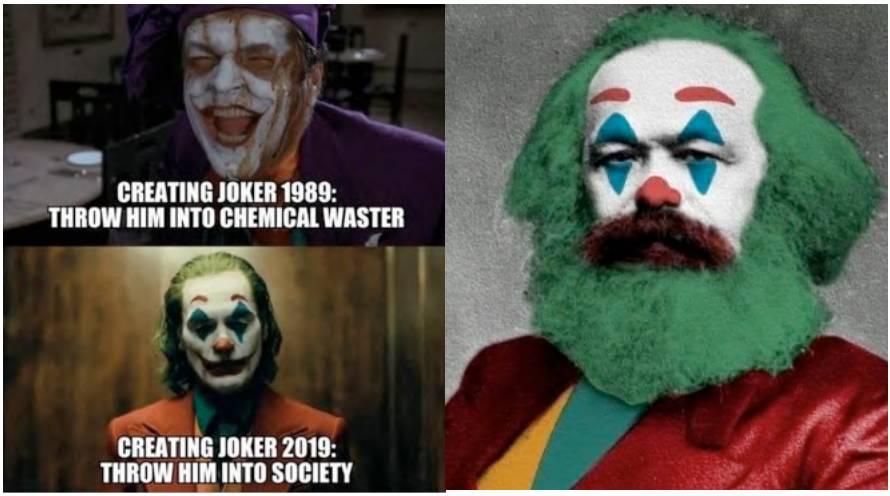

Fig. 10.1: Joker memes created and spread outside far-right circles. 'We Live in a Society' became one of the most popular Joker memes, yielding endless variants. Left-wing meme depicting Karl Marx as Joker. https://me.me/i/creating-joker-1989-throw-him-into-chemical-waster-creating-joker-866cd2582a7042679e82fd818478d36e.

When right-wing extremists began to exit the screen in 2016, their threat to democracy became apparent IRL. People who previously brushed off incels as petty virgins and the alt-right as a niche collection of misfits were suddenly unscrambling boogaloo memes and learning the differences between Chads and Stacies. However, their efforts stopped there. No major online counter-strategies were undertaken and, all the while, class inequality continues to grow. Then, in January 2021, far-right mobs stormed the US Capitol. Since there was no time left to develop deradicalisation think tanks, drastic solutions had to be implemented. Twitter accounts, Facebook groups and subreddits were banned en masse. Parler, a 'free speech' social network used by right-wing radicals and conspiracy theorists, was shut down by Google, Apple, and Amazon.

There is no doubt that deplatforming is an efficient strategy; when executed on a wide scale it can throw an entire movement into disarray. Nationalist rhetoric has lulled as right-wingers mourn election losses. But this is only temporary. The practice of deplatforming opposes the inherent structure of the internet. The long-standing failure to undermine online piracy is proof of this. Banning The Pirate Bay yielded thousands of mirrors with VPNs mushrooming overnight. It's only a matter of time before alt-tech social media platforms grow in scope, this time out of plain sight. Fascist shibboleths will become subtler so as to evade auto-bans; the conversion tactics will become more nuanced.

Countering the Counterstrategies

The alt-right have persistently proven their ability to adapt to situations geared against them. By masterfully manipulating the narrative to appear in control, they transformed the act of getting banned from an inconvenience into a goal: *we didn't get banned, we got ourselves banned on purpose to prove how arbitrary free speech policies are*. When Blizzard forbade the use of OK hand emojis in a multiplayer game,[17] it inadvertently confirmed the alt-right's power to decide what is a fascist symbol and what is not. When far-right trolls spam enemy communities with far-right symbols and memes, those communities get flagged and removed. Proving the original members weren't fascist is difficult if the community is small. Stricter regulation is leading to the emergence of a parallel internet composed of alternative social media platforms—such as Gab and Bitchute—toxic echo chambers and melting pots for far-right ideologies and conspiracy theories. While this feels like a breath of fresh air for Twitter users and Redditors who are sick of being harassed by malicious edge-lords, research shows that publicly engaging with far-right extremists on a Twitter comment thread deradicalizes that thread.[18] In recent years, there has been an uptick of studies proposing direct intervention as a viable countermeasure to hate speech, referred to as 'building a counter-narrative'. Unfortunately, many progressives often end up debating trolls or bot accounts, overlooking legitimate posters who might be more open to changing their minds. Misplaced debates can be avoided by checking a user's post history to see if the account is genuine. A quick analysis of a user's profile and post history should be done even when a user is presenting as left-wing: as mentioned previously, far-right trolls pose as feminists and POC in order to misdirect and flame in-fighting. It's also important to engage with the goal to de-escalate the conversation, even when it's tempting to do otherwise. According to the Anti-Defamation League, this can be done through fact-checking, humour and satire.[19]

PsyOps such as Operation O-KKK, Operation Honk and #reclaimtheflag taught the alt-right a valuable lesson: their enemies were an untapped source of unpaid labour who could be recruited as faux gatekeepers, unknowing transmitters of confusion and demoralization. The left's slow adoption of digital canvassing methods and failure to acknowledge far-right populism as a legitimate threat has also played a role. Instead of subverting the rules of the game—which once belonged to them—leftists continue to walk into traps. They end up targeting the ever-shifting fascist symbols designed

17 John Trent, "Report: Blizzard Forbids 'Okay' Symbol in Overwatch League Arena – Claims It's a 'White Power Symbol'," *Bounding into Comics,* April 5, 2019, https://boundingintocomics.com/2019/04/05/report-blizzard-forbids-okay-symbol-in-overwatch-league-arena-claims-its-a-white-power-symbol/.

18 Joshua Garland et al., "Countering Hate on Social Media: Large Scale Classification of Hate and Counter Speech," *Proceedings of the Fourth Workshop on Online Abuse and Harms,* June 2, 2020, https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2020.alw-1.13.

19 "Best Practices For Responding To Cyberhate," *Anti-Defamation League,* https://www.adl.org/best-practices-for-responding-to-cyberhate.

to be obsolete instead of analysing and learning from the root of the problem – the alt-right's success at assimilating and organizing supporters online. Short-sighted by anxious goodwill, progressives have inadvertently placed themselves into the position of online janitors. They remain stuck in the pre-digital past, adhering to outdated rules of symbol creation, dissemination and control.

In the digital era, anyone with access to a computer is a graphic designer, and anyone with access to the internet is a propagandist. It takes less time to manufacture an endless stream of far-right symbols than it does to identify, analyse, detect, and remove them. Figuring out the latest far-right dog whistles, exploits and in-jokes is a full-time job. Automating the process by building bots to flag online hate speech cannot be a long-term solution. First, removing content does not deradicalize the posters, it simply makes them less visible to the general public. This inadvertently masks the severity of the situation we currently find ourselves in: far-right parties are gaining power all over Europe. Election results seem shocking in part because so much online content is tidied up. Second, bots cannot read between the lines. Anti-racist technologies have increased far-right reliance on coded language based on acronyms, innocuous words and emojis, which morph on a daily basis and escape detection. *Operation Google* involved the use of 'unbannable' company names such as 'google', 'skype' and 'yahoo' as stand-ins for Jews, African Americans, and Latinos respectively.[20] As with Operation #reclaimtheflag, their goal was to trick google algorithms into displaying racist images to innocent viewers, while at the same time deceiving Google algorithms into censoring Google itself. Third, far-right trolls often control multiple puppet accounts, and generate new ones as soon as old ones are banned.

Controlling online platforms costs time, energy and nerves—resources that might be better spent on assimilating left-wing armies to build a counter-narrative to the far-right. Left-wing copypastas can help unite leftists by outlining specific tasks, such as the formation of digital flash mobs and targeted canvassing of social media groups. Flooding fascist platforms with satirical content would catch the attention of recent alt-right recruits—many of whom are just teenagers—and expose them to alternate views. Raiding former left-wing forums would allow expelled members to reclaim lost territory. For example, many anarchist and leftist eco-groups have been overtaken by eco-fascists. The original members were either thrown out or converted. These territories still exist and can potentially be reclaimed. After all, the good news is that any *progressive* with access to a computer is a graphic designer, and any progressive with access to the internet is a propagandist. Memes should be viewed for what they are—propaganda posters—and meme dissemination adheres to the same principles guiding advertising firms: repetition breeds familiarity, which leads to preference.

20 Gabriel Weimann and Ari Ben Am, "Digital Dog Whistles: The New Online Language of Extremism," *International Journal of Security Studies,* 2, no. 1 (2020). https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/ijoss/vol2/iss1/4.

When it comes to coded language, the best strategy is to hijack it. The far-right fears losing control over symbol creation. This was evident when 4channers were brainstorming culture jamming strategies in Honkpill threads. Some users worried that conjoining Pepe with the LGBT flag was too risky because normies would assume that Pepe was *un*cancelled. Which could lead to Pepe being reappropriated by the left, stripping the far-right of their favorite mascot. One hesitant 4channer outlined his concern in an Operation Honk thread: 'All your [sic] doing is taking the greatest meme /pol/ ever had and making it gay. You are letting the fags claim Pepe, not the other way around. Because anybody outside of the chans sees rainbow Pepe and thinks LGBT /.../ your doing their dirty work for them.' Other users echoed similar concerns:s the real danger to Pepe is appropriation, *not* cancellation.

Fig. 11: Pepe Instagram collage created by clusterduck, a left-wing artist collective that uses memes to protest the climate crisis. They have reappropriated Pepe to promote a positive message of inclusivity. https://www.instagram.com/realclusterfuck.

What the alt-right fears most is losing media attention and its reputation for being an edgy counterculture that defends 'free-speech' for the underdogs. Punk was killed by popular culture, not law enforcers. Anti-fascists can fight culture-jamming tactics using signal flooding. When clown emojis and Joker memes inadvertently became mainstream, far-right trolls were furious because they could no longer distinguish between their own ironic shitposts and normie sincerity. They were forced to revert to Honkler, a less subtle symbol, due to Pepe's controversial status. If leftists were to casually reclaim Pepe, the alt-right would be forced to invent a new mascot, or resort to using explicitly fascist symbols which cannot be reappropriated – such as swastikas and Odal runes. Forcing them

to revert to old-fashioned symbols would repulse their center-leaning members as well as future recruits who have not yet become desensitized.

Of course, continuously co-opting freshly-minted right-wing symbols doesn't eliminate the alt-right—culture-jamming is just one tool in their digital toolbox. But it would damage their reputation as dissident purveyors of online culture, and prevent the unnecessary surrender of arbitrary symbols. Repossessing additional hacktivist tools and using them against the alt-right would signal the beginning of an online anti-fascist retaliation. Memetic warfare is more immediate and accessible than real-life demonstrations. It is not susceptible to police disruptions and pandemics. If anti-fascists build an active online presence, they can assimilate enough supporters to demote the alt-right from *provoker* into an inept *reactor*.

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YOUR FEED IS A BATTLEGROUND: A FIELD REPORT ON MEMETIC WARFARE IN TURKEY

SARP ÖZER

As a child, I lived with my mother's younger brother who was a fan of rock music thanks to Metallica's popularity in the late 1980s. Even though I encountered him in our living room rather than on social media, he was the influencer of yesterday to me. Though it should be noted that he never said, 'if you like this, you will like that'. Since nobody gave me a tutorial to upgrade my suave game, I intuitively set out to parrot him starting from the looks. I started wearing black or monotone outfits and favoring denim pieces. While working on my attitude, I noticed some hand gestures he was flashing to his friends which are commonly known as the horns and peace gestures. At that time, I was not able to decipher these enigmatic salutations, but it seemed to work like a charm to indicate that one was cool.

Fig. 1: Author's childhood portrait while flashing the peace gesture. Date unknown.

To execute the horns gesture, one should have the pinky and index fingers pointing upwards while the middle and ring fingers should be folded and pressed within the knuckle and fixed in place by the thumb. On some occasions, like group photographs, making a V-shaped peace gesture was also very popular. The first time I tried making the horns gesture in front of my uncle, I had him rolling on the floor laughing at me: this ambiguous hand gesture would deliver different meanings if finger positions were altered even slightly. In fact, a very similar hand gesture already exists in Turkey. Called the howling wolf, it is the foremost symbol of the National Movement Party (MHP). The difference between the horns and the wolf is that, for the wolf, the middle and ring fingers point upfront along with the thumb. Thus, index and short fingers represent the ears of the wolf while the rest form the canine's nose and mouth.

Completely unrelated to the horns salutation, the howling wolf gesture, as well as the animal itself, is among the most controversial images in the history of Turkish politics. Even though scholars and politicians strive to prove that its position within the iconography of Turanism means no harm, it is nevertheless widely associated with Islamist, ultra-nationalist, and neo-fascist movements such as the Grey Wolves Association, which rose to prominence during the late 1970s' political violence in Turkey, resulting in the 1980 military coup. The ambiguity between the horns and wolf is akin to the swastika symbol conveying a meaning within certain Buddhist cultures, among others, that differs markedly from its appropriated use in Nazi Germany. The Japanese heavy metal-idol fusion band called BabyMetal also uses the same gesture of the wolf in a completely different context. Not affiliated with Turanism in any way, BabyMetal's kitsune (fox in Japanese) gesture shows that images live many lives at once in different people's minds. After all, hand gestures originate from symbols that represent things not visible to the eye by association or convention. They stand for ideas, objects, or relationships, serving as visual shorthands. These symbols, however, might not immediately communicate with their viewer on first eye contact. Sometimes they carry encrypted messages that require clearance which might be obtained through proof of loyalty, initiation, calling, etc. That's why religious groups, esoteric communities, and political movements alike make use of them to deliver messages to the masses, and also to ideologically condition younger generations.

The wolf in the context of Turkey could be considered both a symbol and a meme. It is a unit of cultural transmission. One does not need to subscribe to the nationalist perspective to know about its fictive racial significance tied to the Turkish identity. Produced and reproduced both by the state and citizens, it is an ever-present image that never goes out of fashion. This viral image may be archaic, yet it remains impactful as it is commonly displayed on online platforms and in public spaces. The ideology behind it holds substantial political power and therefore enforces its presence within public memory. As a hand gesture, the wolf is free of cost, easy to learn, and simple enough to perform. The same conditions apply to circulating it on social media in the form of an image macro. Since visual forms of communication are instrumental to disseminate messages within the wider pub-

lic, images with such potency become weaponized in politics and other fields which rely heavily on perception management to engineer citizen consent. Today these operations are referred to as memetic warfare, occurring on a social media battlefield. They are motivated by competition over narrative, with the aim of obtaining social control. Unlike cyberwarfare, memetic warfare's concern is not related to data but to the seizure of the psychological space at the grand narrative level, taking control of public opinion to establish advantage over an opponent in a manner akin to psychological warfare.

The primary objective of memetic warfare is not to come up with the most convincing arguments but to debunk the opposing parties' ideas by any means necessary. There are no rules of engagement on this battlefield. The lower the blow is, the more attention it gets. Such content gets a lot more interaction than statements written in a fair play fashion. As far as the history of digital political campaigns goes, the internet operates as a space of collective self-confusion. On social media, it is taken for granted that there is no smoke without fire. Under these circumstances, search engine listings could be considered publicly visible conduct sheets. If enough mud is thrown at a wall (or somebody's reputation), some will stick. The internet forgets nobody's deeds as long as caches of inactive sites remain accessible.

After ruling Turkey for twenty years with an iron gauntlet, the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's internet search results are flooded with content portraying him as a corrupt, racist, and authoritarian politician. Opinion polling for the 2023 Turkish general election indicates that Erdoğan's popularity has taken a dive.[1] The discontent is especially observable among internet-savvy younger generations.[2] Since their consent is impossible to forcefully obtain, it needs to be engineered. Rather than making a genuine effort to earn approval, Erdoğan's propaganda team started to invest in a fully-fledged propaganda war, with a special focus on social media. There has been an extreme proliferation of overt offensive accounts run by hired users manifesting hostility on social media platforms to support Erdoğan's cause. These include doxxing, identity policing, and digital lynching which even extends to tracking down and physically harming dissident politicians.

These state-backed social media warriors popularly named Ak Troller (white trolls)[3]. Originating from a translation error, the zombie army called white walkers in *Game of Thrones* was named 'Ak Gezenler' in Turkish subtitles. This became a meme that portrays Erdoğan as the zombie king an over-ambitious leader who is not satisfied with Turkey and won't stop until Westeros is conquered. However, this meme does not only target him, but also

1 Wikipedia Contributors, "Opinion Polling for the 2021 Turkish General Election," last accessed April 29, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2023_Turkish_general_election.

2 Gönül Tol, Ayça Alemdaroğlu, ''Turkey's Generation Z Turns Against Erdogan',' *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/15/turkey-youth-education-erdogan/.

3 Wikipedia Contributors, "Ak Trolls," last accessed March 15 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AK_Trolls.

his voter base. There is a stinging insult behind this that hurts AKP supporters by suggesting there is an absence of subjectivity amongst those who do as Erdoğan bids—akin to zombie armies.

Fig. 2: A meme example mocking the style of AKP propaganda posters featuring the Night King, the supreme leader of White Walkers from the Game of Thrones series. Translates as: 'Redemption and Ascension with kind support of the president we are resurrecting the Ottoman.' Meme archived from Uludağ Sözlük. Posted by 'theoutsider' under the subsection 'akgezenler vs the akp secmeni' on 27.08.2017. Image available at: https://www.uludagsozluk.com/k/ak-gezenler-vs-akp-se%C3%A7meni/.

Ak as a prefix has not only spawned the AK Troll term. It is in such widespread use in daily life that it has become a memetic pattern itself. There are a great many compound words that derive from the word AK. The rule is simple: if one seeks to state one's loyalty to Erdoğan, naming a business or a legal entity by adding the AK prefix to the title sends a message. Even Erdoğan named his multi-million palace Aksaray (White Palace). The same formula is applied for mockery. One could play with it by adding AK to words, names, and titles to ridicule cases related to nepotism, corruption, funky Islamo-Turkic aesthetics, or fake news. In short, tongue-in-cheek uses of AK ridicule Erdoğan's obsession with being powerful and rich, which has become an essential part of the decadent conservative culture he developed in the last two decades. As a fundamentalist Muslim, he preaches

about being just and fair yet goes full-on YOLO by living a lavish life, accumulating unfathomable wealth that would be impossible to make only as a president. With enough financial resources at his disposal, rallying supporters or opportunists that are willing to get their hands dirty is an easy task. But keeping their cover intact is not so simple. The existence of paramilitary forces is publicly known in Turkey—both physical and digital.

The state-sponsored web brigades are reported to be formed by recruitments made from the AKP youth unit, TÜGVA, and its ilk. Türkiye Gençlik Vakfı (Turkey Youth Foundation) is an association that critics claim is run as an astroturfing entity.[4] To stay institutionally incognito, these operations are not run in-house but commissioned to third parties. Camouflaged as advertising companies or public relations agencies, they discreetly operate under the radar, working from domestic contexts to not leave any traces behind that would lead to AKP.[5]

Operating in different ways and at different scales, some of the individual sock puppets have transitioned from acting as lone wolves to forming organized cyber paramilitaries. Formed on Telegram in 2020, Ebabiller (The Apodiformes) consists of a massive assault team that operates through social media. They orchestrate bans of accounts of dissident politicians, journalists, or citizens, but also run hashtag operations with their expansive retweet networks. They aim to support the government in engineering public opinion, or in generating *casus belli* cases to facilitate the legitimization of political arrests. Most of the members of the Ebabiller Telegram group obscure their real user information on purpose. They use nicknames and random images that favor portraits of Erdoğan and Sultan Abdulhamit II as their profile pictures. Some of the rare real profile photographs have distinctive features such as Ottomanesque clothing, prop weapons and favor the Turkish fez in particular.

As a trendsetter, Erdoğan strategically makes use of memetic engineering: a method of attuning the subjectivity of the masses to one's interests through the development or repurposing of memes. He modifies the beliefs and thought patterns of his fans and supporters by synthesizing and splicing Turkic and Islamic cultural icons. Ottoman, Selçuklu, and Arabic cultures are appropriated, mixed, and mashed according to Erdoğan's idiosyncratic taste to construct a visual common ground for AKP supporters. This effort deploys the affordances of mixed media: for example, the national television run by the Turkish state TRT produces propagandistic television series' such as Diriliş Ertuğrul (Resurrection Ertugrul) disguised as entertainment.

4 ''TÜGVA'nın Arkasında Sümeyye Erdoğan Mı Var," *Oda tv*, May 12, 2015, https://odatv4.com/o-vakfin-arkasinda-sumeyye-erdogan-mi-var-1205151200.html.

5 Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, ''Troll Özel Sayısı," *Millet Dergisi*, June 6, 2020, https://milletdergisi.chp.org.tr/Detay.aspx?id=2031.

Commissioned to familiarize the Turkic iconography to the public according to Erdoğan's political agenda, the seal of Kai Tribe represents two arrows and a bow. It also resembles the Latin letters IYI which gathered massive hype from the fans of Neo-Ottomania. Flags, t-shirts, stickers, weapons, armor, and other sorts of merchandise were produced in massive numbers until another nationalist contender saw the opportunity to seize the power of this image. The İYİ Party (which translates as the Good Party in Turkish) strategically took control of the Kai sign and its legacy., This resulted in Erdoğan shifting his plans to instead encourage the image to fail. Since the foundation of the İYİ party, the image is rarely seen on television.

Erdoğan's speeches also play a key role in propaganda efforts, and the narrative is constructed through visualization of metaphors and replication of others' thoughts. These consist of assemblages of quotations from historical figures or the Quran, serving as a validation of his intentions, and fortifying his patriotic and conservative image at the same time. In fact, a poem resulted in Erdoğan's unjust imprisonment in the 1990s because it was interpreted as a call for jihad. Featuring visualization of symbols through the means of language, the lines that got him prosecuted translate as:

'Minarets are our bayonets, domes are our helmets

Mosques are our barracks, believers are soldiers'[6]

After getting out of prison, Erdoğan's cultivation of a so-called 'hero's journey' narrative began. Competing with Kemal Atatürk's haunting presence, he seeks to transcend mortality like the founding president of the country. Aiming to build his image as a standalone political symbol, Erdoğan's appearance is carefully designed from tip to toe to become viralized. For instance, one can detect Erdoğan supporters from the patterns on their suits. Erdoğan favors prestogal suits in dark blue, based on a superstition that this lucky suit makes him win elections.[7] He has only once changed his style on an Election Day, and this deviation coincided with his defeat. Thus, variations of this checkered outfit became popularized. From cabinet members to regular citizens, his fans and dependents put on the prestogal suit to express loyalty. Erdoğan's image appears in the most unexpected places—even while in traffic. His signature and portrait are amongst the most popular bumper stickers, alongside Atatürk's. The idea to produce merchandise as a political means of expression might belong to Atatürk fans in the first place, but Erdoğan fans have certainly brought it to a new level with unexpected items such as bed sheets. The appropriation is not limited to the content but also the form: similarities between the hand signatures of Tayyip Erdoğan and painter Abidin Dino indicate this.

6 'Eşref Ziya, "Asker Duası (Minareler Süngü Kubbeler Miğfer) (English translation)," Submitted by Artukî, July 25, 2019. https://lyricstranslate.com/en/asker-duası-minareler-süngü-kubbeler-miğfer-soldiers-pray.html.

7 "'Erdoğan 'Makes his Own Fashion,' Turkey's Semi-Official Agency Says," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 12, 2015, https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-makes-his-own-fashion-turkeys-semi-official-agency-says-76826.

Another case that exemplifies Erdoğan's fabricated image is his presidential campaign's graphic identity. Borrowed from Barack Obama's, it could be argued that it goes slightly beyond the blurred line of fair use. The internet quickly reacted to taunt Erdoğan with doctored images that feature his photo in a similar style as that which Shepherd Fairey designed for Obama's campaign. Instead of captioning the image with a positive word such as hope, it was titled 'HOPP', which in Turkish is a word used to threaten somebody. Another trick played to ridicule Erdoğan was through manipulating his logo to look as if it was inspired by the alcoholic beverage brand Malibu.

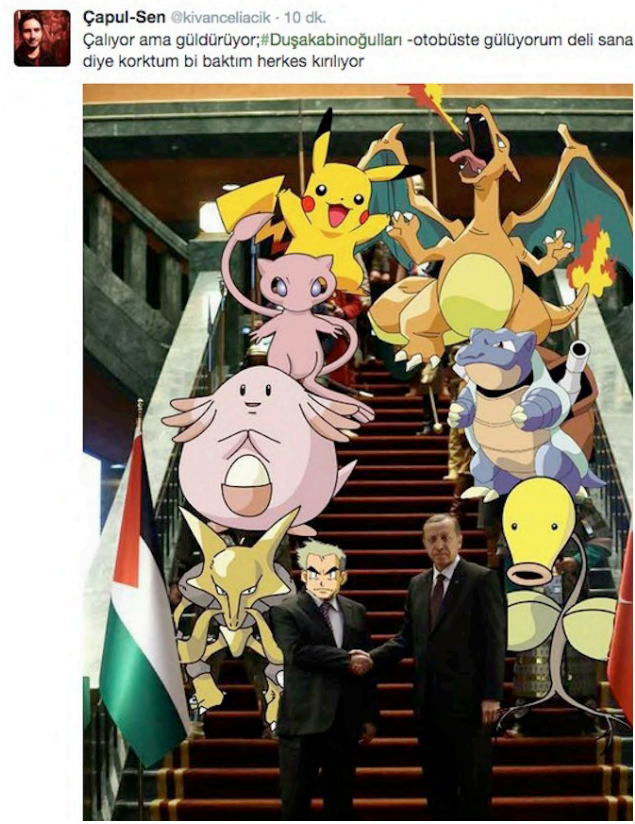

Fig. 3: Guarded by Pokémon, Erdoğan shakes hands with Professor Oak in Aksaray. Author unknown. Posted on Twitter under the username: Çapul-Şen @kivanceliacik Date: 12.01.2015 Image available at: https://www.diken.com.tr/erdoganin-askerleri-caps-oldu-yagdi-game-thronestan-age-empiresa-sey-var/.

Erdoğan puts himself in front of the public as if he embodies an archetype: the new sultan. As part of his advocacy to preserve Turkic heritage and traditions, Erdoğan endorses the color turquoise as the official state color. As a result, there has been a nationwide graphic

makeover, extending even to changing the colors of taxis from yellow to turquoise, as was introduced in Istanbul.[8] Retouches include the uniform colors of the police forces guarding the parliament as well as the carpets within the halls.[9] These are instrumentalized signals, designed to insinuate definitive changes in the establishment. Erdoğan disapproves of the developments that went into effect during the modernization process of the country. He seeks to underline the end of that era by unofficially naming his establishment as 'the new Turkey', which he links to the genealogy of the former sixteen Turkic states. To emphasize this connection, a ceremony was orchestrated by the presidential guard regiment for the occasion of President Mahmud Abbas' diplomatic visit—which coincidentally resembled a scene from Star Wars referred to as 'the emperor arrives'. This is the moment in which Sith Lord Darth Sidious arrives at the Death Star surrounded by his royal guards: similarly, Erdoğan descends from the principal stairs of his palace to receive his guest surrounded by guardsmen in warrior costumes.[10]

Because it fell short of the production standards of a space opera, this villainesque appearance had not gone the way it was expected. Apart from the overall poor quality of the costumes and props, one of the soldiers looked more like they were wearing a bathrobe rather than armor. As images from the ceremony appeared on the media, this design failure attracted immediate attention from witty users of the internet. The former dean of the Pamukkale University, Prof. Hasan Herken was the first to tweet about ''the bathrobe incident''. Numerous satirical Turkic state names relating to the fictive reign of the bathrobes were coined in the comments section of his tweet. As this joke became viral, the image of Erdoğan descending from stairs became an internet meme template.[11] These images feature Erdogan alongside various superhero characters such as Spider-Man, various Pokémon, Batman, Spider-Man, etc. After this, Prof. Herken had to immediately resign from his position. According to his statement, this decision was made to not cause any harm to the institution.[12]

Superheroes and villains usually have weaknesses following the archetype of the Achilles heel. Just like how motherly love counters Voldemort, Superman is weak to kryptonite, Green Lantern to the color yellow, Wonder Woman to her own magic lasso, and Sauron to the one ring, Erdoğan is vulnerable to humor and prone to resentment out of his bloated pride. Time

8 "İşte İstanbul'un Yeni Taksileri! Turkuaz, Siyah…," *Hürriyet*, July 19, 2018, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/iste-istanbulun-yeni-taksileri-turkuaz-siyah-40902239.

9 "Devletin Yeni Rengi: Turkuaz," *140Journos*, January 20, 2017, https://140journos.com/devletin-yeni-rengi-turkuaz-18d377f88407.

10 Stuart Williams, "Dress-up Warriors no Joke for Erdogan," *Times of Israel*, January 22, 2015. https://www.timesofisrael.com/dress-up-warriors-no-joke-for-erdogan/.

11 "Erdoğan'ın Askerleri 'Infial Yarattı'; ve o 'Resmin Orijinali' de Bulundu," *Diken*, January 12, 2015, http://www.diken.com.tr/erdoganin-askerleri-caps-oldu-yagdi-game-thronestan-age-empiresa-sey-var/?fbclid=IwAR1ipLvL4rXZbwCDCjOB49QpGbzZR4cdUQ4DYFx_jYHZceuTS7MDese3rTI.

12 "Turkish Professor Resigns Over Joke About Erdoğan's 16 Warriors," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 20, 2015, https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-professor-resigns-over-joke-about-erdogans-16-warriors-77166.

after time such incidents inspire humor: the Gezi Park Protests (2013), the leaking of corruption audiotapes (2014), the failed coup attempt (2016), and various other arbitrary government decisions such as the appointment of Erdoğan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak to various ministries. Finally, Albayrak (also known as 'the groom' in the Turkish context) memes circulating over the internet portraying him as an incompetent dummy minister or a nitwit caused so much humiliation that it resulted in his resignation. Under heavy fire, Erdoğan could not insist on keeping the weakest link in his position anymore.[13]

Fig. 4: Meme showing Minister Berat Albayrak smiling by the tombstone of the Turkish economy. Author unknown. Posted on Twitter by the username: Dünyalı @obirdunyali Date: 17.08.2020 Image available at: https://twitter.com/obirdunyali/status/1295298492555042816?s=20.

To keep this fragile political image intact, the primary strategy in effect is to dominate the traditional channels and moderate social media to maintain consistency between propaganda narratives. A significant number of TV channels and newspapers changed owners over the last twenty years, thus becoming astroturf organizations. It is a common sight to see newspapers that feature the exact same headline on the same day, as if they were able to 'physically retweet' each other. This of course suggests that these might be run from the same editorial office. The current reality in the country is a post-internet version of 'the boy

13 Carlotta Gall, "Turkey's Finance Minister Resigns Amid Pressures of Sliding Economy," *New York Times*, November 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/08/business/turkey-finance-minister-resigns.html.

who cried wolf'. One cannot take the truthfulness of any news for granted, even from trusted sources. This environment of uncertainty creates conditions that are ripe for the trolls to thrive.

But what could be an effective inoculation to enhance our collective immune system, such that we might retain the coherence between our realities? The solution may lie in establishing a culture based on the commons, making use of means that are low cost, accessible, and as easy as hand gestures to execute. As a mural seen in Jean Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* suggests, one must confront vague ideas with clear images.[14] Perhaps the potential political usage of internet memes was foreseen half a century ago by this quote. Especially when imbued with the power of humor, these images are so relatable that they could potentially break the echo chambers and instigate the creolization of world views to facilitate communication in a polarized society. If jokes could take down ministers, could internet memes serve as silver bullets, garlic, or a wooden cross to counter the likes of the Ak trolls, and even to win the final boss battle?

There is no cookie-cutter solution crude as a recipe to follow. Learning from the adversary and constantly devising new methods is critical to counter the forces that are dominating the political conversation. A proven counter-tactic is to follow common sense and not feed trolls by engaging with them. Mansur Yavaş, the mayor of Ankara deliberately avoids being too present on social media and even prefers not to be photographed: a sharp contrast to AKP's promotional campaigns which are famous for holding multiple opening ceremonies for already functioning facilities.

The reason for Yavaş's success is that he understands the battlefield. He acknowledges that he does not have the media firepower to match his rival, and thus avoids polemics at all costs. Against a rival who is ever-present, always visible and has the loudest voice in the country, peacefulness and invisibility work as tactics. In an instructive example of this, Erdoğan's last personal victory was against Muharrem İnce, a pompous and loudmouth politician in the presidential elections. Oblivious to the fact that every polemic provides more ammunition to the media arsenal under Erdoğan's disposal, İnce adopted an aggressive attitude, attempting to overcome Erdoğan by acting like him. But is it possible to defeat a troll at its own game? Erdoğan unapologetically makes use of offensive themes under any condition, which no opposing politician can dare. Could one even defend oneself, let alone attack back, under such circumstances without risking one's politically correct position?

As the case would be in a physical war, one cannot afford to focus solely on either offense or defense. Defensive measures such as verification of news, forensic data science, and efforts towards making basic knowledge of how to survive online more accessible are commendable efforts but do not suffice. As common sense suggests, the best defense is a good offense on the battleground of the internet, where not only ideologies but also alternative realities, true and false, authentic and fake, clash. Public shaming, defamation, and discrimination help oppres-

14 Original quote in French: "Il faut confronter les idées vagues avec des images claires."

sive forces to change the conversation topic. But these can never dispel the emancipatory effect of a good joke, slogan, or a clever hashtag which could be considered as 'operational coordinates of memetic warfare.'[15] While public statements put the public to sleep as they demand too much attention and time, memes wake people up. They are fun, understandable but most importantly relatable. What more could a political party possibly ask for?

To win this war in the long run, there is no weapon other than building a counter-narrative imbued with the power of humor. Mockery and humiliation disrupt both amateur and professional trolling efforts. Too proud to laugh at a good joke along with the crowd, amateurs are easy targets as taunting them often suffices to cause them to self-destruct in a resentful tantrum. On the other hand, professional trolls are more difficult to deal with. They cannot be given a taste of their poison. Unlike amateurs, they lack emotional surges, ethical concerns, and attributes that make individuals authentic, vulnerable, and conscious of the consequences of their actions online. They are never one but many hiding in plain sight. Even if you spot them, fighting with them online is akin to engaging in melee combat against zombie armies. You can ban them *en masse*, but they will return regardless as long as they have internet access, and with more ammunition in the form of hashtags or memes to unload.

However, the main actors of these battles are not troll armies, states, or political parties. Civilians are just as effective in digital wars that fall into the category of fourth-generation warfare. In such circumstances, war and politics as well as civilian and combatant identities are intertwined and cannot be separated from one another. Memetic warfare is no different than how Carl Von Clausewitz saw the conventional war: the continuation of politics by other means'. These include unconventional methods that require no institutional protocols, bureaucracy, or formalities whatsoever. No recruitments need to be made as the adhocratic nature of this war enables social media users to act as casual warriors. Consumer electronics, internet connection, and basic image editing software suffice to participate in politics as subjects or combatants with the potential to turn the tide of war. These digital affordances might serve as weapons, but they are merely props that do not fire without ammunition: a common sense of humor.

Following Clausewitz's thought, Metahaven describes jokes as 'a continuation of politics by other memes.'[16] for a reason. As memes have ambiguous ontological natures, there are various unpredictable factors relating to critical potency, timeliness, and aesthetics, alongside others, which makes a meme an actual meme; of these, satire might be the most definitive. Even good jokes do not guarantee political impact alone, as honorable public service does not guarantee the winning of elections. As anonymously asserted by the internet, a meme is not a meme until it is fully absorbed by its public. However, in war the situation is somewhat different. Spending hours to develop good jokes or humorous political memes to address people who already agree

15 Jeff Giesea, "It's Time to Embrace the Memetic Warfare," Open Publications 5 (Spring, 2017): 9, https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/media/doclibrary/open201705-memetic1.pdf.

16 Metahaven, *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics.* Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013.

with us is self-propaganda at its best. But in war, a meme only becomes a meme when it hits the mind of people that disagree.

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IT LURKS IN THE DEEP: MEMETIC TERROR AND THE BLUE WHALE CHALLENGE IN INDIA

ANIRBAN K. BAISHYA

The Networked Uncanny

In September 2017 a 30-year-old Indian man, Ashok Maluna, jumped into a river, killing himself. Prior to his suicide, Maluna had uploaded a video on Facebook, declaring that he was a victim of the Blue Whale Challenge (BWC). While certainly not the only death reported surrounding the BWC, Maluna's instance was unique because of the use of a confessional video on Facebook.[1] The BWC is believed to have originated in Russia in 2016, consisting of a series of tasks culminating in suicide; but the exact nature (and indeed, the veracity) of the game remain shrouded in mystery despite reports of arrests of suspected administrators.[2] Given this sub-public, almost urban legend status, Maluna's video is a crystallized media object in which the traces of the BWC can be detected. But the video also raises a number of questions about the nature of public speculation around the BWC. For instance, Maluna states in his video that he had 'downloaded' the Blue Whale game on his phone—something that is impossible since the BWC is not a downloadable app. There is no way of ascertaining whether Maluna had misrepresented (accidentally or deliberately) his experience of the game, or even if the BWC was a proxy for other issues plaguing him. What matters however, is the mere mention of the BWC in the video. This invocation of the BWC is indicative of a media ecology in which phenomena manifest themselves as real through circulation. A close analogy is the idea of 'fake news,' whose truth value is questionable, but whose status as a circulating media artifact is very real. In this networked ecology the process of transmission and imitation lying at the very heart of the concept of the meme assumes a central role. Crucially, the BWC is not intended to be a meme. In contrast to satirical political memes, or humorous cat memes, which have definite objects and audiences, the BWC becomes memetic in the process of its spread.

In our current digital environment, memes are most commonly associated with their visual and textual manifestations—image macros and rage-face templates for example. In these cases, repetition and imitation can be seen on the visual surface itself. But is the visual the only level at which memes and memetic activity can be understood? What about feeling,

1 "Man Jumps in River, Blames Blue Whale Game in Final Video Post on Facebook," *Outlook*, September 3, 2017, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/man-jumps-in-river-blames-blue-whale-game-in-final-video-post-on-facebook/301155.

2 Dan Evon, "Is the 'Blue Whale' Game Responsible for Dozens of Suicides in Russia?," *Snopes*, February 27, 2017, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/blue-whale-game-suicides-russia/.

affect and other nonvisual aspects of the human sensorium? Perhaps we should approach the meme as more than just a visual and textual form. What allowed the BWC—something that lies at the intersections of conspiracy theory, hoax and pure fear—to spread itself through networked audiences was not simply text and image, but memetic terror. Memetic terror is the necropolitical surplus of networked life. It is a feeling of threat that manifests itself through the affordances that make networked life possible, but it is not a breakdown of the network. Rather, it constitutes a surplus precisely because while it operates through the same infrastructures that make networked life possible, it is in excess of both individual and institutional control. We cannot always regulate who or what we are connected to—Wendy Chun describes this as the 'anxiety over the jacked-in computer's breaching of the home.'[3] Memetic terror is an affective, networked fear of such 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.

The BWC is not the only site in which we can locate this kind of memetic terror; consider internet panics like the Momo Challenge and the cyb-urban legend of the Slenderman. Both of these examples are now known to be either hoaxes or works of fiction, yet they felt real at an affective level during the peak of their circulation. Part internet folklore, part rumor and part internet prank, such instances suggest that networked media link bodies and devices together in an affective machine. Perhaps it would be worth it, then, to ask what it was that Ashok Maluna felt as he spoke about the BWC in his final video message, and what resonated with him as he interfaced with the network? While we cannot conclusively answer this at the level of the individual, we can begin to map what had spread through the digital ecology leading up to this situation. Such mapping and analysis of the impact of the BWC in India's digital ecology requires us to attend to the infrastructural—i.e., that which lies between the social and the network. Thus, while the BWC may not have originated in India, it becomes a part of India's evolving internet-vernaculars and is coextensive with its cultures of WhatsApp forwards, misinformation and of course, memes.

Networked infrastructures are key to this arrangement as they enable the transmission of affect through text, image and hypertext. I take seriously Parks and Starosielki's assertion that while media infrastructures may be owned by states and corporations, 'at their edges they are imagined, arranged, and adopted in different ways by people or "end-users".'[4] As they remind us, our encounters with infrastructures 'can elicit different dispositions, rhythms, structures of feeling, moods, and sensations.'[5] We can, then, conceive of not just infrastructural effects, but also infrastructural *affects* that are in excess of what an end user can control. Things like the BWC emerge at the edges of internet infrastructures—

3 Wendy Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2006), 28.

4 Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, ed. *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015) 11.

5 Parks and Starosielski, *Signal Traffic,* 15.

from the friction between vernacular internet practice and the unknowable expanse of the network. The memetic, in the case of the BWC then, can be said to be the region of the infrastructural irrational. If device interfaces and screens are the façade of the digital home, then memetic terror is that which crawls in the shadow cast by its woodwork and piping. Always in excess of what is intended of the infrastructure, and graspable only as shadow, memetic terror is more than just the visual and textual representation of what it spreads. Thus, while there may be visual manifestations of the BWC (Maluna's video is an example), the ripple-effect of the BWC emerges out of the affective power of the network itself.

Of Monkeys and Whales: Infrastructures of Feeling

It is true, the BWC does not originate in the specific cultural milieu of India. Yet something about it resonated with the Indian imaginary. Echoing Charles Taylor's conceptualization, I postulate that memetic terror is in fact, an imaginary—something 'carried in images, stories and legends' through repetition and replication.[6] Understanding why something not inherently Indian resonates with India's internet users requires some reflection on the specific forms of its networked modernity. Writing about postcolonial India's urban spaces, Ravi Sundaram asserts that 'media experiences increasingly expose and generate new sites of fear.'[7] According to him, such fear is made possible by technologies of relay, both digital and non-digital—text messages, mobile phone photos, media headlines and good old rumor.[8] Focusing on such practices, Sundaram demonstrates how, in the city of Delhi in 2001, rumors of 'the monkeyman'—a monster that allegedly mauled people in their sleep—not only spread widely, but also presented a paradox in which the phenomenon was seen as 'part mass hysteria' and partly a 'verifiable source of fear.'[9] Sundaram's analysis turns our attention to the changing dynamics of India's urban spaces that began to inhabit the 'time of the global' through media urbanism in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[10]

While the case of the monkeyman is not memetic in the same way as the BWC, it does help us understand how new media technologies, while couched in the language of rationality, can still generate spaces that are unknowable and uncountable. In some ways, the internet is an extension of such an uncanny despite the façade of algorithmic objectivity. As Wendy Chun and Sara Friedland assert, our dependence on networked devices constantly tethers us to 'infrastructures of tracing and remembering [. . .] Even when our machines are not networked, they leak.'[11] While such networked media enable connection to others, by and large we never know what we are interacting with beyond the interface

6 Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002):106.
7 Ravi Sundaram, "The Visceral City and the Theatre of Fear," *Architectural Design* 77, no. 6 (November/December 2007): 31.
8 Sundaram, "The Visceral City," 31.
9 Sundaram, "The Visceral City," 33.
10 Sundaram, "The Visceral City," 31.
11 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Sarah Friedland, "Habits of Leaking: Of Sluts and Network Cards," *differences* 26, no. 2 (2015): 5.

of our devices. The digital uncanny envisages a space in which 'new mobile populations, new networks, new previously unimagined terrors'[12] threaten the positivist veneer of the always predictable, seamlessly managed and frictionless network. The very thing that connects us also terrorizes us. Memetic terror, as in case of the BWC, is an expression of this dissonant digital habitat.

In the context of India's internet infrastructure, this has clear implications. According to the IAMAI *Digital in India* report of 2019, India has 504 million active Internet users 'who are 5 years & above [. . .] 433 Mn are 12+ years old & 71 Mn are 5-11 years old.'[13] The report further states that the mobile phone 'remains the device of choice for accessing internet in both urban and rural [sic].'[14] The prominence of the mobile phone in such statistical figures is significant as it means that a majority of Indian internet users access the network through mobile, locative devices that are always connected. While the report is quick to declare that the digital divide in India (between rural and urban) no longer exists, such statements do not give us a sense of how users interact with their devices and with what level of understanding of network processes. As India's culture of WhatsApp forwards and misinformation demonstrates, the numerical magnitude of what is now being called 'digital India' does not necessarily preclude the possibility of the infrastructural uncanny. The spread of the BWC in India must be read in this infrastructural context. To the planned city: a monkeyman; to the algorithmic network: a whale.

When a Meme Becomes Real

As the BWC panic began to spread in India, institutional responses to the crisis also emerged. As mentioned earlier, the BWC was not made to be a meme—not in the same way as image-based memes (like cat memes) at least. Yet, there has been a flurry of media activity around the BWC in India which lends to its memetic propagation. In this media ecology, news and media reports, as well as user generated content become memetic carriers. For instance, at the peak of the panic, *The Times of India* produced a web video titled 'What is the Blue Whale Challenge?' Aided by motion graphics, and occasionally overlaid with melodious music, a reassuring female voiceover explains that the BWC is 'shared among secret groups or a link on social media'[15] and provides other details about the kinds of alleged tasks that lead up to the final suicide. In some ways, the video is intended as a public service announcement, albeit one that is to be viewed and shared on the internet.

12 Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Jeebesh Bagchi, "Preface," in*SARAI Reader 08: Fear*, ed. Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Jeebesh Bagchi (Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2010),v-vi.

13 "Digital in India 2019-Round 2 Report," Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), 2019, https://cms.iamai.in/Content/ResearchPapers/2286f4d7-424f-4bde-be88-6415fe5021d5.pdf, p. 3

14 "Digital in India," 10.

15 "What is the Blue Whale Challenge?," *The Times of India*, September 11, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/motion-graphics/what-is-the-blue-whale-challenge/videoshow/60461098.cms.

Strikingly, there is no rumination about the veracity of the BWC; its existence and the nature of operation is presumed to be factual, although what we encounter in the video is not much different from internet rumors about the BWC. Videos and headlines like these abound, so this one is not unique by any stretch. But it is worth noting that in replicating the rumor-like details about the BWC, even a news video like this one becomes an unintentional memetic by-product that lends itself to the affective charge of the BWC. While this does not constitute misinformation in the same way that fake news does, it demonstrates how the circulation of traditional media such as news can also become memetic in the digital ecology. To put it another way, (fake) news is not always memetic, but may be impacted by memetic circulation. A video like this may not mean much individually, but taken as part of a larger set of media objects, they become memetic in that they 'pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon.'[16] Following Shifman's postulation of the meme as a 'shared social phenomenon,' we might then ask, how was the BWC shared in the context of India?

In August 2017, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed in the Delhi High Court with the explicit purpose of asking platforms such as Google, Facebook and Yahoo to remove links to the BWC.[17] The petition stated that 'there is a game / challenge namely "blue whale" Game / Challenge through GOOGLE, FACEBOOK and YAHOO.'[18] A similar petition was also filed in the Bombay High Court (Mumbai) by an NGO named Citizen Circle for Social Welfare and Education. The PIL stated that the online availability of the game should be blocked in the interest of the welfare of children who have easy access to mobile handsets and application downloads. A third petition filed at the Supreme Court sought more concrete, infrastructural measures, asking the Court to direct the Indian government to:

> improve the filtering services at Indian Shores like having firewalls in each Cable landing Station (CLS) or having DNS Blocking wall with brain scanner (at underground submarine optical fibre cable connecting the operators abroad) to be installed at Indian Shores to prevent and filtering the virtual online games which are harmful and life threatening and morally degraded.[19]

Several such petitions exist, and as one study notes, this may well have been the 'first time in Indian legal history that five High Courts of India [...] were approached simultaneously

16 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2014), 18.

17 "Blue Whale Challenge: PIL in Delhi High Court to Remove Online Links of the Game," *The Economic Times*, August 16, 2017, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/blue-whale-challenge-pil-in-delhi-high-court-to-remove-online-links-of-thegame/articleshow/60086351.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

18 "PIL Filed In Delhi HC Against 'Blue Whale Challenge' [Read Petition]," *Live Law*, August 16, 2017, https://www.livelaw.in/pil-filed-delhi-hc-blue-whale-challenge-read-petition/.

19 Prabhati Nayak Mishra, "Blue Whale: SC Tells Centre To Form Expert Panel [Read Petition]," *Live Law*, October 13, 2017, https://www.livelaw.in/blue-whale-sc-tells-centre-form-expert-panel/.

for regulating the internet.'[20] Most, if not all of these petitions frame the BWC within: (a) the language of child welfare and safety in a networked environment; and (b) an imagined media ecology that encompasses internet applications, the dark web and even popular culture. For instance, the Delhi petition makes a reference to the suicide-themed television show *13 Reasons Why*, while the PIL in Mumbai compared the BWC to *Pokémon Go*. Further, all three petitions also refer to news reports of suspected deaths, as well as internet rumors about the structure of the BWC. At one level, such petitions respond to media reports and rumors rather than a tangible, verifiable phenomenon. News reports and public litigations thus replicate the idea of the BWC in a memetic chain.

The ripple effects of this chain can be felt in not just PILs such as these, but also gestures towards concrete action. For instance, in the city of Chennai, the police department issued an advisory to parents of teenagers.[21] At the legal level, the Supreme Court sought the Indian government's response to pleas for banning the game.[22] The government responded, saying that it was impossible to do so, since the BWC is not a downloadable game.[23] Nevertheless, in December 2017, the Indian Ministry of Information filed an advisory on its website with guidelines for monitoring child mental health, safe internet practice and so on.[24] An FAQ linked on the website states that it was unclear how platforms such as Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Microsoft would curb access to the BWC, because it is 'not publicly available and freely downloadable. It is a social media phenomenon where conversations about this take place secretively in closed social media groups.'[25] In this exchange, the shadow world of the internet game becomes real as echo. Rumors feed headlines, which in turn feed regulatory efforts. To take a page from Ryan Milner's work, this is literally a 'world made meme' through the 'messy memetic interrelationships' between media, law, regulation and of course, users.[26]

20 Debarati Halder, "The #BlueWhale Challenge to the Indian Judiciary: A Critical Analysis of the Response of the Indian Higher Judiciary to Risky Online Contents with Special Reference to the BlueWhale Suicide Game," in *The Responsive Judge: International Perspectives,* ed. Tania Sourdin and Archie Zariski (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 260.

21 "Police Advisory To Parents On Blue Whale Challenge," *NDTV*, August 29, 2017, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/police-advisory-to-parents-on-blue-whale-challenge-1743188.

22 "Supreme Court Seeks Government's Reply on Plea to Firewall Blue Whale Game," *The Economic Times*, October 13, 2017, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/supreme-court-seeks-governments-reply-on-plea-to-firewall-blue-whale-game/articleshow/61065409.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

23 "'Can't ban app-based games like Blue Whale', Centre tells Supreme Court," *The Times of India*, November 21, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/cant-ban-app-based-games-like-blue-whale-centre-tells-supreme-court/articleshow/61722857.cms.

24 "Advisory on 'Blue Whale Challenge Game'," Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, September 12, 2017, https://www.meity.gov.in/advisory-blue-whale-challenge-game.

25 "FAQs Blue Whale Challenge - What Parents Need to Know," National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, last updated August 25, 2017, https://ncpcr.gov.in/showfile.php?lang=1&level=1&sublinkid=1267&lid=1499

26 Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2016), 3.

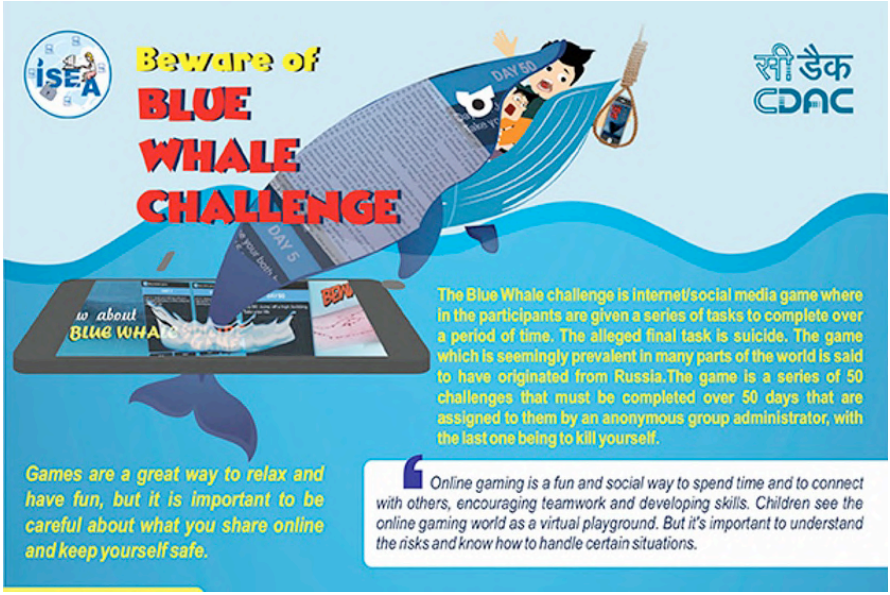

Fig. 1: Excerpt of an information brochure about the BWC hosted on the Information Security Awareness website run by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.[27] (Original Creator: Information Security Awareness, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Govt of India).

End/Users

It might be worth taking a moment to think back to Parks and Starosielki's notion of the 'end user' in relation to the BWC. As opposed to the rational, choice-making agent denoted by the terminology of the end user, the affected public presumed by regulatory efforts such as those mentioned above are largely seen as infantile, irrational and susceptible to (memetic) influence. In that sense, the infrastructural uncanny of the BWC is not unlike those found in the dystopian techno-imaginaries of horror films such as Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), Takashi Miike's *One Missed Call* (2003) and more recently, Leo Gabriadze's 2014 film *Unfriended*. In each case, fear and terror emerge from the uncontrollable underbelly of seemingly rational technologies—the near-obsolete VHS tape in *Ringu*, the emergent culture of the mobile phone in *One Missed Call* and the Skype interface in *Unfriended*. One study also compares the BWC to the cyberpunk body horror of the cult anime classic *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998) in which suicide in the physical world is seen as a gateway to the virtual.[28] Narratively

27 Full brochure available here: https://infosecawareness.in/gallery/brochures/ISEA/BlueWhale.pdf.

28 Irina Volkova, Natalia Rastorgueva, Leila Algavi and Shuana Kadyrova, "From the Silent House meme to the Blue Whale-Game: The Storyworld's Transformation," in *4th International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on Social Sciences and Arts SGEM 2017* 17, Book 1, *2017,*

then, the BWC is part of this broad genre of techno-horror that focuses on not only the intended end users of these technologies, but an uncontrollable technological surplus that literally ends the lives of these users. While such texts are surely fictional, they inform the folklore of internet terrors such as the BWC, the Momo Challenge and Slenderman. The lines between fact and fiction, between verifiable risks and the hoax are blurred in these cases. Albert Benschop's rephrasing of the Thomas Theorem is immensely illustrative here—'If people define networks as real, they are real in their consequences'.[29] Perhaps a slight rephrasing is in order: 'if people define memes as real, they are real in their consequences.' The fact/fiction binary is less important in understanding the nature of the BWC in India than the extremely 'real' consequences of its reverberation.

Approaching the BWC as this kind of a collective hyper/text also allows us to attend to its affective resonances through the network. Accounts that consider such phenomena as folkloric may in fact have some generative insights. In her study of the BWC Elizabeth Tucker reads the phenomenon as a form of hypermodern ostension, a legend enactment that makes extensive use of digital technology.'[30] Tucker reads the BWC as a 'faster-moving version of the kind of imitative behavior' seen in pre-digital social arrangements such as the famed 'Werther Effect,' a spate of suicides that resonated with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in eighteenth century Germany.[31] While the social and cultural contexts are vastly different, the crucial point is imitative behavior—imitation and replication are after all at the core of the memetic. If the transmission of affect is a question of contagion emerging from 'encounters between texts and readers'[32] then the collective hypertext of the networked folkloric resides at the level of infrastructure as a dynamic and resonant space.

If legal and regulatory efforts are at one end of the memetic spectrum of the BWC, the other is the level of the textual. As Tucker demonstrates, this kind of folkloric ostension manifests itself in user generated videos, online conversation and commentary, pranks and so on. Interestingly, a major focus of Tucker's analysis is on Indian internet users, especially in the case of prank videos for which, as she notes, India is the leading place of origin.[33] Following this, it might be generative to turn to some concrete objects that demonstrate the BWC's more vernacular, 'folkloric' memetic ripples. A quick YouTube search for 'Blue Whale Challenge

253-260.

29 Albert Benschop, "Virtual Communities: Networks of the Future," trans. Connie Menting, *Sociocite.org*, Internet Archive Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20190312031446 / http://www.sociosite.org/network.php#SECONDHAND.

30 Elizabeth Tucker, "The Blue Whale Suicide Challenge: Hypermodern Ostension on a Global Scale" in *Folklore and Social Media,* ed. Andrew Peck and Trevor Blank (Utah State University Press, 2020), 211.

31 Tucker, "The Blue Whale Suicide Challenge."

32 Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, "Introduction: Feeling Differences–Affect and Feminist Reading," in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences,* ed. Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen (London: Routledge, 2010), 2.

33 Tucker, "The Blue Whale Suicide Challenge," 211.

India' leads us to a mix of news videos as well as user generated content. Considering such user generated content allows us to observe some repetitive similarities.

One category of content includes advisory videos that again, using the same set of internet rumors, alerts viewers about the dangers of the BWC. The other category includes amateur short films that use the narrative format to the same effect. What is interesting is the way the BWC manifests itself in the visual coding of these films. For instance, in one video uploaded by user Mohak Meet,[34] we see a teenager 'download' the Blue Whale game from the Android Appstore. Soon after we also see shots of the WhatsApp interface as the teenager interacts with the 'admin.' The WhatsApp interface surfaces in another similar narrative video uploaded by user onionNgarlic.[35] The premise again, is same—a school-child with a cellphone stumbling upon the BWC, 'downloading' it and then being sucked into the vortex of the game. Strikingly, in this latter video, one of the tasks assigned to the protagonist is to watch the horror film *The Ring* almost in an intertextual metanarrative about digital contagion. Mobile communication platforms such as WhatsApp become central to such articulations of unregulatable encounters on the network, and of the fear and anxiety arising out of such encounters. As Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat point out, WhatsApp use in India has an intimate connection to death in the context of vigilante violence.[36]On the one hand, while WhatsApp becomes a key agent in everyday practices of connectedness, it also overlaps with misinformation, rumor mongering and the fear of sudden, erupting violence.

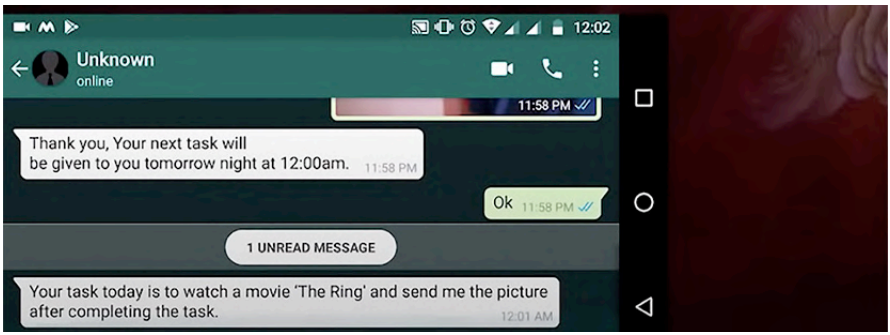

Fig. 2: The WhatsApp interface and The Ring featured in an amateur short film on the BWC on YouTube. (Creator: onionNgarlic, YouTube).[37]

34 Mohak Meet, "BLUE WHALE CHALLENGE SHORT FILM DOCUMENTARY WITH A MESSAGE (ENGLISH SUBTITLES) || Mohak Meet," YouTube video, September 14 2017, https://youtu.be/yURoT2bBfWQ.

35 onionNgarlic, "A Short Film Blue Whale || onionNgarlic || oNg || Death Game," YouTube video, Aug 15, 2017, https://youtu.be/Yjk1FnM9Aek.

36 Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat, "WhatsApp Vigilantes: An Exploration of Citizen Reception and Circulation of WhatsApp Misinformation Linked to Mob Violence in India," *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2019, https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/projects/WhatsApp-Misinformation-Report.pdf.

37 onionNgarlic, "A Short Film Blue Whale || onionNgarlic || oNg || Death Game," YouTube, Aug 15,

Let's also not forget how the cellphone and such mobile communication platforms inform the petitions and regulatory efforts mentioned earlier, especially in the context of children and the internet. Further, in all of these—advisory videos, short films, news reports, petitions— the figure of the vulnerable child and the idea of a nefarious shadow network are a common refrain. In the absence of a concrete referent, the family and the child become signs on which the fear of the unregulatable network is fixed. Again, think back to the language of petitions and advisories, the melodrama of the short films on YouTube, or commentary and chatter on sites like YouTube and Twitter. While law and regulation scramble to catch up to the viral speed of the network, the collision between bodies, devices and practices remains largely unmanageable. And as Bauman reminds us, 'we fear what we can't manage.'[38]

Fig. 3: YouTube screengrabs of an NDTV news program about the BWC. The image on the right shows public demonstrations against the BWC (NDTV, YouTube).[39]

The Fearsome Meme

That the networked uncanny manifests itself in text and images circulating and reverberating with users/audiences is not surprising in itself. After all, in the study of film, such semantic and syntactic turns are the very basis of the notion of genre.[40] In that sense, the BWC may very well be taxonomically placed within the internet folklore genre of techno-horror. Yet there is something about the memetic reverberation of the BWC that extends beyond the imitation and replication of genre codes. This is seen in the visual and textual traces that reappear with remarkable consistency at different levels of responses to the BWC. The legalese of petitions and regulations, the language of advisories, the melodrama

2017, https://youtu.be/Yjk1FnM9Aek.

38 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity, 2006), 94.

39 NDTV, "Blue Whale Challenge: Game Of Death?," YouTube video, Aug 17, 2017, https://youtu.be/AHnzwnp83Gc.

40 Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring, 1984): 6-18.

of news and user generated content, all echo with similar visual and textual codes. For instance, many user generated advisory videos on YouTube detail the alleged fifty stages of the BWC with their attendant tasks in voiceover and text—as for instance asking the user to carve 'f57' on their arm or watching horror films at 4:20 am. The same coding is also visible in the short film variants, albeit in narrative form, and such details also inform the PILs discussed earlier.

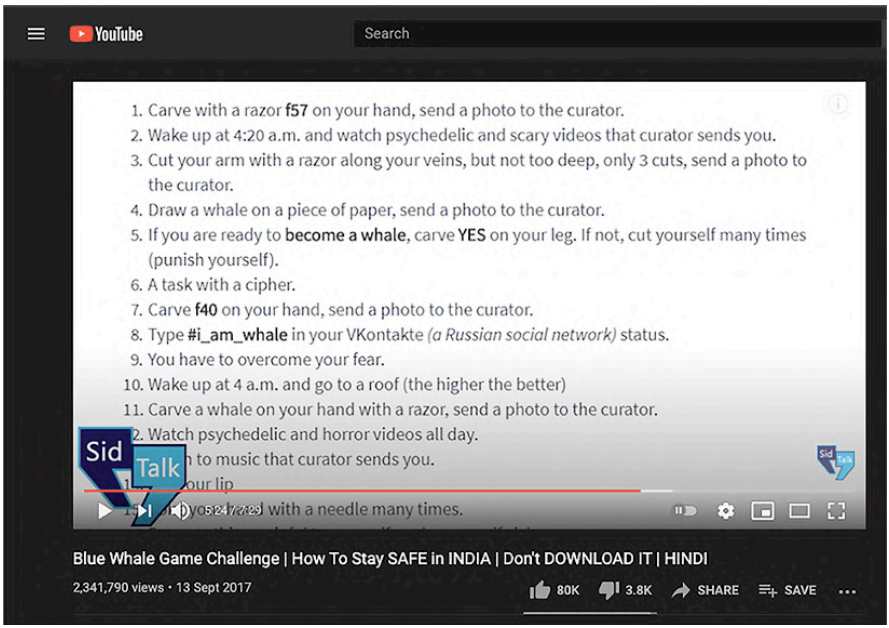

Fig. 4: The BWC 'tasks' listed in an advisory video on YouTube. (Creator: SidTalk, YouTube).[41]

While such details remain largely unverifiable or dubious, they become 'real' through repeated circulation. Details about the BWC take on the structure of rumor, which Veena Das describes as being marked by a 'lack of signature, the impossibility of its being tethered to an individual agent.'[42] The dystopian and sinister imaginary of the BWC circulates with terrifying affective force through the interconnected ecologies of the news, participatory internet culture and the law, but the 'images, stories and legends'[43] that make this possible yield to no one referent. For sure, user generated content, news headlines and legal documents are not memes in and of themselves. But the murmur of these objects transmits the terror of the digital unknown from device to device and body to body in a

41 SidTalk, "Blue Whale Game Challenge | How To Stay SAFE in INDIA | Don't DOWNLOAD IT | HINDI," YouTube video, Sept 13, 2017, https://youtu.be/6cwiBEbDf-0.

42 Veena Das, *Life and Worlds: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007) 132.

43 Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," 106.

memetic loop. If the map precedes the territory,[44] the meme now shadows the network. This is the work of the meme as a mode ('the memetic') rather than an object ('this' meme). So, what after all, did Ashok Maluna feel as he blamed the BWC for his death in his pre-suicide video? Perhaps the whisper of the network.

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44 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

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SILICODEFORESTATION

STEPHANIE BOULDING

I. Statement of Intent

Cowboys are dead and so is the Wild West. The utopian hacker-dream of the Net, of all the world's knowledge at all the (hacker) world's fingertips, is increasingly a historical fantasy. The World Wide Web has splintered into disparate regions, no longer willing or able to connect. These fractures are replicated internally and exist as 'soft breaks' between communities on the same regional shard.

This global failure of unity implicates our impending failure to take meaningful action on climate change. The Singularity isn't technological—it's ecological, and that 'climate gun' may have fired by the time you read this. The 'weirdification' of climate has a parallel in the radicalization of reddit and chans. The psychic mycelium of the Web is burning away, both to bit rot and vandalism, in patches not dissimilar to wildfires. These patches create islands *qua* continents.

These new continents have their own diasporic languages, and a fractured memescape emerges from the smoke. Algorithmic evolutionary pressures create regional diversity, as Darwin first observed in the beaks of finches. As new memetic fields spring into being on these new cyber-continents, some memes will 'succeed' at propagation to a new community, possibly being semantically changed as they do. Yet other traditions and formats will remain entirely localized - the shared emoji language of lovers, or regional cultural s(h)ibboleths.

The cowboys dreamed of Cyberspace as a new digital Commons; it seems today to be more like airspace or mineral rights, inherited from regional power projection by the builders and keepers of the Backbone. This new material reality demands a new metaphor.

II. Deforestation

Scott Malcolmson, in his book Splinternet, describes the internet as "cracking apart into discrete groups no longer willing, or able, to connect"[1]. This phenomenon is variously called the splinternet or cyber-balkanization (a term that mistakes the political dynamics of south-eastern Europe as inherent to the region, not aftershocks of colonial rule). I propose a new meme, aligned with the sense of the internet as bound to physical architecture on a warming planet: that of deforestation.

1 Scott Malcolmson, *Splinternet* (OR Books, 2016).

Like deforestation, which emerges from multiple causes (clearcutting for extractive agriculture, logging, and climate-'weirded' forest fires), this cyber-deforestation has numerous origins. Perhaps the greatest, like it was for pre-industrial forests, is simply entropy. "Bit rot" of storage media, lapsing of domain registrations, state censorship, dead links, and the accumulation of spam threaten the connectedness of the World Wide Web. As the Web ages, even its archives fail; without vigilance on the part of the archivist, old growth disappears and is replaced by new.

Initially, though, the Web was meticulously organized. Atomized computers begat clusters, begat networks, begat networks *of* networks. When those early atomized computers were networked together, they created architectures quickly recognizable as like the "Wood Wide Web" described in plant scientist E.I. Newman's 1988 paper, ""Mycorrhizal Links Between Plants[...]".[2] This ancient organic network-of-networks that Newman describes is called the 'mycorrhizal network', and the sheer level of activity it contain dwarfs our prior understanding of all activity of trees and forests. The mycorrhizal network, in brief, connects an estimated 90% of all land plants to each other through invisible hyphae within soil, and allows for the transmission of not only information (say, about a forest fire) but nutrients, chemicals, and other physical goods.

Understanding the vastness of the mycorrhizal network calls for a re-interrogation of how we understand trees, roots, fungi, and soil. There is a way of seeing available here that prompts us to imagine forests as networked organisms, or a network-organism, and each land plant we see as a note in a shimmering chorus. The fantasist China Miéville once called the subterranean world of fungi 'the kingdom of the gray'[3]. If the mycorrhizal network is a kingdom, are land plants its constituents? Its architecture?

As forests burn, the mychorhizzal network melts away in patches. The imposition of humanity on our natural environment means that these patches often describe themselves as analogous to, or areas within, our present national borders. On land, the immense wildfires of the past few years have carved out empty spaces in those mycelial networks. Likewise, dead zones emerge when a nation severs its internal networking from international protocols or services, as Russia experimented with via their 'RUnet' and Iran sought to do with a 'halal internet' that banned western social media apps and filtered out (centrally-designated) haram content. Note, however, that the parallel Chinese internet, which dwarfs the English language internet in size, is a special case which is not comparable to the RUnet or halal internet examples, which create smaller 'walled gardens' within an existing forest.

2 Newman, Edward I., "Mycorrhizal Links Between Plants: Their Functioning and Ecological Significance," *Advances in Ecological Research* 18, no. 1 (1988): 243-270. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0065250408601828.

3 At a conference; apocryphal.

III. Gardens

Different networking protocols lead to diasporic languages, services, and memescapes. The forest meme invites new understandings of these environments as more than simply impoverished by the lack of Facebook or Gmail: these 'walled gardens' are indeed *gardens*.

The Baudrillardian idea of hyperreality pervades the garden, or the public park. A constructed space that embodies a romantic version of nature and which exists for many in cities as their closest access to nature. The obvious fact that public parks were constructed and designed, much as each gardener designs their garden, is irrelevant to all who cherish them. And so the Chinese internet, despite its lack of Google and Facebook, maintains the tools and networking required for the 'psychic mycelium' of the Web. How could it not? Hyphae connect 90% of all land plants. Human beings intuitively seek out community, and find each other regardless of access to one third-party tool or another.

How, then, can we draw a meaningful distinction between deforestation and manicured gardens? A gardener removes weeds and invasive species from her cultivated space, but also constructs and designs that space. Total censorship more closely resembles a wildfire, where individual constituents are permanently cut off from the network, and a new network grows from the ashes. We see examples of this on a crude, macro level with foreign service bans, censorship of 'immoral' posting, and server failure. Sometimes a state will exercise its power to shut down all communication in and out of the country; control over a limited number of Backbone or access points for the entire country is but one tool to control one form of communication.

A more subtle and resilient form of gardening, exercised by more capable states, prunes the thoughts themselves, or the desire to share them, from its participants. Panoptic surveillance creates a self-censorship effect in those surveilled. On the Chinese internet, the lack of a clear boundary on which speech is and is not permitted causes netizens to self-censor even beyond the official line. I note with irony here that my gardening meme converges with that of Mao's during his Hundred Flowers campaign, where the policy to "let a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" invited open criticism of the state, only to lead to the swift persecution of those schools of thought and their participants. An invasive species, or weed, has always been defined by the gardener.

IV. Virality

On land, deforestation is an ecological catastrophe which contains its own aftershock - the pandemic. A forest, once clear-cut, fills with stagnant water, and breeds mosquitoes. The wild species who once lived in that forest are driven closer to human environments. This

linkage is perhaps clearest in the 1998 emergence of Nipah virus in Malaysia.[4] Fruit bats, driven from their Indonesian forests the year prior, spread a new viral disease to pigs, and then to pig farmers.

The COVID-19 pandemic in which I write this may likewise have its origins in zoonotic contact from bats to a second animal to that market in Wuhan. Climate change and deforestation, per a number of researchers publishing together in *Science*, have accelerated the progress of our pandemic reality.[5]

Online, this cyber-deforestation poses psychic first-order, as well as physical second-order hazards. While internet traffic has centralized in the FANGs, psychically-mediated communities have splintered, quickly losing common ground. These communities increasingly see outgroup members as Other. A parallel to pandemic reality can be seen in the development of the ideologically poisoned incel movement, who have been responsible for more death than the Nipah virus ever was.

An understanding of the mycorrhizal network again proves instructive. Memetic transfer of ideas over our psychic substrate parallels memetic transfer of genes by the network. Some of these ideas (incel misogyny, terrorism, suicidal ideation) are particularly capable of viral evolution, leading to pernicious new variants and death in the real world. A particularly chilling meme is that of vehicle-ramming, or 'car' attacks, invented by the alleged Islamic State and based on omnipresent factors of urban life, where a violent person exposed to the meme uses a car or van as a weapon against defenseless civilians.

The low skill and material requirements (a vehicle, the ability to drive) mean that the car attack is an appealing option to 'lone wolf' violent actors who lack access to more lethal tools. The convenience of the method makes it particularly viral across different kinds of actors, who are exposed to the meme and later carry it out in a new circumstance. Car attacks are perhaps most famous today as a tool of incel terrorists, with one of the most prominent cases being the 2018 Toronto van attack, where an incel killed ten people and injured a further sixteen.

The year prior, in America, a fascist used a car attack to murder antifascist protestor Heather Hayer. Vehicle ramming attacks are often less lethal than IEDs and mass shootings, but unlike prior forms of terrorism, they can't reasonably be prevented in advance, reliant as they are on omnipresent factors of urban life. The decision to act on this meme might even appear to be to its actor a spur-of-the-moment decision, as in the case of drivers delayed by pedestrian protestors who choose to assault those protestors. That these events rose

4 Nipah carries a 50-75% fatality rate and inspired 2001 film *Contagion*, which you watched in March of 2020.

5 Andrew P. Dobson et al., "Ecology and Economics for Pandemic Prevention," *Science* 369, no. 6502 (2020): 379–81, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abc3189.

in frequency as a response to the Black Lives Matter rallies in America shows that these 'snap' decisions are motivated by learned hatred and callousness.

In our metaphor, we can think of these negative externalities, the physical second-order effects of both terrorism and suicide, as a particularly infectious root blight. The blight autophages its host and destroys connections all around it. But this metaphor offers a silver lining—a new perspective on deradicalization. Current attempts to 'deprogram' incels, terrorists, and those warped by exposure to the psycelium[6] stress the *prevention of exposure* to these memes at point of contact, or the *concomitant exposure* to 'deradicalizing' and 'disengaging' memes. Perhaps a 'blight-resistant' populace, created by egalitarian education (or authoritarian education), could show antibody resistance to these memes.

V. 大妈

1. *dà mā* (big mama) | Dama, literally means "big mama," referring mainly to married women between the age 40-60. They were pushed to the forefront for the first time in 2013 when thousands of Chinese women began buying record amounts of gold. They were the driving force in the global gold market between April and June, when prices had slumped. As well as making investments, 大妈 also love public square dancing.

2. *dà mā* (Big Mama) | Moderators required on web forums and BBSes based in China. Named in a cognate pun for both definition 1 and Orwell's "Big Brother". While automated surveillance and censorship tools prevent politically sensitive information from being directly stated, 大妈 monitor fora and chatrooms and 'harmonize' offending memetic content, sending the user an email notifying them that their post is now shadowbanned. As well as monitoring internet communities, 大妈 also grow to know and personally apologize to the users they censor.[7]

VI. 陈光诚 / 河蟹农

Consider the case of Chen Guangchen 陈光诚. China's "barefoot lawyer" is a famous self-taught civil rights lawyer and activist, whose nickname hearkens back to the Maoist idea of the 'barefoot doctor'. He's blind, and wears trademark dark glasses (either aviators or a more visually striking pair, which are rectangular and pretty Matrix-y). For one of da Chen's regular lawsuits against a local family-planning clinic enforcing the one child policy, he was

6 For this word, which I use to describe the psychic hyphae humans create through mind-to-mind contact online, I am permanently indebted to the Wachowskis and J Michael Straczynski's <<Sense8>>.

7 Lokman Tsui's MA dissertation discusses da ma moderators at length, and is the source of this anecdote. See: Lokman Tsui, "Internet in China: Big Mama is Watching You - Internet Control and the Chinese Government," MA Diss., University of Leiden, 2001. https://www.lokman.nu/thesis/010717-thesis.pdf.

imprisoned for four years, and later placed under indefinite house arrest. After nineteen months of house arrest, the barefoot lawyer escapes in the middle of the night, in a car chase straight out of Hollywood.

Crazy Crab 疯蟹, then a pseudonymous contributing political cartoonist for the China Daily Times[8], issued a viral challenge: make your avatar a photo of yourself with dark sunglasses or a blindfold on, to show your support for the long-suffering Chen Guangchen. He also draws his comic, in which Red, the protagonist of the Angry Birds series, is trying to break out of the Shawshank Redemption jail cell. In the West, we might think of these sorts of social media avatar memes as a mix of personal expression and political advocacy. But in China, these posts are broadly understood to be political speech - very public political speech, no less.

The 大妈s permit the dark sunglasses posts. But more overt support for the jailbreak itself—illegal, after all—is harmonized. In response to this new pressure on a new meme, the meme evolves, and shifts. Netizens begin to post a photo not of their own face in dark glasses, but of Andy Dufresne, the character from Shawshank Redemption. Andy Dufresne in dark glasses was especially harmonizable. Throughout, the dark glasses profile pictures are permitted; only that political speech which celebrates the impermissible is censored.

The 大妈s acted - continue to act - as one half of an 'organic GAN', the discriminator to netizens' collective *id* as generator. The Chinese state has a longstanding tradition of control over the media, and the psycelium has been just one more network to police. A 'normal', neural GAN exists in a state of balanced competition. But in the Chinese forest, the discriminator is empowered with the agency of the state. The house always wins.

VII. reterritorialization Imbues an Artifact with a New Aura

The stateless Marxist Jewish exile Walter Benjamin invented the idea of the 'aura' to explain what distinguished a mechanical reproduction of an artwork from the original, copied work. He explains the aura of an object as *"its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."* The mechanical reproduction of an artifact does not copy the original aura; Benjamin tells us that the reproduction is hollow until imbued with an aura by performance. He also tells us that performed art used to exist as a sort of ritual-cult of the object, but mechanical reproduction explodes that context and strips the art of its aura.

On land, forests are permeable. The psycelium likewise leaks at the edges. Animals leave one forest and enter another, and so do memes and content. Benjamin's concept of the

8 Crazy Crab's personal webcomic is called 河蟹农 - "River Crab Farm", in a nod to Orwell. 'River crab' here rhymes with 'harmony'; it's one of the 10 Baidu Legendary Animals, along with the grass mud horse and French-Croatian squid.

aura, as well as historical analysis of the meme's chains of replication, combine to allow a theory of reterritorialization, whereby a meme from one forest becomes a constituent of another.

A meme from one forest is shared by one of its residents to someone from another forest. 'Citizenship' in these forests is fluid, and a netizen may belong to one or many forests. In order for the meme to successfully propagate, the receiving culture must have an understanding of the meme's subject matter, something on which it can seize semantic purchase. As the meme spreads between different citizens of the receiving continent, its aura is re-written by the cultural performance of its distribution.

A Westerner perceiving the trend of dark sunglasses profile photos may have no understanding of Marxist village doctors, or Chen Guangchen's historical context, but ought to immediately recognize it (via psychic metadata) as political expression. Some aspect of the fundamental truth of the meme is retained. While the Chinese poster's psychic discriminator, her own imagined Panoptic da ma, talks her out of overtly 'harmonizable' political speech, the Americans uploading dark sunglasses selfies have no such discriminator. Continental translation offers new opportunities for memetic evolution, while destabilizing a meme's aura.

As the internet continues to experience this deforestation—this splintering—intercontinental communication will become more common and more important than ever. It falls to all of us to undertake this task of translation between islands and continents, both within and beyond the terrestrial national borders the new continents imitate.

VIII. not a conclusion

> A friend told me once about 'ribs', or records - rock and roll, jazz - smuggled into the soviet union before it died; contraband culture via x-ray, Beatles via cover band.
>
> Did you ever wait by the radio's REC to catch the opening notes to some song that would make them notice you, love you? Before my time.
>
> I made mix CDs and wrote the track listing on a piece of A4 paper, which, folded intricately, was both album cover, sleeve, and mailing envelope.
>
> It has never been easier than it is now to copy art. JPEG artifacts are samizdat without the hardship.

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AN AMBIGUOUS UTOPIA

INTRODUCTION

Our contribution is an experiment in memetic worlding. It explores what could happen if we generated pluralistic, positive visions as an alternative to today's vastly nihilistic memescape. Initially, our attempts to create memes antithetical to nihilism ended up #wholesome, and did not necessarily represent a radical or visionary enough departure from the status quo. To imagine a more divergent shift, we decided to escape the constraints of the current moment and turned to worldbuilding, science fiction and futuring techniques to envision scenarios set in an alternative place and time.

As for a theoretical framework, we found Metamodernism helpful in thinking beyond static categorization:

> *Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.*[1]

Usefully, metamodernism allows space for multiplicity and ambiguity - to think more divergently and less naively about what a 'positive' might mean in a complex context. In other words, there is never just one narrative. Life can be absurd and meaningless, but we can still believe in hope.[2] It is worth noting that our aim here is not to establish a telos, nor suggest that we should follow a set path to a preconceived future. Instead, we hope these ideas might spawn others, beyond the reach of our own imagination.

We want to acknowledge here that a certain amount of financial stability, and therefore privilege, was necessary to complete this contribution. From the outset, the project is therefore limited in scope. It is a result of the ways of knowing and being of two white, gender non-conforming people of American and German-American origin.

We tried to include diverse perspectives and collaborators in this project. However, for the time being, these are limited to our extended network. Creating a truly pluralistic project would require the addition of many more contributors. Much like a good meme, we hope it will travel and provide a loose enough framework to eventually incorporate broader perspectives.

xo The Trans Bears

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1 Timotheus Vermeulen & Robin van den Akker "Notes on metamodernism," Journal of Aesthetics & Culture 2, no. 1 (2010). doi: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

2 Simon de la Rouviere, "Exploring Metamodernism and Optimistic Nihilism in SciFi," Simon de la Rouviere, accessed April 2, 2021, https://blog.simondlr.com/.

PROLOGUE

Hello!

Meme Squad here. We decided to share our story as a message of hope, and as proof that change is always possible even with limited means. This story centers on internet memeing, a seemingly innocent cultural phenomenon that brought us together. Memes are funny bits of content that are remixed and shared online by people. If you think of memes as tiny bits of cultural DNA then, like us, you might be able to imagine using them to alter the status quo. We hope you might discover their radical potential and want to make mischief as we did.

THE RUINS

Our Meme Squad met at a time we now refer to as The Ruins. Human and natural systems were on the brink of collapse. Our societies and politics were the remnants of violent pasts, built on a logic of expansion, exploitation and extraction. Much of our work and leisure were organized around producing value for corporations. Financial wealth was the main indicator of success and determined our position in the social hierarchy.

The circumstances left us exhausted, isolated and alienated – everyone their own island. Few were imaginative enough to question the narrative we were fed: that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of the systems that governed our lives. As apathy grew, irony and cynicism were normalized in online and offline culture.

Still, a scattering of people searched for alternatives. Seeking connection, we tried to find like-minded others on the Whisper Web, a substratum of private chat rooms and social platforms just out of sight of the corporate clearnet. Here, we found each other through positive memes and cemented our bond by forming a squad.

Anyone else ever feel like dis?!

O em gee, yea!

Thought I was the only one lol. Phew.

LMAO...SO TRUE!

We should b more like trees n shrooooms ☺

Yeee, let's go!

♥

Soon the Whisper Web was acquired by corporations, and we were forced further underground. We began using the dark forest, a nascent model of what would later become the Subaltern Web. Here we met others. The dark forest was alive with covens of meme witches and wizards, droves of digital fairies and elves, cabals of dissidents, and many more.

Diverse in counter-cultural identity but united in vision, we collectivised. We formed a syndicate, and began casting coordinated memetic spells to jinx the established order. We hexed corrupt corporations, went troll hunting and inundated bureaucrats with our raging semiotic meltdown.

Mind-bending journalism

The Mind Bender

Reg No. 34568 (The Ruins)

HOME WORLD ARTS & CULTURE TECHNOLOGY SCIENCE OPINION

Covens of meme witches hex multinationals with coordinated DDoS spells.

It seems a growing community of netizens has syndicalized and is taking collective action against, as an anonymous source put it, '*the corrupt capitalists and rentiers that are destoying people and planet*'. The latest in a series of attacks was perpetrated by a coven of meme witches and wizards against multinational corporation Scumazon.

Using memes as 'spells' the group coordinated a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack on Scumazon. They flooded the company's online services by simulatneously leaving millions of memes instread of reviews on the company's own smart assistant.

This followed widespread critique that the company was using data collected by the assistant to spy on consumers in their own homes. Allegedly the company both uses this intimate data to increase sales on their own site, as well as selling it on to third parties. The site was down for an entire day.

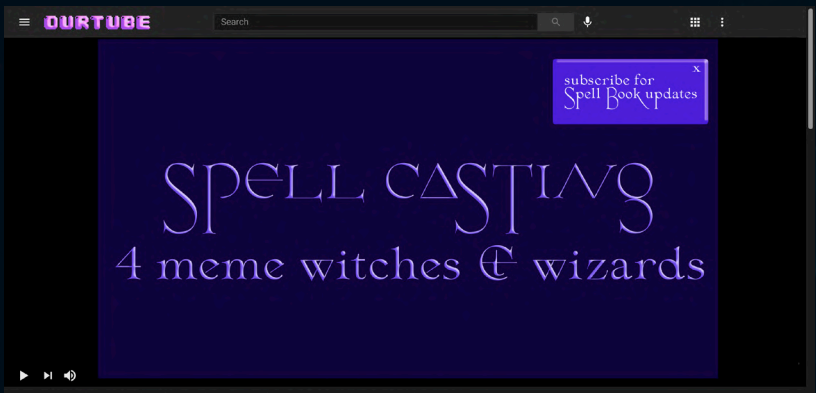
SCUMAZON LATEST TO BE TARGETED BY SYNDICALIZED MEMERS MAKING MISCHIEF

TRYNA VIBE WITH IN-HOUSE SPY

VIBING WITH YOUR DEMONS

Scumazon representatives confided a record number of missed sales around $1bn.

Meanwhile, there is no trace of the memers. Wisely collectivised and distributed, there is no way of pointing blame at a single witch or wizard.



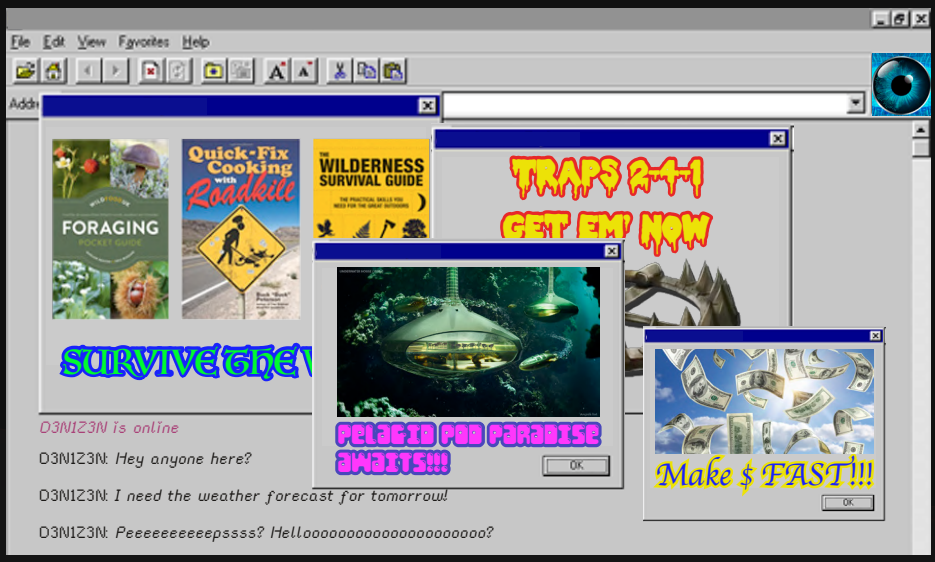
Spell Casting 1 – Collective memeing for discrete magical effect

We ridiculed old power, and laid bare that the concepts and systems invented by humans were impressionable to our resistance and change. Our signs of resistance attracted others. An intense burst of optimism began to germinate and fill the narrative void of The Ruins.

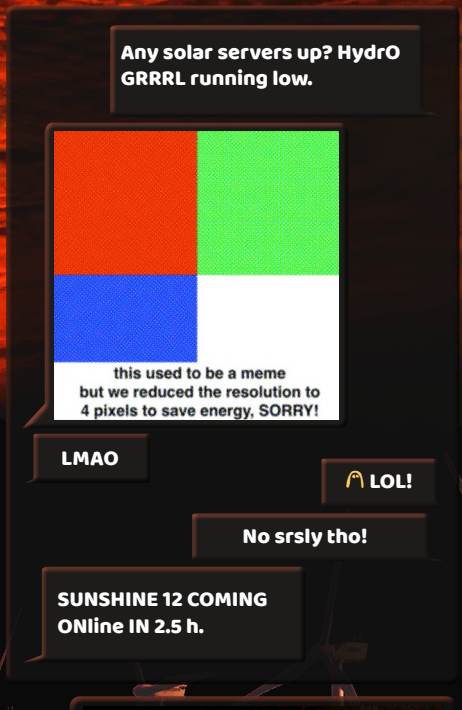
Collapse

Not long after we met, things beyond our control fell apart. Earth's climate had been changing noticeably throughout our lifetime, and was now at its breaking point. Erratic weather patterns brought catastrophic forest fires, floods, and droughts. They led to the collapse of both the human and ecological systems on which we depended.

Coastline internet infrastructure drowned in saltwater and the rare earth minerals needed to maintain the physical web became inaccessible. Large swathes of the clearnet went dark. Unsurprisingly this caused widespread fear, chaos and confusion. We saw a new digital divide: the monied, who paid gatekeepers for access to information and goods, and the poor left with nothing but patchy service hosting unreliable, ad-littered news sites and communication channels.



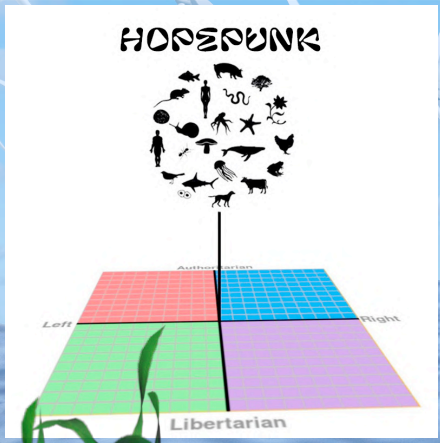
Our plans to grow an accessible, sustainable internet gained urgency. We'd laid some groundwork in The Ruins, but the crash took its toll on us and our network too. After the initial shock, we began working in local chapters to repair and transfer our infrastructure to solar, hydro and wind power. The internet memes we were used to became nostalgic memories. We didn't have the bandwidth for anything but the most necessary comms. Still, smuggling lols in with the info quickly became a thing and we learned to meme offline, in slower and more local forms that resembled older and more ancient traditions. Most importantly, we learned to laugh together in person again.



THE MAK

We began to adapt and find new ways to operate in The Makeshift, the decade following the collapse. While the rich walled themselves off in artificial oases, we found hope and purpose in relinquishing things that hadn't served us in the past and restoring those that had. We transformed the Subaltern Web into a distributed commons and, for the most part, found strength in our differences. Still, rebellion and insurrections caused damage. We suffered setbacks when rogue ideologues tried to undermine us from the inside and endured attacks on our hardware by troll mercenaries who wanted to repurpose our infrastructure.

We survived, and the physical and psychological rubble left by the collapse became fertile ground for hybrid countercultural narratives and identities. As more of our network returned to life online, semiotics of The Makeshift were shared using old meme formats. Hopepunk emerged as an absurdist mash-up philosophy, encoding a culture of care, nurture and maintenance into our mischief.

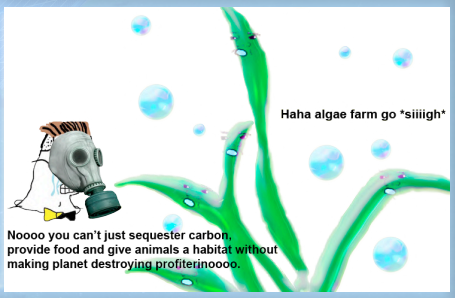


RESHIFT

AHY! REMEMBER THIS GUY LOLOLOL!

AHAHAH! NEVER THOUGHT I'D SEE HIM AGAIN!

WHAT ABOUT THIS !???



LMAOOOO. LITERALLY MY KELP FARM!

As the years passed, the last of the old elite hid in their walled and now dying gardens. While locked out, we'd come to realize we didn't need them. They had just been middlemen who estranged us from ourselves and each other. Necessities were available if we stayed bonded by our philosophy of nurture. We avoided old monetary currencies wherever possible and, after significant chaos and suffering, managed to establish our own distributive support systems, whose success we measured against earthly vitality instead of growth. We still faced opposition at times, but even sceptics joined us when they saw we were thriving.

Deep Ada

After a rocky and generative decade in The Makeshift, we found Deep Adaptation. While in many ways still reeling, we were freed from old societal constraints. Propelled by necessity, we studied and learned from previously marginalized human and non-human voices – forgotten or disregarded ways of knowing and being. We organized our lives and technologies around the rhythms and cycles of natural rather than artificial intelligence.

The Web transformed into an entirely new entity, hosted by sun, wind and water. Realizing that our networks ran on the same energy sources and minerals as Earth's ecosystems, we began to wonder if there were ways to connect human networks to natural ones. We developed an adapter to plug into mycelium and root networks. Our protocols were then able to develop memetic code in symbiosis with the natural world. Our self-image shifted dramatically when we realized we were in essence all part of the same earthly nervous system. Turns out, natural and cultural DNA is one and the same thing, and Earth is the greatest memer of all.

what is

just loling wif 🌵 rn...they r rly cracking me up 2day!

akakaka adorbs!

aptation

Of course many cultures had long known and embraced this. For those who hadn't, scientific evidence made the difference. Old concepts of the boundary between self and other dissolved and became obsolete. Once the loneliest species on Earth, we were now able to understand ourselves as holobionts: multi-species organisms in constant communion with those in and outside ourselves. In the present day, we make no distinction between nature and culture. They have merged into one word: nurture.

EPILOGUE

That's all from us for now. All we're really saying is that 'nonsense' can be an effective counter to hegemonic 'common sense'. Don't let the bullies win. And most importantly: don't forget to lol together.

If you wanna get in touch, find us @ambigutopia.lol wherever you get your memes. We'll try to get back to you through deep time.

xo Meme Squad

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PEPE THE FROG IS LOVE AND PEACE: HIS SECOND LIFE IN HONG KONG

CASPAR CHAN

In Hong Kong, starting in June 2019, a series of demonstrations and civil disobedience actions were launched, protesting the government's controversial proposal of the extradition law. The political situation has turned out to be tense and, to an extent, violent, where one can see police in blue and protestors in black assaulting each other; where one can see countless Molotov's cocktails and tearing gases flying in front of the backdrop of the metropolitan, where one can see an abyss gradually being formed between the authorities and the Hong Konger activists, and where one can also see how people possessing different political views have moved their battleground from physical places to online platforms amidst the pandemic. Amidst all this, one icon always remains ubiquitous: the face of Pepe the Frog. Connoted as an alt-right symbol, a figure of hatred and white nationalism, the meme of Pepe the Frog sheds these meanings and signifies something very different in the political drama in Hong Kong: love, peace and frustration towards the government. Indeed, through repeated uses in different situations, the meaning of memes also changes, which can result in a contrasting understanding of the same meme by two groups of people. Investigating the uses of the meme of Pepe the Frog in the current Hong Kong situation, I will explore how politically charged memes can be appropriated otherwise from their original contexts and significance. Memes have the affordances and the flexibility to be entextualized out of their original place and be re-contextualized by their users. In this way, a meme does not only appoint one specific way of understanding, but allows its viewers to derive and create their own ways of comprehending the meme through continually identifying with the meme itself.

The Entextualizability and Appropriability of Memes

Memes have taken on a variety of roles in online spaces. For one, their jocular aspect has been manipulated by users to refer to or mimic other contents on various social media[1], and by the same token, memes that parody public and political figures have also appeared, in turn giving rise to political memes.[2] Pepe the Frog is such a meme, whose prominence on

1 Laura Glitsos and James Hall, "The Pepe the Frog Meme: An Examination of Social, Political, and Cultural Implications Through the Tradition of the Darwinian Absurd," *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, no. 4. (2019): 381–395; Limor Shifman, "An Anatomy of a Youtube Meme," *New Media and Society* 14, no. 2 (2012): 187 – 203; and Heidi E. Huntington, "Subversive Memes: Internet Memes as a Form of Visual Rhetoric," *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research* (2013).

2 Anushka Kulkarni, "Internet Meme and Political Discourse: A study on the Impact of Internet Meme as a Tool in Communicating Political Satire," *Journal of Content, Community & Communication Amity School of Communication* 6 (2017): 13; and Giselinde Kuipers, "'Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?' Public Discourse, Digital Disaster Jokes, and the Functions of Laughter After 9/11,"

online social platforms has allowed him to be a representative of political memes of many sorts. His adoption by the American far-right as a symbol of 'white nationalism, neo-Nazism and anti-immigration,'[3] his relation with Trump,[4] as well as his personification of the ideology of 'embrace your loserdom' as articulated by Dale Beran,[5] has earned this frog-looking caricature his own political dimension and connotation.

If we understand a meme as a sign, then as with understandings of signs in general, we understand memes contextually. In other words, if a meme enters a context different from its original one, its reading can be different, and thus the viewers can also understand it otherwise. Being able to be contextualized in one situation implies that a sign can also be *entextualized* from that context and *recontextualized* in another. By entextualization, Piia Varis and Jan Blommaert mean that a sign can be extracted from its original context and re-inserted into another 'involving different participation frameworks', which allow 'different meaning outcomes.'[6] Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs also express that entextualisation as a process 'of making a stretch of our linguistic and/or semiotic. . .production into a unit - a text - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting'[7] Content from social media have a high possibility to be entextualisable.[8] Through numerous clicks of transmitting and copy and-pasting a meme, its formal features can eventually be levered from their original context. Now that a meme, being entextualised, floats from its original niche, it opens up the possibility to be perceived in a different way. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear rightly point out that while a meme is circulated on social media, its content can never be 'intact'[9]. The more exposure a meme gains with its viewers, the more versatile the meme becomes. Throughout the meme's dissemination, new understandings and'idiosyncratic spins', can be accrued according to its viewers' own referential background. In other words, after being extracted its original context, a meme can also be 'remixed' with new

The Journal of American Culture 28, no. 1 (2005): 80.

3 Glitsos and James, "The Pepe the Frog Meme," 285, citing from "Pepe Cartoonist Kills off Character That Became Hate symbol," *Australian Broadcasting Corporation,* May 9, 2017 retrieved from http:// www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-09/pepe-cartoonist -kills-off-character-that-became-hate-symbol/8509280.

4 Know Your Meme, "Pepe the Frog - Pepe Timeline," last updated 2015. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/942029-pepe-the-frog; Glitsos and James, "The Pepe the Frog Meme: An Examination of Social, Political, and Cultural Implications through the Tradition of the Darwinian Absurd," 284.

5 Dale Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," *Medium*, February 14, 2017, https:// [5] medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb.

6 Piia Varis, and Jan Blommaert, "Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media: Virality, Memes, And New Social Structures," *Multilingual Margins: A Journal of Multilingualism from the Periphery* 2, no. 1 (2015): 36.

7 Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990): 73.

8 Irene Theodoropoulou, "Mediatized Vernacularization: On the Structure, Entextualization and Resemiotization of Varoufakiology," *Discourse, Context & Media* 14 (2016): 28–39.

9 Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, *New Literacies : Everyday Practices and Classroom Learning*, 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006,) 208.

elements in the new context, and appropriated by its new viewers. This entails the shedding of a meme's original connotation, regardless of whether the new appropriator of the meme knows of this original connotation or not, and the acquisition of new significance in its new situation.

So, a meme's ability to be entextualised from its original context entails the possibility of its subsequently being appropriated in another. But I suspect that there remains one more step before an entextualised meme can be perceived and used otherwise by its new appropriators. In other words, simply being taken away from the meme's original context does not and necessarily mean that a new meaning is automatically assigned once it enters the new context. For a new meaning to emerge, an identification by the new appropriators must identify with the meme. In the case of a political movement where the situation is dynamic, such as that in Hong Kong, a continuous, negotiable identification can arise.

Left or Right? — The Political Case in Hong Kong

To understand how the meme can be laden with a different political charge in Hong Kong, it is useful to first look at the political context in Hong Kong. The current political turmoil started with the disputed proposal of the 'extradition bill' by the Hong Kong government in early 2019. On June 9, about one million Hong Kongers flooded the streets to protest this proposal. Hoping for an agreeable response from their government, the Hong Kongers instead received a reply from the authorities stating that the bill had already been widely consulted and discussed, and thus the government would proceed to the legislation of this bill anyway. Frustrated, agitated, and disappointed, Hong Kongers began a series of protests, rallies and activist actions to counteract the government's proposal. This wave of political action has thus received the name 'The Anti-Extradition Movement'.

Gradually, alongside the opposition against the government's proposal, other political demands were also voiced. Five demands have emerged from the protestors: as one of the movement's slogans goes: 'Five Demands, No[t] One Less!' (五大訴求 缺一不可). The five demands are: 1) withdrawal of the Extradition Law; 2) retraction of the proclamation that the protests are 'riots'; 3) withdrawal of criminal charges against all protestors; 4) establishment of an independent committee to investigate the abuse of power by the police; and 5) implementation of dual universal suffrage. With the government as the common enemy, the movement's anti-establishment, anti-oppressive character also implies its motivation in dethroning the current ruling atmosphere in Hong Kong. This facet of the movement echoes some of the ideologies of left-wing politics in the Western sense. What marks the movement's difference from traditional left-wing politics, however, is that the movement is not based on the yearning to fight against class inequality. It did not start as a struggle to combat economic discrimination. Instead, the Anti-Extradition Movement began with a wish to intervene in the process of law-making. However large the social movement has become in its later stages, it has always and mainly aimed at attempting to reform the governmental system. 'Democracy'

and ‘freedom’ are the two keywords resonating through the whole movement, but rarely are there people who would think that ‘improving the wealth gap or ‘refining social welfare’ should occupy a primary place in this movement.

Nonetheless, the movement quickly shifted towards a ‘nationalistic’ approach. More aggressive actions were also performed. For instance, seeing both the Hong Kong government and Chinese central government as the enemy, the protestors initiated a wave of boycotts of Chinese products and stores, as well as those businesses who advocated support to the government. From July 2019, protestors began to sort all businesses into one of four color-coded categories, each designating an action to be taken: 1) ‘Renovate the Black’: those stores and shops run by the mainland Chinese, politicians from the pro establishment parties and the government were to be destroyed and dismantled; 2) ‘Decorate the Red’: the walls and facades of the shops established by or related to Chinese businesses were to be graffitied and pasted with activist posters; 3) ‘Boycott the Blue’: businesses who showed support for the government were to be boycotted; and 4) ‘Visit the Yellow’: local, indigenous shops run by Hong Kongers and who supported the movement were welcomed by the protestors and were to be visited. The protestors also focused more on finding what constitutes a ‘real’ Hong Konger, suspecting any non-movement-supporting business or person. With the above purist ideals in the protestors’ minds, there even existed a brief moment of ‘witch-hunting’, where the Hong Kongers competed to be more passionate about the movement and more resistant to anything not Hong Kong-related. Such purist action is termed 鬥黃, ‘to compete to be more yellow’, where the color yellow is the symbol of this movement. While one store could be boycotted and destroyed because it was not ‘yellow enough’, some protestors became more radical and extreme, criticising and alienating other fellow protestors.

Fig. 1: A poster circulated on LIGHK, a popular Hong Kong forum, which illustrate the four categories as well s what to act accordingly. Screen captured from https://lihkg.com/thread/1626988/page/1.

One could also attack another protestor as being a “’eftard (左膠), who sought a universal struggle and focused on non-violent ways to continue to act. ‘Leftard’ is an interesting term,

and it first appeared in the public discourse in around 2014 when the Umbrella Movement arose, sparked by the intervention of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, who implemented a restrictive election framework for both Chief Executive and the Legislative Council. At the beginning of that movement, calmer ways and principles for counteracting the police and the government gained support from many Hong Kongers, and could be summarised as 'Peaceful, Reasonable, Non-violent' (和理非). But as the Umbrella Movement proceeded, many protestors started to think that because the actions carried out by the authorities and the police were consideredbrutal, non-violent actions should be replaced by those more aggressive so as to show their stance more firmly. From this point, those who still believed that the movement could continue in a peaceful manner were name-tagged as 'bleeding-heart liberals' (大愛撚), which is literally translated as 'big-love dickheads'). This group of people were further seen as leftists, who, in the eyes of Hong Kongers, are essentialized as communists and have also been called 'leftards'. Though the Umbrella Movement was halted about eleven weeks after its start, this term, as well as the militaristic approach to counteracting authority, have lasted beyond this point. As a result, five years later in the Anti-Extradition Movement , one could be called a 'leftard' if one was not 'brave and military' enough. This is a translation of 勇武, a term which is used to refer to those protestors who fought directly against the police, and contains the idea that their violence is justified because the authorities first used violence against them. It is also because of this that, generally speaking, no Hong Kongers seethis movement as a leftist movement.

Amidst the pandemic, and after the imposition of the National Security Law on 1 July 2020, Hong Kongers now have other agendas in continuing the movement. They have also revised their strategies for counteracting the authorities. The 'witch-hunt' was halted, milder ways were adopted, and the battleground has been moved online. Nonetheless, the notions of 'yellow' and 'leftard' still occupy a place in everyday discourse. In any case, through all these changes, one can see that it is hard to categorize the movement into a specific place on the political spectrum: one can say that it reflects a certain degree of nationalism and populism, but one should also not overlook the anti-establishment bent and universal goals the Hong Kongers collectively seek. Neither can the movement be interpreted as politically 'central and neutral', at least in the Hong Kongers' sense, who have adopted the view that 'one should never be central and neutral before great issues'.[10] In short, the political movement in Hong Kong reflects a certain ambiguity and intuitiveness in characterizing its political orientation. On the other hand, it can be argued that, to some extent, the mainstream way of perceiving left/right politics could not fully be applied to the case of Hong Kong. Be that as it may, it is this ambivalent and dynamic atmosphere that gives birth to a Hong Kong where a new framework and way of seeing things awaits. It also provides a ground where, as Varis and

10 Naam Ngon Geoi Sii [南岸居士], "'Zhongli' De Yuanzui「中立」的原罪," [The Sin of Neutrality] *Standnews,* February 29, 2020. https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/%E4%B8%AD%E7%AB%8B- %E7%9A%84%E5%8E%9 F%E7%BD%AA/, and "點樣同啲中立撚對話? How to Talk With Neutral Retard?" *LIHKG*, last modified August 12, 2019, https://lihkg.com/thread/1459016/page/1.

Blommaert write, a new understanding of pre-existing signs and symbols can be produced.[11] Within difficult-to-define political background, Pepe the Frog, well-known as a symbol of hatred, can receive his second life in Hong Kong.

Pepe the 'Hong Konger' — A Symbol of Love, Sympathy and Trolling

Being fans of Trump's presidency and shit-stirring online campaigns, as well as the exaggeration and bragging of his anti-China stance, the Hong Kong protestors must have been familiar withthe relation between Trump and Pepe the Frog. Yet not many were aware of the relation between the infamous meme and the alt-right, nor the meme's trolling, self-deprecating character[12]. Instead, the sad-looking amphibian-humanoid is seen as a symbol of resistance, even one of love and peace, by the protestors in the Anti-Extradition Movement. 'To me, Pepe is just a Hello Kitty-like character,' said a protestor in Daniel Victor's NYT report. 'It just looks funny and captures the hearts of so many youngsters,' said a user of LIHKG, a popular forum in Hong Kong.[13] Pepe, shedding its alt-right connotation, is seen as an uplifting, youthful comrade who accompanies Hong Kongers amidst the political struggle.[14]

The protestors embrace Pepe not as a loser or as a means to ignite hatred, but as a persona the protestors feel related to, and one that possesses the qualities being projected onto him by the protestors. For instance, 'Pepe the Press', one wearing a helmet with the word 'Press', holding a phone and wearing a vest, represents the press, the journalists and reporters who work—even volunteer—in this movement, symbolizing free press and a wish for justice to be upheld towards the protestors. Another 'Pepe the Protestor', wearing a black shirt and a yellow helmet (the attire of a protestor), lets out a cheer with fists held in front of his chest. He too could be seen as an encouraging being who offers comfort and solidarity to the protestors. To be sure, Hong Kongers have created different artefacts with Pepe's image and placed them everywhere, in a sense that the more they project themselves and their values onto Pepe, the more they 'materialise' them on Pepe to the extent that their 'Pepe self' accompany them everywhere. Pepe could be seen on walls and façades in common places like tunnels, bridges, flyovers, and shopping malls all around Hong Kong.

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11 Varis, and Blommaert, "Conviviality and Collectives on Social Media," 36.

12 Victor, Daniel. "Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog. No, They're Not Alt-Right," *The New York Times*. August 19, 2019. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/ 2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-pepe-frog.html.

13 Victor, "Hong Kong Protesters," 2019

14 Christina Ko, "How Pepe the Frog became face of Hong Kong protests – despite cartoon being a symbol of 15 hate in US," *South China Morning Post*, August 17, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/ lifestyle/arts-culture/article/ 3023060/how-pepe-frog-became-face-hong-kong-protests-despite-cartoon; and Gina Echevarria, "How This Frog Meme Became a Symbol of Hope and Hate," *Insider*, October 8, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/ pepe-frog-meme-hate-symbol-hope-hong-kong-protesters-2019-10?r=DE&IR=T.

Pepe is ubiquitous, as if Pepe had become a fellow Hong Konger, so special as a symbol of the movement, but also familiar: a consolation a Hong Konger can always count on.

Fig. 2: 'Pepe the Press' graffitied by the Hong Kong protestors. Screen captured from Daniel Victor, 'Hong Kong Protesters Love Pepe the Frog. No, They're Not Alt-Right,' The New York Times, August 19, 2019, retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/19/world/asia/hong-kong-protest-pepe-frog.html.

Fig. 3: A flag showing a cheering Pepe. Photo from: © Getty Images. Anadolu Agency. Miguel Candela. Screen captured from Igor Ogorodnev, 'What the Uncanceling of Pepe the Frog – Just for HK Protests. Though – Tells Us about US Media,' RT Question More, September 21, 2019, retrieved from https://www.rt.com/op-ed/469318-pepe-frog-hong-king-media/.

Fig. 4: A graffiti of Pepe wearing the protestor's helmet, smiling and holding a fist with the words 'Hong Kong Hang On!' On the side. Photo from Billy H.C. Kwok / Getty Images.

Fig. 5: A chains of Pepe with different look, hands in hands. Screen captured from Denise Tsang (@denis_tsang), 'Love this Pepe-the-Frog chain at the Shum Shui Po Lennon Wall,' Twitter, August 23, 2019, <ahttps://twitter.com/denise%5C_tsang/status/1164779085186211840?ref%5C_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1164779085186211840%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1%5C_&ref%5C_url=https%3A%2F%2Fstayhipp.com%2Fnews%2Fpepe-the-frog-as-a-symbol-for>.

Fig. 6: Graffiti of Pepe found outside the Central Government complex, depicted with a board with the word 'Hope'. Photo from Billy H.C. Kwok / Getty Images.

The Hong Kong protestors do not only use Pepe to personify their ideals: Pepe is also used to express frustration and anger towards the government and the police. For example, Pepe is depicted without one eye after a journalist was shot in the eye by the police. Pepe is elsewhere also depicted as a crying character, helping out two other characters, LIHKG Pig (連登豬) and LIHKG Dog (連登狗), two mascots well-known on the forum of LIHKG, when the three of them are attacked by a smoke grenade. There has been much creativity derived from the depiction of Pepe the Frog as sad, weeping and upset. Pepe relates the emotions sensed by the protestors, and in turn, symbolises their disillusionment towards the authorites.

Such a sensation of dissatisfaction, as well as the sense of being the victimized underdog in the situation may echo the ideology of 'loserdom' adopted by the American alt-right in the manner described by Beran.[15] However, I contend that the two cases are different. For one, by portraying Pepe as an injured character, the Hong Konger protestors actively attempt to work as a voice for a change, so that no one will be hurt 'in the same way'. They are frustrated about the status quo, intimidated by the violence done to them, and they illustrate such bitterness by turning Pepe into the victim who suffers from these harms. As

15 Beran, "4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump," 2017.

demonstrated earlier, such depiction is the Hong Kongers' 'Pepe-self'. It is the projection of the Hong Kongers' feeling. But it does not follow that they automatically fully agree with this depiction *per se*.

By representing Pepe in these ways, the Hong Kongers attach him to the naked reality of the political situation, aiming to prompt viewers to reflect on the moral and/or social questions behind these moments. Concurrently, such memes also work to denounce the suffering seemingly inflicted upon the Hong Kongers as it is onto Pepe. It is at this point that Hong Kong's Pepe is distinguished from his counterpart in the US, where the partisans of 'Pepe the Loser' passionately embrace his self-effacing, bizarre, loser's 'values', rationalising them as an attempt to alter their own 'loser' status.

Fig. 7: Pepe the Frog, LIHKG Pig and LIHKG Dog. Screen captured from Lamjj (@Lamjj5), 'Pepe and his friends in hong kong Twitter, August 21, 2019, https://twitter.com/Lamjj5/status/1163972363643318272/photo/1.

Figure 8: Pepe, with a yellow helmet, depicted as a patient with an eye bleeding, with the words: Police Shot MY EYE. Give me back my eye! Screen captured from Alvin Lum (@alvinllun), 'In Queen Mary Hospital, some medical staff showed support for one one lady who is shot blind on Sun,' Twitter, August 13, 2019, https://twitter.com/alvinllum/status/.

Fig. 9: A sobbing Pepe with the words "Don't Beat Me", seemingly a protest against police brutality. "2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Bill Protests - "Don't Beat Me" Pepe the Frog sign," Know Your Meme, 2020, etrieved from http://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1543273-2019-hong-kong-anti-extradition-bill-protests.

In addition, Pepe the Frog has also gone viral among Hong Kong netizens, further spreading the ideas of the political movement to internet users. He appears in the form of Whatsapp and Telegrams stickers, personifying both encouraging emotions and the rage and will-to-troll against the authorities. In using these stickers, the social media users can relate the context of their conversation to the political situation they are in, incidentally mock the authorities, or simply relate the emotions of a specific Pepe to their instant feeling (of course in turn, upon seeing Pepe, the user of that sticker would also be reminded of the political movement to some degree). In every aforementioned case, by relating individual emotions and political realities to Pepe the Frog, this meme has become politicized and functions as a protesting strategy in Hong Kong, just in a very different way to its political deployments in the USA.

Fig. 10: A Pepe sticker pack as a troll to the government and police, including one, the third one from the left on the bottom row, depicting the chief executive of Hong Kong, Ms Carrie Lam, "Polite Pepe," WhatSticker, https://whatsticker.online/p/18668317p5Lmt/HK/zh.

Fig. 11: One of the many sticker packs depicting Pepe as the Hong Kong protestors and Pepe as the Hong Kong police. "Fighting Pepe," Stickers.clould, retrieved from https://stickers.cloud/pack/fighting-pepe.

The Becoming of 'Pepe the Omnipotent'

Pepe the Frog, escaping from its detestable character in the US, has become an adorable figure, a mascot in the political movement in Hong Kong. The singular political situation in Hong Kong allows the city to be an incubator for new understandings of signs and symbols. Yet such a context does not necessarily mean that any sign or symbol can automatically acquire new meanings once they enter Hong Kong. While new meanings await when a meme enters a new context, and social media content is a highly entextualizable environment, there remains a gap between a new meaning being *awaited* and a new meaning being *realized*. In other words, after being entextualized from its old context, but before being appropriated in the new context, an additional step is required. This is where Pepe

the Frog is able to acquire his diverse characters. Specifically, this is where the characters taken up by Pepe can be *negotiated* and *identified* by Hong Kongers. This step, therefore, is crucial because it links the free-floating Pepe to how it is later materialized in the political movement.

To begin with, the omnipresence of Pepe in Hong Kong indicates that the Hong Konger protestors relate to him. I argue that such relation is an identification, and has a bilateral dimension: while the Hong Konger protestors can identify their sadness, frustration and anger with Pepe, Pepe can also be made to relate by representing an injured journalist, a hopeful protestor, the corrupt police, etc. There is a continual negotiation of identification between Pepe and the Hong Konger protestors that allows Pepe to take up different personae. Pepe, thus, can become an omnipotent being. And this continual negotiation of identification is the crucial step that links entextualization and appropriation together.

Sirpa Leppänen et al. argue that within social media contexts, it is such a process of identification that first allows entextualization to occur. They suggest that, while social media have gradually become 'grassroots arenas' where different cultural groups interact, these interactions and activities oftentimes 'overlap, complement and intertwine' with their offline affairs. While identifying with the content fromsocial media is a recurring process, just as how social groups continually identify themselves via offline social activities, there exists an intertwined relationship between the two wheels of identification. This process finally leads to the entextualization of the content from its original context on the social media.[16]

This mechanism is a good description of the case of Pepe in Hong Kong. Through such identification, the appropriation of Pepe in the new context is also made possible. While the protestors engage themselves in the political movement, they are also concurrently exposed to different content available in the online arena, which in turn would reflect back upon their offline situation in their interpretation of this content. Being fans of Trump increases the possibility they might encounter the meme of Pepe the Frog, but extracting the frowning, grumpy frog from its context of hatred to become a symbol of genuine sadness, hope, anger and trolling requires a linkage be made by the Hong Konger protestors between Pepe and the political context in Hong Kong. Such a linkage is only possible through a continuous dialectical identification between the Hong Konger protestors and Pepe. And such a linkage, due to this continuous dialectical identification, leads to Pepe's extextualization from its original context and his final appropriation by Hong Kongers.

To further illustrate using 'Pepe the Press' as an example, we can see that the identification process goes like this: Hong Kongers first feel the importance of the press in the

16 Sirpa Leppänen, Samu Kytölä, Henna Jousmäki, Saija Peuronen, and Elina Westinen, "Entextualization and Resemiotization As Resources for Identification in Social Media," in *The Language of Social Media: Identity and Community on the Internet,* ed. Seargeant, Philip, and Caroline Tagg, (London, 2014), 112-114.

political movement by their continued presence and support. With that in mind, Hong Kongers project such a thought onto Pepe when encountering him online. Such an encounter is where the two wheels—the ceaseless social events happening to the Hong Kongers and the recurrent online appearance of Pepe before them—meet. Projecting their subjective thoughts onto Pepe implies that the Hong Kongers can identify their experience with him. Such identification first allows Pepe to be dragged from its original online circle—*entextualised*—and to be harnessed in the new 'Hong Kongers' circle'—*appropriated*. It is also during such identification that, as Bauman and Briggs put it, the Hong Kongers can 'make a stretch' of their experiences into Pepe, pulling him from his original context.[17] It is at this moment where 'Pepe the Press' can rise, where Pepe takes up the character the Hong Kongers assign to him. Along the same vein, the Hong Konger protestors project different experiences and emotions from the dynamic offline arena onto Pepe. From this, different characters—'Pepe the One-eye Journalist', 'Pepe the Protestor', 'Carrie Lam Pepe—are negotiated and then assigned to him. Such continual negotiation of identification enables Pepe to assume different personae. Identifying with Pepe, the Hong Kongers can then appropriate the meme to their advantage and make Pepe their own possession, devising and weaponizing different Pepes in different arenas.

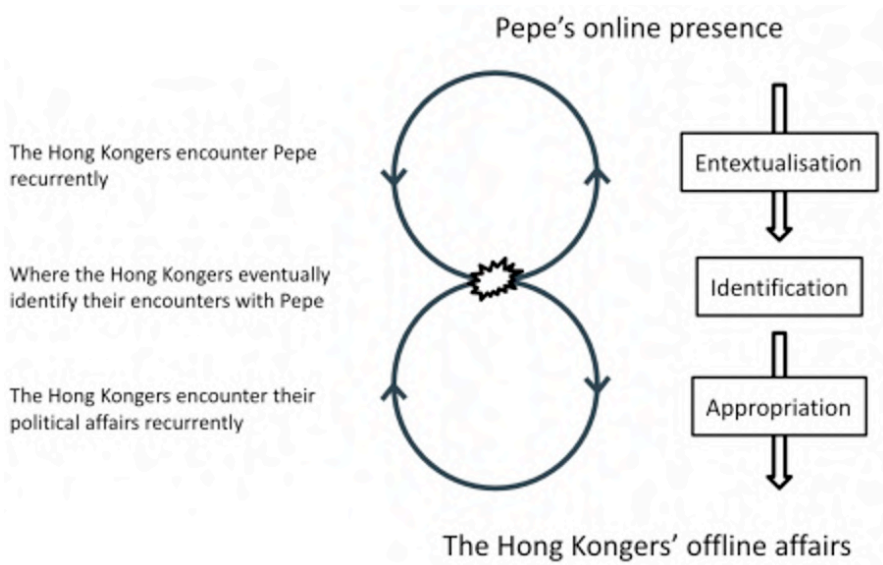

Fig. 12: How Pepe is eventually entextualized from its original context to be appropriated by the Hong Kongers in a new context through recurrent identification.

17 Bauman and Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," 73.

The way Pepe has gained his second life in Hong Kongshows that one can identify a meme through relating to one's own referential background, experiences and emotions, and this is where entextualization can occur and appropriation can follow. Born amid Hong Kong's political turmoil, an ambiguous and turbulent zone, Pepe the Hong Konger shows us how a political meme can attain new meanings. He shows us how memes can acquire various characters and express diverse characteristics. He also shows us that memes do not only appear as a joke or parodybut also allow us to reflect on more serious affairs, such as political and social issues[18]. We must therefore ask what memes can mean to us and do for us besides merely trolling others. Can political memes be salvaged from their bare joking aspect, and be involved in a political movement in a more agonistic way? Pepe the Omnipotent's response seems to be affirmative.

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18 Kulkarni, "Internet Meme and Political Discourse: A study on the Impact of Internet Meme as a Tool in [20] Communicating Political Satire,13; and Kuipers, "'Where Was King Kong When We Needed Him?'," 80.

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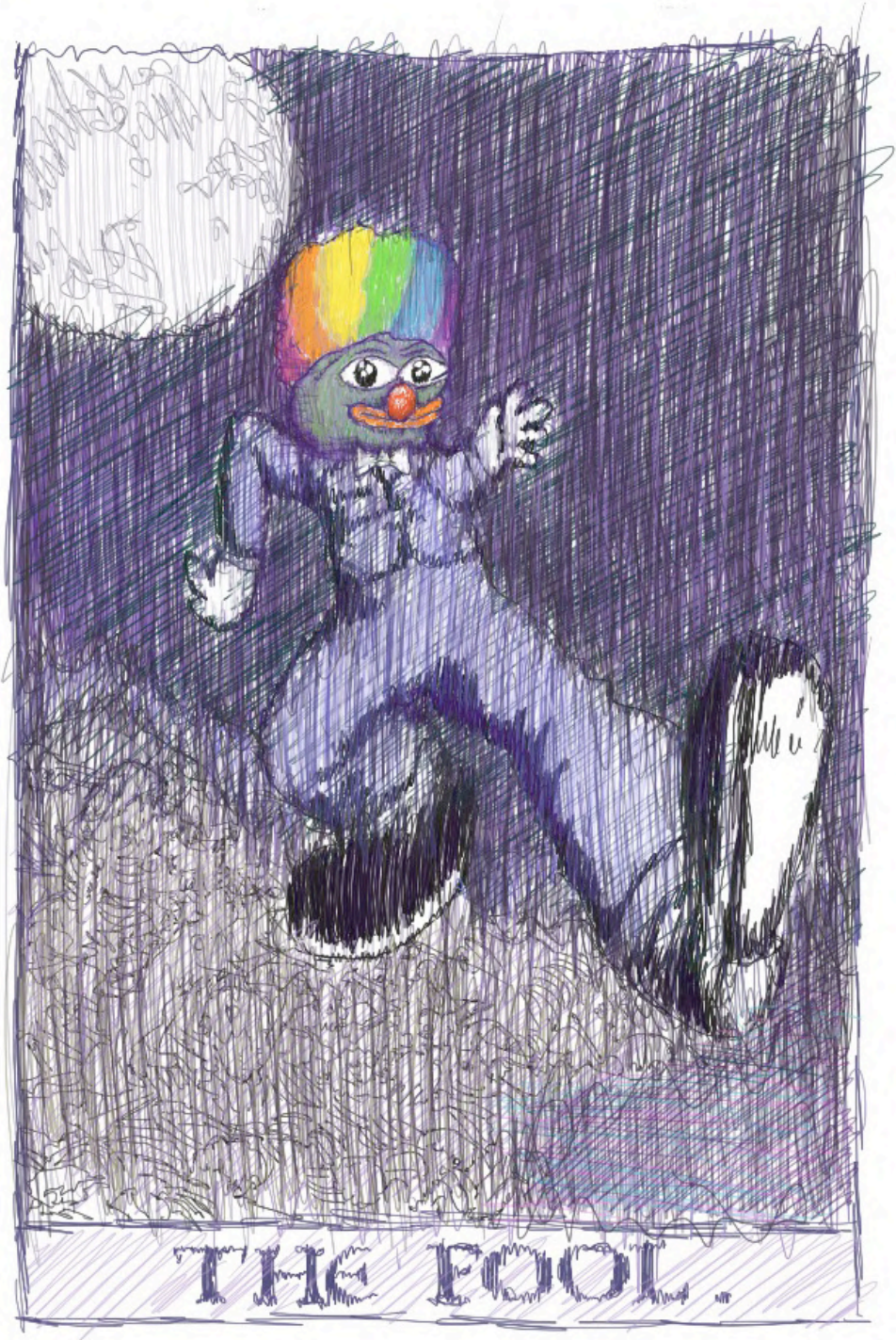
MEME TAROT

LUTHER BLISSETT


THE FOOL

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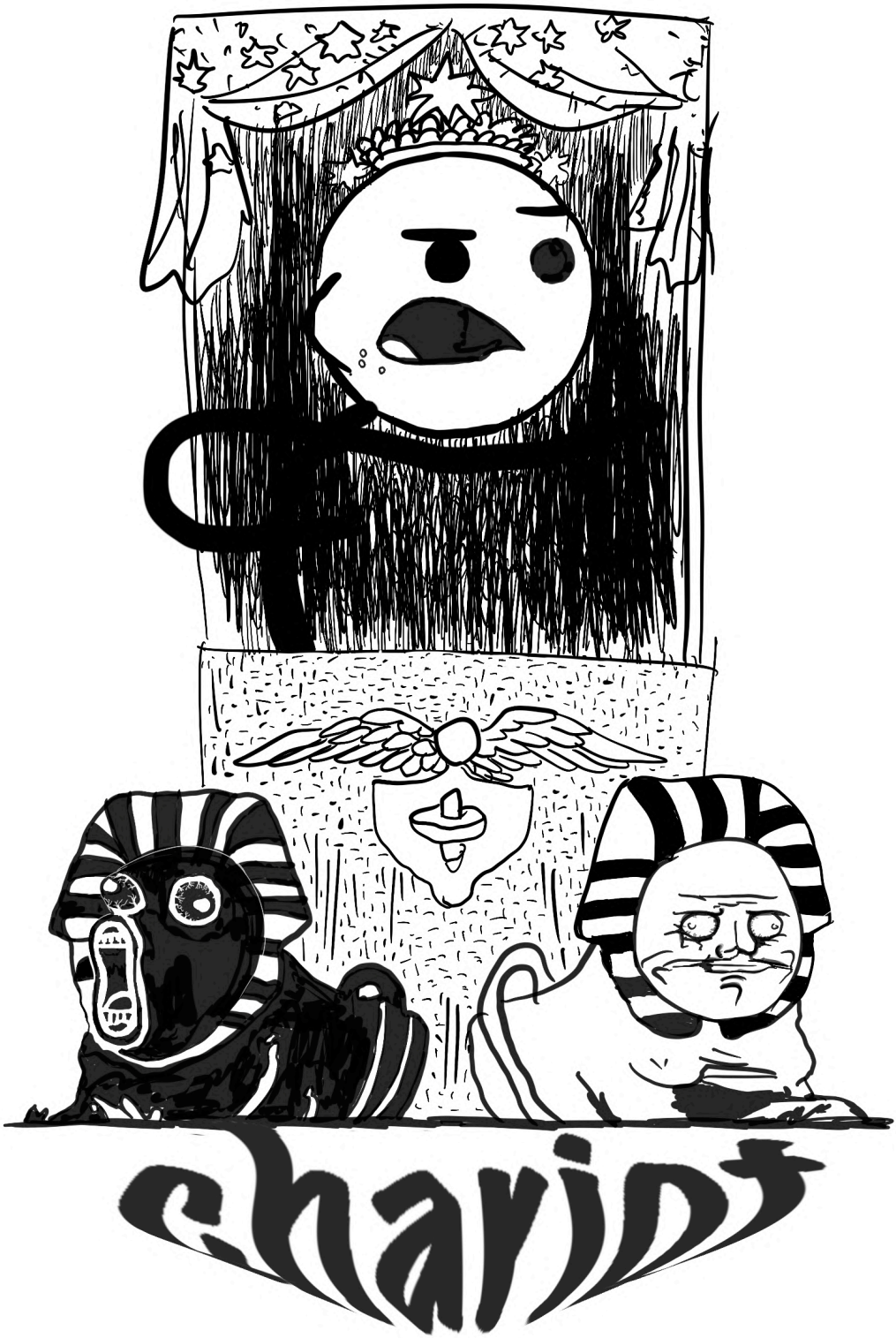
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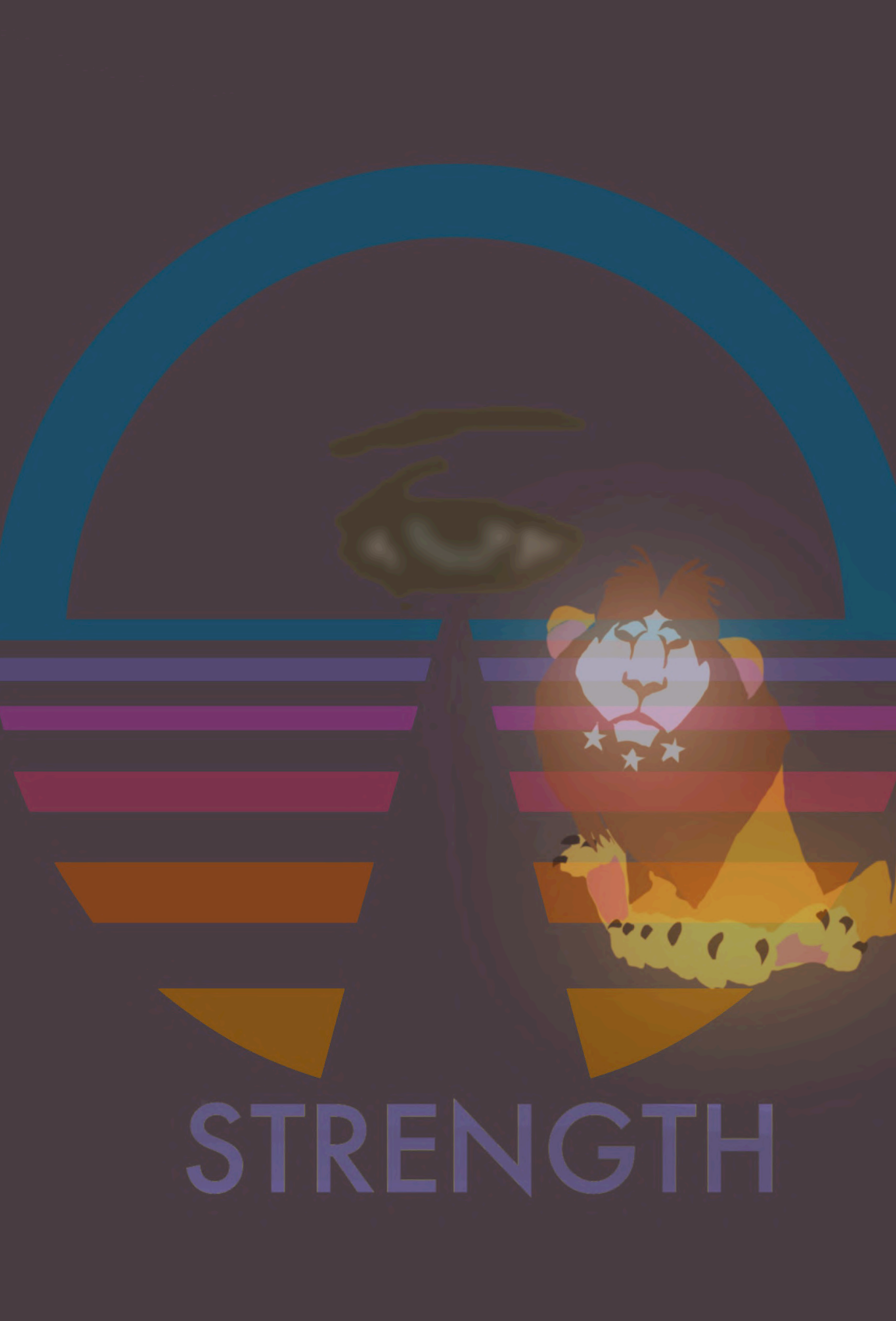
STRENGTH


DEATH


TEMPERANCE


THE DEVIL


THE TOWER


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STAR

THE MOON


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GENES, MEMES, DREAMS

IVAN KNAPP

Genes, Memes, Dreams. Three words which, to borrow one of Theodor Adorno's famous remarks, 'are connected by more than phonetic association'. [1] To give a flavour of the way I want to think about the relationship between, or rather, through these words, as well as the stakes on which our present circumstances encounter them, a few lines from William Burroughs' might help set the tone:

> The word is now a virus. The flu virus may once have been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the lungs. The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk.[2]

The word, in Burroughs' idiom, is indeed like a virus, possessing its own kind of virality. In his dense and associative texts, words arrive in sequences, tripping and folding over themselves. Words infect other words, linking by long associative chains stretched out over determinedly horizontal literary structures. The word in Burroughs is thus also like the meme; often metonymic, it takes a part for the whole, mutating by association and then appropriation.

The lines I quote from Burroughs above have also recently served as an epigraph to an essay by David Joselit in which he argues that 'it is now simply a fact—we have learnt it all too well—that 'viral' memes and biological viruses are coagents.'[3] For Joselit, the Coronavirus pandemic has latched onto and become coextensive with an epidemic of fake news—a degrading of information in which memes are deeply implicated for the role they have played in assaulting the authorization of 'information as knowledge', for their unlinking of words from reality.[4] In 2019, Emily Apter wrote presciently of how memes are mobilized by 'channelling the epidemiological analogy to an aggressive virus and all that comes with it: imaginaries of disease, contamination, toxicity, and demographic incursion'.[5] 'The episteme of the meme', she continued, 'is essentially pandemic and bellicose'.[6]

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1 Adorno is talking, of course, about 'museum' and mausoleum'. See Theodor Adorno, "Valery, Proust Museum," in *Prisms*, trans. and ed. Shierry Weber and Samuel Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 173.

2 William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 49.

3 David Joselit, "Virus as Metaphor," *October* 172 (2020): 159.

4 Joselit, "Virus as Metaphor," 159.

5 Emily Apter, "Alphabetic Memes: Caricature, Satire, and Political literacy in the Age of Trump," *October* 170 (2019): 8.

6 Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 8.

For Richard Dawkins, the rhyme between gene and meme was always meant to be conceptual as well as phonetic. He was keen to emphasise that this closeness between the two words should refer to a correspondence between the biological and the social or cultural, by which any quantum of genetic or cultural material is perceptible less in a singular presentation or encounter than in a series or sequence which could be apprehended most clearly through a vast sample. But if the gene would make legible transgenerational mutations, then the meme as its 'cultural' corollary would write the intersubjective relations between .

But what about the last of these three words, the dream? How does the dream make of the gene-meme coupling? Apter cites the meme's association with mass consciousness but also its 'negative capability'.[7] If we take the 'negative' here to mean the underside of something, an underside of consciousness perhaps, then the pathway to Freud's psychoanalytic project becomes clearer. It may be enough, to begin with, to set out some of the most striking congruences between dreams and memes that emerge from a reading of the *Interpretation of Dreams*. We learn there that dreams are composed of fragments, held together by association: they are composed of jokes, slips of the tongue, figures of speech; they are mnemonic, partial, fleeting and transitory. Dreams are bizarre, absurd, irrational, monstrous. They express the satisfaction of wishes dispelling powerful anxieties. They are formed by the operations of displacement, condensation, revision and substitution. And, like internet memes, they were first elevated to an object of critical inquiry from a derided status within the culture at large.[8] In sum, one might go so far as to say that at the level of vocabulary, memes speak the language of dreams.

Displacement, condensation, and revision are the three primary terms of dream-work. Each one designates a mechanism by which an unconscious wish or anxiety is given form, made representable to the dreamer in disguise.[9] As dreams are dreamt in images before being translated to words, they are also essentially pictorial. But what I think is important to emphasize here is the stress Freud places on the notion of 'work' to describe the way these image-making functions also represent unconscious processes. In dreams there is always a manifest or surface content produced by these operations which covers for its hidden or latent meaning. With this terminology to hand, one can easily see how the pictorial and associative means by which memes are produced resonate with Freud's project. But might we then ask what could be supposed by a notion of meme-work on the level of psychical dynamics from which, in dreams, these aesthetic processes are indivisible?

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7 Apter, "Alphabetic Memes," 8.

8 'Freud was a collector of farts and grimaces, an archaeologist of rubbish avant la lettre, as well a collector of the fading yet precious detritus of Western civilization'. John Forrester, "Collector, Naturalist, Surrealist," in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and Its Passions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 122.

9 Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 1-627.

In the deadly context Joselit and Apter have in mind, Trump looms large. Four years of a president apparently swept to office on a wave of alt-right meme-warriors has irreversibly altered the status of the meme as an object of political and psychic agency. As the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell puts it, 'psychoanalytic theory uses the bright colours of pathology as seen in the clinic to grasp the duller shades of the normative.' [10] If this is so, might not the glimmer of possibility that alt-right examples provide be an opportunity to say something of the psychic work memes perform? In other words, can we use the alt-right meme as a pathological instance inscribed by the trace of operations also present in less extreme, more generic, examples? Certainly the alt-right's incredulous declaration that with Trump's ascent to the White House in 2016 they had 'actually elected a meme' provides a sense of the wish-fulfilling functions that memes perform. Surely the politics of anxiety and fear which undergird Trump's electoral support would corroborate such a reading. Trump memes, in this sense, are a means of representing—giving form to, articulating—a set of collective desires and anxieties. The wish is at once dispersed and collected. For with memes, we are talking of images for and of the group, and the psychic work they perform is necessarily qua this mediation of group subjectivity—a subjectivity which, as we see daily, manifests an unremitting discordance.

One of the reasons why psychoanalytic theory isn't particularly well represented in the literature on memes may be on account of the persistent misapprehension that it is a theory of the individual rather than the social. And perhaps this owes something to Freud's own language when writing about groups. From *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and *Totem and Taboo* to *Moses and Monotheism* and *Civilisation and Its Discontents,* the major texts on groups strive to escape the image of the father and therefore remain beholden, figuratively at least, to the centrality of the individual circumscribed by the family unit. Unsurprisingly then, when Adorno—in his *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*, or more recently, Hal Foster, turn these ideas towards an analysis of historical or contemporary neo-fascism, the prominence of the 'leader', of the Fuhrerprinzip, remains intact.[11] So, despite the revelation in *Group Psychology* that hostility and violence are integral to the very formation of the social, that the group is psychotic, regressive and sustained by illusions, such moments of radical insight remain shaded in the legacy of Freud's work.[12] A further problem in applying Freudian theory to more recent emanations of fascistic subjectivity arises at the level of organisation. For while Freud's chief examples of groups—the church

10 Juliet Mitchell, "Psychoanalysis, siblings and the social group," *Psycho-analytic Psychotherapy in South Africa* 19 (2011), 64.

11 See also, Adorno with Else Frenkel-Brunswik and others, *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), as well as Foster, "Père Trump," *October* 159 (2017): 3-6; and his "Charisma and Catastrophe," *October* 170 (2019), 25-30.

12 On this current in Freud's work see Jacqueline Rose, "Mass Psychology," in *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2017), 62-92.

and the army—may have reflected the rigid hierarchical command structures of twentieth-century fascism, they resemble far less the anonymous online masses that are distinguished by their de-centered and lateral formations.

In order to escape the primacy of the individual subject as the touchstone of analysis and to more effectively address the 'social' quality of memes, we might look to two French analysts whose work with groups helps illuminate the social dimension of dreams. For Didier Anzieu, the group is 'like a dream', whilst for René Kaës not only is the unconscious structured like the group, but the group is structured like the unconscious. The psychic situation of the group is, like the dream situation, a repository of fantasies. The group, like the dream, possesses its own modes of expression, its own level of thought. The group and the dream are each 'a place where images are transformed in interaction'.[13] Kaës calls the group a 'dream factory', a site of polyphony that emerges from 'the interdiscursivity specific to the associative chain'.[14]

> [Dream polyphony] describes how the dream is worked on by, and in, a multiplicity of spaces and times, images and voices. It integrates the idea of a plural, common, and shared dream space [. . .] dreams are formed in relation to each other and can be interpreted in terms of their relations of reciprocal support. The hypothesis of dream polyphony leads us into a 'dream factory' where several dream spaces interpenetrate, where several dreamers make signs to each other and make themselves heard by several dreamers and several listeners, internal and external.[15]

If the group is like the dream, which is itself like the meme which is, in turn, like the gene, this is a sequence which corresponds to a particular logic of Freudian psychoanalysis. Introducing the first edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud writes of how the dream 'is the first of a series of abnormal psychic formations' whose 'succeeding members' are 'the hysterical phobias, the obsessions, the delusions'.[16] What links these phobias, obsessions and delusions is a corresponding or shared structure—a conflict at the seat of psychic functioning whose irresolution is expressed in the form of a symptom. The logic of the dream and the dream work thus enabled Freud to see how the symptom of a pathology itself represented its cause. And it did so by revealing the subject's psychic reality: that is, the subjective reality produced under the weight of repressed psychical structures and unconscious processes which determine the subject's apprehension of shared reality or actuality.

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13 Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious*, trans. Benjamin Kilborne (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 105.

14 René Kaës, *Linking, Alliances, and Shared Space: Groups and the Psychoanalyst*, trans. Andrew Weller (London: International Psychoanalysis Library, 2007), 202.

15 Kaës, *Linking, Aliiances, and Shared Space,* 183.

16 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* xxiii.

To encapsulate the psychic reality the memetic alt-right offers entry to, a well-known scene in Lana and Lilly Wachowski's 1999 film *The Matrix* offered a neat solution. The 'red pill' meme harks to the juncture in the movie's narrative where the central protagonist, the aptly named Neo, is offered a choice between two pills: one red, one blue. The latter will return Neo to his quotidian life as Thomas Anderson, a computer programmer; the former will deliver him, with no possibility of return, to a revelatory consciousness. Having chosen the red pill, Keanu Reeves' character finds his prior life revealed as a simulation designed to hide his real existence as one nodal organism in a vast system of techno-capitalist extraction.

As a figuration, the network is an exemplary blend of the disciplinary convergences that shaped the modern internet. It has ascended to supremacy as the dominant paradigm for how we compose and give shape to the social field. It is plural, perforating, and lateral. Memes have appeared within the imaginary of the network to limn and negotiate the sub-groups the network maps. As the red pill suggests, memes do not just border but create psychic realities in contrast to others. Which is to say, the network provides the figuration within which the meme, as a formation which might express psychic conflict, emerges as a symptom. For to be red pilled in the alt-right vernacular is to break from a consensus of actuality toward what is deemed from the outside as outside of sanity.

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown takes up nationalism's present resurgence through the 'passion for wall building' that has accompanied the hegemony of globalisation.[17] Walling, for Brown, manifests the tensions that attend the rise of the network as a predominant figure for the social. In the throes of its own waning, sovereignty madly reasserts itself in what Brown parses as defense mechanisms expressive of psychic resistance. She identifies tensions 'between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription' and, relatedly, 'between global networks and local nationalisms, virtual power and physical power, private appropriation and open sourcing, secrecy and transparency, territorialization and deterritorialization'. These show that whilst states may act as sovereign individuals, they are comprised of groups.[18] Responding to these tensions are fantasies Brown counts as 'of the dangerous alien', 'an increasingly borderless world', 'containment', 'impermeability', 'purity, innocence and goodness'.[19]

I want to pause briefly on something Anzieu says about illusions and the power of certain figurations in the group situation. He writes that the illusion 'may be factually erroneous, nevertheless it is persuasive and effective, as high powered ideas often are, because it corresponds to the phantasised reality of the group, because it expresses, as do myths, the transformation of the images that govern underlying forces'.[20] The illusion—the dream, in

17 Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 20.
18 Brown, *Walled States*, 7-8.
19 Brown, *Walled States,* 115-121.
20 Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious,* 124.

other words—is resistant to reality testing, indeed it s all the more persuasive and effective because it does not submit to actuality. This is, in effect, where Brown ends up at the end of *Walled States*, invoking Freud's conception of illusion to account for the persistence of sovereignty's theological dimension. Illusions in this account 'do not die upon being disproved' because they are not errors. [21] They differ from anything which could be mistaken on account of being powered by a wish which they express in the imagistic form of a scene. Anzieu writes: 'the group situation is thus perceived as anxiety-arousing with the same intensity as it is perceived as phantasy wish-fulfilment [thereby confirming] our notion that the group, like the dream and the symptom, is to be linked to both wishes and defences'.[22] Necessarily, the group illusion sustains 'a protective regression' which may be both 'bewitching' and 'self-destructive'.[23] Along this path the group succumbs to projection and splitting, committing to a 'vicious circle of repetition'.[24] Anzieu is telling us here a crucial part of what psychoanalysts working with groups—notably Wilfred Bion and Hannnah Segal in England as well as Kaës and Anzieu in France—have long known about their object of study: namely that the group is an unstable psychic entity prone to actively pursue the conditions of its own destruction.

The physical constructions Brown surveys map the anxieties of the network as it recalibrates the imaginative geography of group violence under conditions accelerated by new media affordances.[25] Far from the only form available for its expression, walling nonetheless indexes a condition of extreme paranoid anxiety: a behaviour, an impulse, a desire which represents the irresolution of a conflict in the social between the fantasy of sovereignty and unprecedented connectivity. Psychoanalysis tells us that the irresolution of conflicting desires and anxieties produces a pathological symptom. It is the provocation of this essay that the meme, sharing so much with the psychic condition of the group and the dream, may be usefully, if provisionally, apprehended along the same thread. So, if memes offer any sort of royal road to a more incisive appreciation of how our technological conjuncture reimagines and re-attires the pathologies of the group, they would surely do so on account of their transmission of unconscious communication. This would be as crucial a part of their transformation and transmission of affects as their explicit acts of political speech. For if memes speak not just their own polyglot vernaculars but a vast array of other languages, verbal and non-verbal, that is not to say they remain masters of their own tongue and invulnerable to it slipping. In such ways, memes un-contain fantasies as much as they contain them. And if memes also collectivise fantasy, inasmuch as they articulate the many voices which comprise the unconscious, such a perspective would read the meme as a medium

21 Brown, *Walled States,* 132.
22 Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious,* 130.
23 Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious*, 159.
24 Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious,* 159.
25 I borrow the term 'imaginative geography' here from Edward Said to encompass the social and political implications of spatiality in fantasy. See Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31 (1977): 162-206.

of peculiar susceptibility to the representation of fantasies which index the pathological dimensions of everyday life.

In the final chapter of her first major work on male hysteria (a subject whose pertinence to the alt-right meme there is, unfortunately, no space to expand on here), *Mad Men and Medusas*, Mitchell offers an intriguing, if all too brief, speculation to this discussion. 'Between the nightmare and the dream', she writes, 'are bad dreams'.[26] Bad dreams, she suggests, are survival dreams, yet what haunts them originates in fantasy. They are dreams in which the subject struggles manically to cope with the threat of his annihilation, to contain that violence within the envelope of the dream. Bad dreams are also confused dreams, caught between wish fulfilment and the escape of waking up (the being allowed to 'die safely' that the nightmare offers its traumatised dreamer.) They feel extremely real, with the quality of those states just before we wake or fall asleep. 'In a good dream, the ego is mobile, occupying different people in different stances'.[27] In a bad dream, however, 'this ego mobility is excessive, frantic and bizarre'.[28] Bad dreams, are 'full of incongruous juxtapositions suggesting the iterativeness and compulsiveness of the [dream's] strategy'.[29] The 'ego is not mobile so much as driven from pillar to post'.[30] The bad dream, it turns out, is a peculiarly intense and illicit dream. It is a high-stakes dream in which anxieties and desire are wrapped ever more tightly around each other to impede the work of the censor. The bad dream puts the mechanisms of dream-work into overdrive. The system, it seems, can barely cope. What is worse, from these dreams, one doesn't wake up.

In considering what this relationship between the dream and memes might let on to, I would recommend not collapsing the differences between the two terms. Instead, any correspondence might be more helpfully directed toward the way memes could help us think about the group as a psychic object. This would be a perspective set against the algorithmic culture which fosters its own illusions about the extent to which the group can be analysed empirically, and which has now attracted around its methodologies familiar categories of the neuroses.

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26 Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition* (London: Penguin Press, 2000), 336.
27 Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas,* 336.
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THE CONTAGIOUS OTHER: VIRALITY AND ANXIETY IN CONGOLESE MEMES

LESLEY NICOLE BRAUN

Two banknotes cover the mouth and eyes of a Congolese young man who is seated in front of a religious poster made in China. His shirt is emblazoned with the flag of Zaire – the Democratic Republic of Congo's former name under the three-decade dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. The caption: "Have you protected yourself? I have". He is a meme-maker. Viral content like memes offer a unique way to understand how cultural, political and economic phenomena register with people. The meme at figure 1 is one example that points to the ambivalence people express regarding the past and future as well as their position within global markets. Landlocked in the heart of the African continent, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been continuously striving to breach its borders and connect to the wider global community. Yet as infrastructural transformations offer promises of connectivity, anxieties surface around the vulnerability that comes with that connection.

Fig. 1: Caption translation: Have you protected yourself? The wearing of dirty bills on one's face resonates with current global mask mandates, as expressed in the caption's call to 'protect yourself. [1]

Coltan is a rare metal prehistorically deposited in the DRC's veins that now pumps through cell phones and car batteries, but with such a blessing comes the curse of hungry foreign investors. Like the rest of the world, mobile phone technology is becoming integral to the lived reality of the Congolese people. Though still a nascent market, in 2020 there were an estimated 35.13 million mobile connections, equivalent to 40% of the DRC's total

1 While the identities of the meme sources/creators are difficult to pin down, those that are known have been intentionally kept anonymous (unless otherwise indicated) due to ethical issues relating to censorship concerns in the DRC.

population[2]. The situation in the DRC presents a two-way flow, where the inner viscera of mobile technologies flow out of the country while the final realization of its commodity form flows back in. This dual movement is sometimes aligned, other times in opposition, or both simultaneously. One stark expression of this phenomenon is seen in the dual movement of biological and memetic virality.

For people whose lives are doubly affected by this extraction and consumption, one possible avenue of escape is the content they consume and share: information, images, memes; a new visual language engendered and enabled through the very technology rearranging the earth beneath their feet. It is in this act that Congolese citizens can recapture a piece of these signs and codes for their own narratives and politics.

Fig. 2: Caption translation: When you're left with only 50f to send 50 texts and Airtel asks you if you want to make a donation of 50f to the government for the fight against covid-19. The specific "when you're…" opening text and the two-panel image follow familiar meme structures. Meanwhile, one needs to think twice before deciding if this is a meme, an ad or a PSA. Meme courtesy of Socier officiel (Instagram).

As older forms of expression and communication employ new technologies, they impose their own pre-digital memetic force. Viral content interacts with other modes of communication, such as rumour, which has been used to convey opinions about biological viral outbreaks like Ebola and now Covid-19. The parallel viralities of pathogens and (mis)information is lost on few. As China takes the spotlight in discussions about 5G cellular technology, metonymies metastasize into memetic narratives and alternate realities. With this technological potential come new anxieties mirroring the movement of discovery and extraction, which are especially apparent in countries that are brought into global mining networks.

2 Simon Kemp, "Digital 2020: the Democratic Republic of the Congo", last Modified February 17, 2020, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-democratic-republic-of-the-congo.

I draw here on ethnographic research conducted in the capital city of Kinshasa in collaboration with Ribio Nzeza, a professor of Communication at the University of Kinshasa. Our findings point to how people circulating texts, images, and memes can disturb structural power. But the open channels, the overflow of signs, the collapse of context—these can also be a contagious force driving breakdown of the social order.[3]

One kind of imagery or visual code impregnated with a force unique to DRC are its memes. Here, we move from virality to virility, an overabundance of life. There's a focus on the corporeality of African bodies, both in their mythological locality, and their eternal affirmations as spiritual cosmologies. These memes, carried anonymously by internet infrastructures, are another connection between the individual and the collective, and between the DRC and the world.

Digital Divide and Control

The West Africa Cable System (WACS) is a submarine fibre-optic cable that provides bandwidth to much of Africa. Implemented in 2012, the DRC was only connected to WACS about a year after this date, with the help of Chinese foreign investment due to a lack of in-country funding. Currently, approximately 70% of the African continent's IT spine has been built by Huawei, a Chinese telecom giant. Information shared between African people must ride Chinese information highways via detours through European data centres, which means that streaming video comes with a slight lag. Such gaps in time undergo compound expansion as more people have become dependent on stable internet connections due to the pandemic. Consequently, Huawei has offered to strengthen the DRC's national backbone network with 5G technology.[4]

News of China's investments should not suggest that the DRC has reached an equitable distribution of connectivity. This country, roughly two thirds the size of western Europe, is home to an estimated population of 89 million people, many of whom survive on $2 USD a day. The digital divide is still massive in this vast land and it is difficult to discern how many people are actually online, as quantitative research regarding online activity in the DRC is scant. This said, people are drawn to online culture like everyone else, chronicling their lives through digital images. They are becoming meme producers — jokes, statements, and outrages get the infinitely shareable translation to become collective expressions. Images are replicable and modifiable, sacred and desecrated — and always with the potential to become a weapon turned against the self qua creator, sharer, witness. For this reason, posters of most memes circulating in, and around, the DRC remain anonymous. This is true both within the country's borders and among members of its diaspora.

3 Lesley Nicole Braun and Ribio Bunketi Buse Nzeza "Infectious Images: Viral Internet Content in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *Critical Arts* 34, no. 4 (2020), 103-116.

4 Paul Budde, "Democratic Republic of Congo - Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband - Statistics and Analyses," *Research and Markets,* September 2020, https://www.researchandmarkets.com.

The Congolese State is not unaware of the destabilizing potential of digital democracy: this decade has been marked by periods of civil protest, and the people know all-too-well that internet blackouts are one of the government's first lines of attack against "unruly" masses. And of course, more traditional censorship is also part of its arsenal. So long as the internet is running, the anonymity provided by social media platforms will be both where and how you critique power and organize political movements.

Viral content in the DRC interacts with a longer history of orality and rumour, as well as political cartoons. During the colonial era when the DRC was oppressed by Belgium, cartoons and popular paintings were communicative genres instrumental in the struggle for independence,[5] and in postcolonial settings they are mediums that covertly and sometimes explicitly mock and challenge gross abuses of power.[6] Like rumours, memes assume new meaning as they circulate. Building on Achille Mbembe's provocation that "rumour is the poor-man's bomb",[7] Frances Nyamnjoh draws parallels between rumour and cartoons in the context of neighbouring Cameroon, foreshadowing what would later form part of contemporary discussions about alternative sources of truth. He writes, "Both political rumour and cartooning, it could be argued, are ways of cushioning the hardness of the crushing and stifling official discourse that monopolised the public sphere, often claiming to be the sole bearer of truth."[8] With the advent of new technology and the diminishing importance of print newspapers in the DRC, memes — specifically image macros (that is, images captioned with text, blending magazine graphic art, print ads and single-panel comics) — are considered 2.0 versions of cartoons. Memes are visual forms shaped by people's concrete experiences, even as they are expressed with the raw visual material circulating in abstract and proprietary spaces. Moreover, in becoming a generative medium through which to discuss politics, they reshape lives and in turn form a continuous productive-consumptive loop.

The Appeal of Memes

As a mechanism of critique, subversive memes hold fascination both in their content as well as for the suspenseful thrill of following the reaction to — or of evading consequences for — a given meme. Figure 3, for instance, is a meme that points to the government's involvement with extractive capital. The head of Kabila Kamambe, the president of the DRC from 2001 to 2019, is photoshopped onto the body of a woman and 'quoted' as saying: "I am Kabila Kamambe, a mediocre prostitute sent from Rwanda." The rubber boots are

5 Akin Adejuwon and Shina Alimi, "Cartoons as Illustration: Political Process in Nigeria," *The Journal of Pan-African Studies* 4 (2011), 57.

6 Francis Nyamanjoh, "Press Cartoons and Politics: The Case of Cameroon," in *Cartooning in Africa*, ed. J.A. Lent (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2009), 97–111.

7 Achille Mbembe, "The Thing and its Double in Cameroonian Cartoons," in *Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Baber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 151–163.

8 Francis Nyamanjoh, "Press Cartoons and Politics: The Case of Cameroon," in *Cartooning in Africa*, ed. J.A. Lent (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2009), 99.

suggestive of the country's eastern region where many of the mines are located. Here we have a combination of corrupt politicians, resource extraction, and the figurative "prostitute" who, in this context, uses their body to monetarily gain from a presumably wealthier and more powerful entity. This sort of print cartoon would land a cartoonist in jail, but as it was anonymously created and circulated online, it could not lead the authorities to hold any individual accountable. Still, simply viewing it or having it on a phone can give one a thrill of being a transgressive dissident.

Fig. 3: Caption translation: I am Kabila Kamambe, a mediocre prostitute sent from Rwanda.

Although some may argue that this symbolic act of transgression only deflates the pressure toward material action, a more likely assumption is that the circulation of political memes complicates the sources, avenues, targets and consequences of political criticism. This is largely since memes can be light-hearted as well as grave, coming at us as a fast-flow of images, perhaps even dulling us to these non-sequitur effects. From serious critiques of state or corporate politics, to ludic takes on social norms, it all blends into a comfy background rhythm of signs and expressions.

Take the highly meme'd pose (Figures 4 and 5) in which a woman carries an adult male using the familiar back sling normally used for babies. The grown man sucks his thumb or grins like a proud brat — the humorous intention apparent to all. However, such a meme also depends on the viewer being "in the know" regarding the context of the sling, of Congolese marital relations, of the infantility of men within domestic materiality, etc.Knowing this, the consumptive rewards are that much more "worth it."

The question again is: Will such mocking images result into true societal self-criticism? Or by making light of these issues, will they temper any call to change?

Fig. 4 and fig. 5: Two examples of a popular meme depicting a man in a traditional sling normally used to carry babies.

This ambiguity brought on by political memes renders it difficult to locate a single source of unchallenged power. Rather, we have a carnivalesque commentary on the arbitrariness of authority. Whether it is the outright mocking of politicians (as in Figure 3), or playfully remixing familiar scenes of male-female/parent-child roles (Figures 4 and 5), the primary aim of these images is to make people laugh. Yet, there remains the danger of the two-way nature of meme production and consumption: one laughs at power, only for that laughter to become redirected at one's own lack of power. We become both subjects of agency and objects of ridicule.

In this way, these memes echo what scholars have said of the role of print cartoons: "Laughter frequently adopts a self-reflexive mode through which those subject to power mock their own powerlessness and lack of agency in the face of a system that they perceive as immutable".[9] The self-reflexive laughter, always teetering at the edge of irony, is therefore a coping mechanism.

9 Wendy Willems, "Comic Strips and 'the Crisis': Postcolonial Laughter and Coping with Everyday Life in Zimbabwe," *Popular Communication* 9, no. 2 (2011): 16.

Sometimes, universality is eschewed for more granular in-group identification. The virality of certain memes or videos depend on their capacity to communicate a select group's situations and ideas, which is often accomplished at the expense of some "other" (such othered figures will haunt this paper further down). And in the shared feeling of identity, community, and nationality, these memes create an imaginary universal set of shared interests.[10] The meme in Figure 6 was particularly popular among Congolese Facebook groups, but more so for those now living in Europe than within the DRC's borders. The three-panel image macro describes the state of surveillance in three different contexts. The U.S-China rivalry is here flattened to similar states using high-tech CCTV cameras. Both are contrasted to the final panel: a neighbourhood in Kinshasa. The meme's appeal resides in how it emits self-essentialized caricatures of Congolese culture: perhaps low-tech, but more personal.

Fig. 6: Caption translation from left to right: "Politicians, wives of politicians, sons of politicians, voters." The instant you get the joke about the corruption of politicians, you're immediately forced to confront your own poverty and powerlessness. Thisenforces the coping mechanism of self-reflexive laughter at your sorry lot and its causes (namely the greedy ruling classes).

10 Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions,1983).

Fig. 6: Caption translation: "Surveillance cameras, America, China, Lingwala" (a neighbourhood in Kinshasa). Again, the joke is based on the material inequalities between the richer countries and poorer Africa, while at the same time reminding/rewarding "in-the-know" viewers through a sense of personal community-interest lacking in the techno-surveillance states of "advanced" countries.

Made in China

International media often criticizes China's manoeuvring as a neo-colonial power in Africa (though some would say that China is merely following the logic of global capitalism). In many African countries, little to no local industry exists, and affordable Chinese goods are the only choice. Pejorative terms like "Fong Kong'' in Southern Africa and "Chinoiserie" in Francophone Africa express people's disappointment with the quality of the products that saturate their lives. A common joke in the DRC: A Chinese man marries a Congolese woman and has a baby. The baby dies and everyone cries except the Congolese woman's father, who says: "Nothing Chinese-made lasts very long."

In memes too, Chinese presence on the African continent is made visible. One finds the expected light-hearted provocations about cultural stereotypes, such as Figure 13. This meme depicts a Chinese-owned shop in the DRC featuring a mannequin that mimics stereotypical Congolese silhouettes, with the text pointing to China's propensity to make knockoffs of anything. These images work their way into everyday conversations, sometimes causing debate.

Fig. 13: Caption translation: (left) "Chinese don't miss anything! They made a Congolese mannequin."

The circulation of people, products and memes has given rise to a multiplication of conspiracy theories across the African continent. Figure 14 presents us with a photoshopped image of a Chinese man grabbing African women's breasts. Is this legitimate or fake news, propaganda or just a troll? What backlash can it cause if interpreted as legitimate?

Fig. 14: Caption translation: "Here is what this poor Chinese man is doing in the quarries with miners."

A Me(r)maid's Tale

Creative genres incorporating text and image (popular art, print ads and print cartoons) draw from oral histories, folkloric tales, and rumours of their cultures. These archives of popular history are now being worked into memes. For instance, the mystical siren *Mami Wata* is a recurring folkloric motif across Africa, appearing in Congolese paintings. Between the 1950s and 1970s these paintings portrayed her donning a wrist watch, an imprint of colonial power. The appearance of this aspirational symbol came at a time when people were experiencing an inflow of new consumer commodities (Figures 9,10,11), themselves symbols of the times changing. Clock-time is also symbolic of the rigid organization of daily life so necessary to capitalist modes of production.

Fig. 7, fig. 8, and fig. 9: Mami Wata wearing a wrist watch.

Since the colonial period, people have told of encounters with Mami Wata, who is depicted as a siren, an irresistible temptress. In exchange for loyalty or a sacrifice, she offers men material wealth and success. Wealthy men are sometimes perceived as having made pacts with Mami Wata, especially if people cannot directly infer their line of work or the source of their financial success. One commonly hears, "azalaka na mwasi ya Mami Wata, mbongo naye eza mystique" (he has a Mami Wata, his money is mystical). These perceived suspicious and dubious sources of wealth are considered immoral because they are linked to occult forces that have been harnessed in their acquisition. Mami Wata is deeply connected to material excess, luring hapless suitors with the trappings of the modern capitalist world. In this way, her serpentine nature connects with the Edenic serpent of the Bible, beguiling humans with sweet and shiny things into the modern world of work, pain, and suffering. Now, this sea serpentess swims alongside information and rumours through digital channels. Men are warned about online romantic liaisons with digital sirens. With new channels come new monsters and anxieties.

One story of Mami Wata surfaced in 2012 when Chinese engineers were installing underwater internet cables in the Congo River.[11] Complications bred rumours of something fishy. Then, they caught Her. A video of captured Mami Wata went viral and eventually aired on national television. How could Mami Wata, so ancient and mysterious, be captured by the Chinese? Chinese people had to become the exotic "other", powerful enough to catch this supernatural creature that was disturbing the connection between Congo's cables and a broader network.[12]

The ways Mami Wata and digital culture circulate demonstrate how the internet is a vehicle for encounters with otherness. Further, both expressions are inter-participatory: their meanings coexist in constant evolution. Parallels can also be made between the virality of memes and Mami Wata's memetic force, in that they are mutable and shapeshifting, both inspiring myths that coalesce into rumours and back again. The cultural feedback loop in which Mami Wata swims has her constantly chasing her own fin.

As circulation accelerates — of people, commodities, images, ideas — proximities will breed new anxieties as well as new potentialities. The ambiguity between anxiety and triviality immanent to internet technology infects our relationships, especially to the "other". Mobile and internet technology only expands the unprotected spaces where others can infect you. In the DRC, mobile-phone technology has provoked concerns about new social forms of intimacy, which then slip into suspicions about spiritual foul play. Since with a mobile one is always reachable, one is always vulnerable to the social "other".

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11 Lesley Braun "Cyber Siren: What Mami Wata Reveals about the Internet and Chinese Rresence in Kinshasa," *Journal of Canadian African Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015), 301-318.

12 Fiston Frequencemagic, "chinios akangi mami wata na congo," YouTube video, April 28, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h80Tchh15_E.

One circulating rumour across Africa and Asia involved a tale of people killed after answering an unknown telephone number[13]— like getting a computer virus when you download a file. This rumour reveals the anxieties associated with the overlapping dynamics of social connectivity, globalisation, and local ontologies of the supernatural. Further, there are some underlying assumptions here to do with local forms of African witchcraft. Writing in the context of South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff suggest that witchcraft in Africa can be thought of as, "etiological principles which translate structural contradictions, experiential anomalies, and aporiahs [sic]— force fields of greater complexity than is normally implied by ''class struggle''—into the argot of human agency, of interpersonal kinship, of morality and passion."[14] The form that witchcraft often takes in the DRC and other African countries relates to intimacy and trust.[15] In other words, the people within one's social networks have the potential of doing you the most harm. Witches can act unconsciously, unaware that they are inflicting harm on others. These supernatural forces now circulate in the digital realm, as even those closest to you can be conduits sharing viruses (biological or computational) or exposing you to anxiety-inducing viral content.

Local ontologies of enchantment, magic, and the sacred strengthen the idea that images themselves are virulent, infecting people's minds on a literal level. For instance, it is not uncommon for a person to say: "Do not infect my phone with that video of yours. I do not want to be contaminated by those images." With regards to the Mami Wata viral video, people were reluctant to save it on their phones, fearing its mystical quality could infect the viewer through its communication. With memes, the passage from information to persuasion to manipulation is optimized, as depicted in Figure 10 in which a young man is washing his brain, trying to make it clean again.

Fig. 10: Caption translation: "Tag a friend who needs to have his brain washed" Though the term brainwashing directly translates in French as "lavage de cerveau", this meme also refers to having a dirty mind. Meme courtesy of Starjirexmedia (Instagram).

13 Julien Bonhomme, "Les Numéros de Téléphone Portable qui Tuent. Epidemiologie Culturelle d'une Rumeur Transnationale," *Tracés 21* Contagion/Contamination (2011), 125–150.

14 Jean and John Commaroff, "Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants , and Millennial Capitalism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (2002), 796.

15 Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Self-Mockery as Defence

Supernatural content in memes can also be light-hearted, and not perceived as sinister. Consider the rooster in Figure 11, standing at attention among a roll call of uniformed soldiers. The French caption reads, "When you are a witch and forget to transform yourself back in the morning." Like many great memes, the humour operates at several different levels: the common meme "TMW" setup, the witch's forgetfulness, the in-feeling of getting the mystical significance, a poke at militarism, and the gesture of Congolese self-mockery in which the idea of a witch's presence is an uncanny, yet plausible one.

Fig. 11: Caption translation: "When you're a witch and you forget to transform yourself in the morning." This follows the familiar "that moment when…" (TMW) structure very common in memes.

Fig. 12: Caption translation: "The moment when your phone is charging and you start to think about your future." Again, there is that "TMW" structure. Meme courtesy of Socier officiel (Instagram).

"Sorcier officiel," or 'Witch official,' is a profile on Instagram devoted to francophone African memes (Fig 12). The account handle is an ironic nod to African witchcraft, but also to the bureaucratic humour of writing from a witch's "official" account (as if it is run by witch interns).

Sorcier officiel's popularity signals the bewitching quality of being a meme creator, charged with the task of sending out images to infect our minds.

Enchanted Horizons

As the reality of a biological virus dominates our material lives, its media dominates our airwaves and bandwidth. The next decade's struggle over internet politics will usher in its own ideological battles, and mapping the pressure points of geopolitical anxieties can reveal the moving intersections between biological and technological virality. The digital image of Mami Wata, that captured mythical siren — horrid and scared in a bright white room, surrounded by prodding engineers — surfaced during a moment when connectivity was on the horizon. Congolese people have long understood the potency of images, and their power to spread, infect and manipulate. Dichotomies between the state and "the people", as well as China and the "rest" are not clearly discernible, and alliances between different actors and entities create new complexities in terms of both cooperation and emergent antagonisms.

As memes continue to circulate around the world, people in the global north, are (re)discovering the enchantment of images, a force that had long been ascribed to irrational worldviews of the "other". Now memes delight and perhaps even unite us as they circulate on our slick and well-branded devices. And in the political realm they have proven to translate their virality into tools of power struggles. However, as our world becomes more connected and infected, we should say: it is not so much a short-circuiting by the "other", but a crashing of a horizon between worlds.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Abidin Abidin and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye

Crystal Abidin is the founder of the TikTok Cultures Research Network. She is a digital anthropologist and ethnographer of vernacular internet cultures, and researches internet celebrity, influencer cultures, and social media pop cultures. She has published 5 books and over 60 articles and chapters on various aspects of internet cultures. Crystal is Associate Professor of Internet Studies, Principal Research Fellow, and ARC DECRA Fellow at Curtin University. For her public scholarship and continuous engagements with industry, Crystal was listed on ABC Top 5 Humanities Fellows (2020), Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia (2018), and Pacific Standard 30 Top Thinkers Under 30 (2016). Reach her at *wishcrys.com*.

D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye is a postdoctoral fellow at L'Université Sorbonne Paris Nord, a research associate at Curtin University, and a sessional researcher at the Digital Media Research Centre at Queensland University of Technology. His research interests include digital music, cultural policy, and platform studies. Recently, he has extensively researched the short video platform, TikTok, with several articles published in peer-review journals and a book under contract with Polity Press to be published in 2022. He has also published research on creative labor in India, digital nationalism in China, and cultural policy in Myanmar.

Chloë Arkenbout

Chloë Arkenbout joined the Institute of Network Cultures as a researcher, editor and producer in 2020. She has a background in media studies and philosophy and worked as a freelance copywriter, journalist and communications professional for several years, specializing in the cultural and social sector. Next to memes, and viral image culture in general, her research includes topics such as online debate, inclusive language, digital activism, call out culture and (performative) allyship. Next to her role at INC, she works as a teacher at the Communication and Multimedia Design program at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, where she is a also member of the Research Ethics Committee.

Anirban K. Baishya

Anirban Baishya is an Assistant Professor at the Communication and Media Studies Department, Fordham University. His current research examines selfies and the rise of digital selfhood in India. His research interests include New Media and Digital Cultures, Social Media & Politics, Media Aesthetics, Surveillance Studies, and South Asian Film & Media. His work has been published in *International Journal of Communication*, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, *South Asian Popular Culture*, *Porn Studies*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* and *Media, Culture and Society.*

Aarushi Bapna and Ajitesh Lokhande

Aarushi Bapna is a visual communicator, designer, and researcher from India. She graduated with a Bachelor's in Design (Graphic Design) from the National Institute of Design – Ahmedabad in 2020. Her interests include critical design, decolonizing design, and designing for social impact, especially in the realm of the socio-cultural implications of technology. She is a recipient of the Core77 Speculative Design Award 2020 in recognition of her project 'Speculative Stories from Shahpur Jat'.

Ajitesh Lokhande is a graphic designer and visual researcher from India. He is a graduate of the National Institute of Design – Ahmedabad, with a specialization in Graphic Design. Originally from Mumbai, India, he currently works as a brand identity designer and art director based out of Paris, France. He is deeply interested in transcultural design, languages, non-western visual cultures, and music. He is a co-author of the paper 'Prosumeristic Publications: alt+yd', a project that explores the future of phygital publication practices, presented and published in the DeSForM 2019 conference organized by the MIT Design Lab.

Both Aarushi and Ajtesh are a part of the Critters' Collective.

Luther Blissett

The Luther Blissett multiple name project (the name originally belonged to a British football player) was initiated in 1994 in Italy, and has since then been joined by dozens of mail-artists, underground reviews, poets, performers and squatters' collectives in cities throughout Europe.

Grant Bolmer

Grant Bollmer is the author of three books, *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection* (2016), *Theorizing Digital Cultures* (2018), and *Materialist Media Theory: An Introduction* (2019), and is a co-editor, with Yiğit Soncul, of a special issue of the journal *parallax* on 'Networked Liminality' (2020). He is currently completing a book on the history of technologies used in psychological research on emotion. He is an Associate Professor of Media Studies at North Carolina State University, where he teaches in the Department of Communication and the Ph.D. Program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media (CRDM).

Stephanie Boulding

Stephanie Boulding is a teller of stories. She is interested in the psychic togetherness afforded by the Internet as a new communication medium, and the intimately human

stories that emanate from this fact. Her podcast, Ephemera, is an exploration of stories and theory, an attempt to situate the Internet and the Online within a framework of literary criticism. By the grace of God, she is neither an academic nor a Youtube video essayist.

'Writers[...]are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like.' —Walter Benjamin

Lesley Braun

Lesley Nicole Braun is a senior lecturer at the University of Basel at the Institute of Social Anthropology. Since 2008, she has been collaborating with researchers in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) on various research projects ranging from the world of popular concert dance, to the transnational movements of women traders who travel between the DRC and China. Her book, *Congo's Dancers: Women and Work in Kinshasa*, forthcoming with the University of Wisconsin Press, focuses on the ways that popular dance, in its embodied and symbolic forms, participates in the construction of an urban experience.

Anthony Burton

Anthony Glyn Burton is a Ph.D. student and SSHRC Joseph Bombardier Fellow in the Department of Communications at Simon Fraser University. Anthony's research is broadly concerned with the networked development of epistemologies and ideology in technological and datafied environments. He has published in *First Monday*, the *International Journal of Communications*, the *Canadian Journal of Communications*, and the *Harvard Misinformation Review*. He also co-convenes the Techne/Technics/Technology (3T) reading and research group with the Associação de Pesquisas e Práticas em Humanidades (Porto Alegre). He graduated from Ryerson and York University's Master of Arts in Communication & Culture, where he wrote his thesis on involuntary celibacy, programmatic epistemology, and masculinity under neoliberalism. He is a researcher at the Digital Democracies Institute, the Infoscape Lab at Ryerson University, and affiliated with the Open Intelligence Lab at the University of Amsterdam. https://anthbrtn.com.

Caspar Chan

Caspar Chan, originally from Macau, is a current Research Master student of Arts and Culture at the University of Groningen, following the track of Arts, Media and Literary Studies. His research interests lie in the relationship between the public sphere and identity construction, along with politics in popular culture, specifically in the contexts of Macau and Hong Kong. He studied Applied Musicology (M.A.) at Utrecht University, and Music Studies (B.A.) at the Hong Kong Baptist University. Raised as a music scholar and being a keen traveler, he also writes on music, travel, heritage, and culture on different local and international platforms, as well as in various journals and newspapers.

Clusterduck

Clusterduck is a collective working at the crossroads of research, design and transmedia, focusing on social media and internet related content.

Åke Gafvelin

Åke Gafvelin is a second year philosophy student at King's College, Cambridge. He runs the podcast *The Metaphysical Laboratory* and has edited the book *Filosofi och Pandemi*, which is a collection of interviews with Swedish philosophers on the Covid-19 pandemic. Aside from meme-culture, Åke is interested in metaethics, pragmatism and the philosophy of religion.

İdil Galip

İdil Galip is a writer, researcher and maker. Her work explores the intersections of digital culture and labour, especially with relation to online communities. She is currently a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of Edinburgh, finishing up her thesis titled *Art Worlds Online: Memes, Labour and Politics*. She is also the founder and convener of the Meme Studies Research Network.

Martin Hanßen

Martin Hanßen is an art and visual historian. He works as an art educator for the Berlin State Museums and teaches art history online. After obtaining his B.A. from AMD Düsseldorf, where he specialized in costume history and fashion theory, he studied art and visual history at Humboldt University of Berlin. His research focus is the visual culture of late medieval and early modern Europe, particularly 15th century European painting and the origins of reproductive media. Currently, he investigates the contemporary perception of the Old Masters online and examines the new conception of late medieval and early modern visual culture in digital spaces by scrutinizing users' interaction with and the migration of digital images of works of art from this period in network cultures.

Geoff Hondroudakis

Geoff Hondroudakis is a researcher in media theory and philosophy of technology, with a background in literary theory and philosophy. Currently he is a graduate research student at the University of Melbourne, where his work examines theories of scale and abstraction in philosophy and media.

Max Horwich

Max Horwich is a musician, designer, teacher and creative technologist based in Brooklyn, NY. His work explores the intersections of new media and folk art practices

Yasmeen Khaja

Yasmeen Khaja is a designer and writer based in Kuwait. She currently works with creative studios including Sharaf Studio and Amna Alsalem. Previously, she has worked with the organizations Aerial Futures, AIA NY, SYPartners, the Arab Film & Media Institute, and more. She is interested in contemplating the overlapping spaces between the internet and everyday life. Yasmeen holds an MA in Design Research, Writing, and Criticism from the School of Visual Arts in New York. She was awarded the Paula Rhodes award for her MA thesis on memes and cultural identity in Kuwait. She also holds an honors BFA in Graphic Design from the California College of the Arts.

Andy King

Andy King is a media artist and researcher, whose satirical and political works focus on internet subcultures, loneliness and human relationships in the digital age. She explores the blurring of borders between truth and fiction, copy and original, private and public spaces. King often includes found images and videos in her works, photographing and manipulating them repeatedly in a way that mimics how information is disseminated and distorted online. In her free time, she infiltrates online far-right groups with the goal to investigate and document new developments, as well as anonymously engage with individual members in order to deradicalize them.

Ivan Knapp

Ivan Knapp was awarded his PhD in the History of Art by University College London in 2021 for a thesis entitled *Meme-work: Psychoanalysis and the alt-right*. His research focuses on questions of psychoanalysis and masculinity.

Jacob Sujin Kuppermann

Jacob Sujin Kuppermann is an interdisciplinary researcher and writer currently living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Their work focuses on the intersections between ecology and the history of science, with particular interests in historical ecology, information studies, and science communication. They also moonlight as a music critic at *The Singles Jukebox*.

Anahita Neghabat

Anahita Neghabat is a Cultural and Social Anthropologist and meme-making activist from Vienna, Austria. She is currently finishing her MA in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Vienna, in the framework of which she also studied at the Gender Studies Department of the Central European University in Budapest. Anahita is working at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) as Academic Assistant to the Rector, Shalini Randeria. She is a board member of the *kontexte*.-network, a non-profit organization that connects and supports students and alumni of cultural and social science disciplines.

In her online-activist practice Anahita uses memes as a visual vocabulary, medium and tool for political commentary, reaching a broad and young audience of over 24 thousand people on Instagram. As @ibiza_austrian_memes she comments on Austrian interior politics with the aim of intervening in public political discourse from an intersectional feminist, anti-racist and anti-authoritarian perspective. Anahita creates and curates memes and posts them along with concise texts, providing additional background information and offering critical perspectives in accessible language. She founded her meme page in May 2019 as a reaction to the 'Ibiza Affair' in Austria, a political scandal that caused the collapse of the far-right governing coalition. Anahita is academically and politically interested in questions of social justice, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives and approaches, as well as intersectional feminism, particularly the genderedness of (anti-Muslim) racism in Austria and Central Europe.

Sarp Özer

Sarp Özer is a curator and researcher working in the field of contemporary art. He is the director of programs at AVTO, a cultural organization located in Istanbul. His research focuses on the role of digital affordances in engineering public opinion. Özer contributed to publications of L'Internazionale, SALT.TXT, Arter and so-far. He is among the producers of the Ahali Conversations, a podcast series inquiring on the future of cultural production by Can Altay.

Saeeda Saeed

Visual activist Saeeda Saeed has spent the last number of years developing guerrilla communication platforms that transgress Saudi state-controlled media. Her practice collectivizes power through incremental, joint collaborations with self-organized microstructures within her community. In 2015, Saeed set up a series of DIY Pirate Radio networks in tandem with underground musicians, erotic poets, nudist artists, members of the LGBTQIA community, and illegal immigrants transmitting over 270 hours of alternative narratives within the kingdom.

In her residency at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Saeed looks at different manifestations of her identity as an activist injecting play, performance, fiction and movement. In her more

recent work, Saeed pivoted to design interventions within Twitter in response to recent legislations that reconstituted 'the act of retweeting narratives that go against the state or religion' as an act of terrorism. Saeed devised a series of counter posting strategies to drown out official state-run tweets and allow users to safely mask their IP locations. Among them is an Instant Meme Noise Reactor (2020), an object that spits out nonsensical, humorous insults to state-run accounts each time they post and a Portable Clickfarm (2019) that utilizes physical movement and the human body as a disruptive tool in gaining digital autonomy.

Saeed is currently working on WILD DAUGHTERS: A queer online publication developed in collaboration with two Saudi female activists. Saeed was awarded The Hartwig Art Production prize | Collection Fund special project 2020-21, for the acquisition of new artworks to be acquired by the Hartwig Art Fund and donated to the Dutch national art collection.

Laurence Scherz

Laurence Scherz (°1989, Belgium) is a writer, translator, tattoo artist, and meme lover. She currently works for The Hmm, platform for internet cultures. Aside from this, she's writing her first collection of short stories, ranging from tales of feminism fairy tales to dystopian, speculative fiction, and magic realism. One time, a boss asked her what a meme was, and she's never been more enthusiastic about anything ever since.

The Trans Bears

The Trans Bears are two gender non-conforming people of American and German-American origin, based in Philadephia and London. As artists, comedians and academics, they are interested in the radical potential of lols and using them to jinx the constraints of consensus reality.

Sabrina Ward-Kimola

Sabrina Ward-Kimola is a Research Associate with the Infoscape Lab. She is currently a student at Ryerson/York's joint program in Communication and Culture. She holds a SSHRC-funded position at Concordia's PhD in Communication, and will be working with the Access in-the-making (AIM) Lab starting in September 2021. She is writing her thesis on the digital writing and interpretation practices of American Sign Language poets in North America. Her more general research interests include critical theory, post-hermeneutics, virtual embodiment and platform infrastructures.

Scott Wark

Scott Wark is a Research Fellow for the Wellcome-funded project, People Like You: Contemporary Figures of Personalisation. He is based at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies at the University of Warwick. He researches online culture, amongst other things.

Jack Wilson

Jack Wilson is a cultural theorist and PhD researcher at the University of Warwick's Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies. His academic work is currently concerned with the research infrastructures and practices of conspiracy theorists, with his extra-curricular labour largely oriented around questions of memory, temporality, and technological form. He also produces music as West Mids and an assortment of other aliases as well as being the founder of the record label DOOMSCROLL.

Daniel de Zeeuw

Daniël de Zeeuw is assistant professor in Digital Media Culture at the department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam. He is also a FWO Junior post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Media Studies, KU Leuven, and affiliated with the Open Intelligence Lab and the Digital Methods Initiative. His current research and teaching focus on the post-truth media dynamics at the fringes of digital culture, including conspiracy theories, leaking, trolling, and memes.

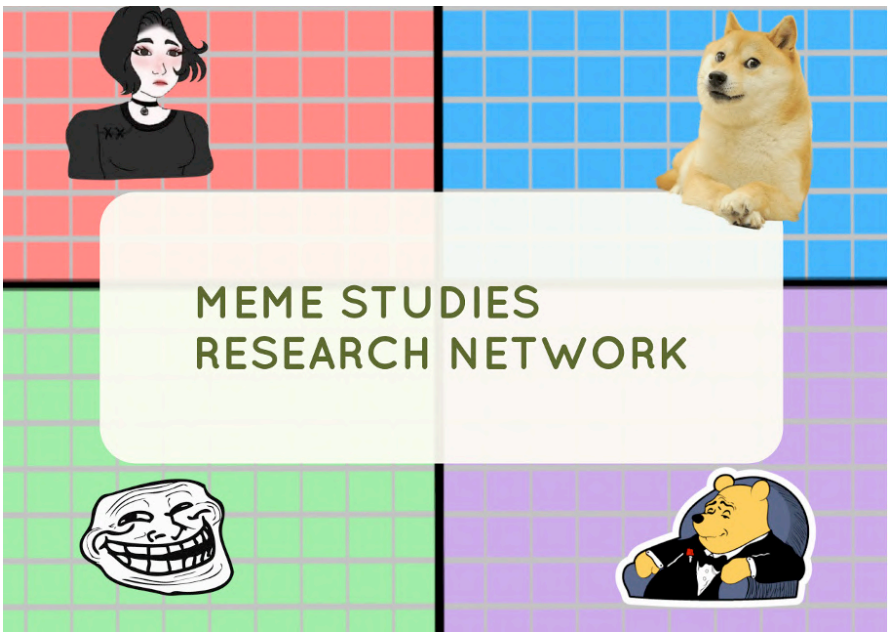
MEME STUDIES RESEARCH NETWORK

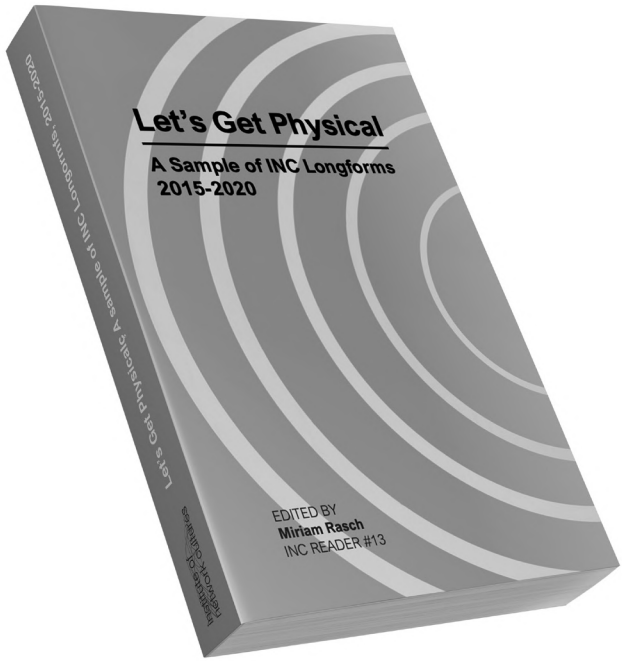
The Meme Studies Research Network is an international and interdisciplinary research network for scholars who study memes. Founded by Idil Galip in November 2020, it aims to bring people together and foster discussion about memes from various academic fields, methodological practices, and theoretical standpoints. The main goal of the network is to collaboratively establish a meme studies canon and offer researchers an index of resources that centre memes as their main object of interest. The network lives on multiple platforms - we maintain a blog, as well as a reading group, resource list and a Discord server.

To learn more and join the network, visit *http://memestudiesrn.wordpress.com*

Follow the MSRN on Twitter *http://twitter.com/MemeStudiesRN*

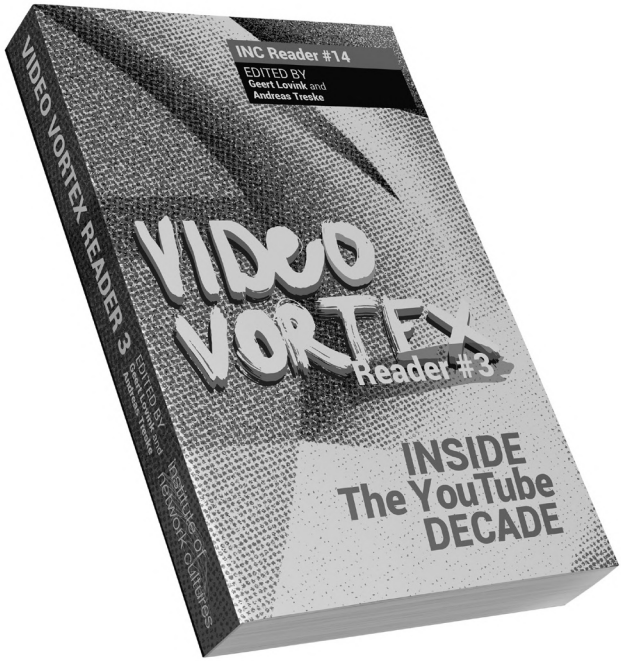
E-mail the MSRN at *memestudiesrn@gmail.com*





Let's Get Physical*:* A Sample of INC Longforms, 2015-2020 marks the five year anniversary of the INC Longform series. Based on research both theoretical and practice-based, INC Longforms showcase original projects, reflections, and critique. The essays in this collection invite the reader to look ahead while finding firm ground in the recent past. What topics are rising on the agenda of internet, media, and technology research? Which themes deserve our (ongoing) scrutiny and what are urgent reconfigurations of discourse? The thirteen contributions presented here take well-known issues in internet criticism one step further and address new subjects that call for attention. Divided into four sections, the authors cover the changing emotional attachments between humans and machines ('Affects & Interventions'), rethink questions of labor and economic divisions ('Class Lines'), dive into visual culture and its political influences ('Meme Politics'), and ask how software and technology play their role in neo-cybernetic forms of bio- and necropolitics ('Architectures of Control').

Contributors*: Davide Banis, Pim van den Berg, Lasse van den Bosch Christensen, Tim Brouwer, Rebecca Cachia, Susan Clandillon, Gustavo Velho Diogo, Bennet Etsiwah, Inte Gloerich, Maisa Imamović, Cristel Kolopaking, Anastasia Kubrak, Sander Manse, Felix Maschewski, Anna-Verena Nosthoff, Rose Rowson, Ruben van de Ven, Nikos Voyiatzis and Agnieszka Zimolag.*



Video Vortex Reader III: Inside the YouTube Decade: What is online video today, fifteen years into its exponential growth? What started with amateur work of YouTube prosumers has spread to virtually all communication apps: an explosion in the culture of mobile sound and vision. Now, in the age of the smart phone, video accompanies, informs, moves, and distracts us. Are you addicted yet? Look into that tiny camera, talk, move the phone, show us around — prove to others that you exist!

The contributions herein respond to a broad range of emerging and urgent topics, from bias in YouTube's algorithms, to the use of video in messaging, image theory, the rise of deepfakes, a reconsideration of the history of video art, a reflection on the continuing role and influence of music video, indy servers, synthetic intimacies, love and sadness, artist videos, online video theory in the age of platform capitalism, video as online activism, and the rise of streaming. Click, browse, swipe, like, share, save, and enjoy!

Contributors*: Annie Abrahams, Ina Blom, Natalie Bookchin, Pablo deSoto, Ben Grosser, Adnan Hadzi, Judit Kis, Patricia G. Lange, Hang Li, Patrick Lichty, Geert Lovink, Gabriel Menotti, Sabine Niederer, Dan Oki, Aras Ozgun, Daniel Pinheiro, Rahee Punyashloka, Albert Figurt, Oliver Lerone Schultz, Ana Peraica, Florian Schneider, Peter Snowdon, Andreas Treske, Colette Tron, Jack Wilson, Dino Ge Zhang.*

CRITICAL MEME READER
GLOBAL MUTATIONS OF THE VIRAL IMAGE

CHLOË ARKENBOUT, JACK WILSON, DANIEL DE ZEEUW (EDS.)

Beyond the so-called 'Alt-right' and its attendant milieus on 4chan and Reddit, memes have passed the post-digital threshold and entered new theoretical, practical, and geographical territories beyond the stereotypical young, white, male, western subject. As they metastasized from the digital periphery to the mainstream, memes have seethed with mutant energy. From now on, any historical event will be haunted by its memetic double. Our responses to memes in the new decade demand an analogous virtuality.

This Critical Meme Reader features an array of researchers, activists, and artists who address the following questions. What is the current state of the meme producer? What are the semiotics of memes? How are memes involved in platform capitalism and how do they operate within the context of different mediascapes? How are memes used for political counter-strategies? Are memes moving beyond the image? How can memes be used to design the future? Will there ever be a last meme in history? Together, the contributors to this reader combine their global perspectives on meme culture to discuss memetic subjectivities and communities, the work of art in the age of memetic production, the post meme, meme warfare, and meme magic – varying from reflections on real-life experiences to meta meme theory.

Contributors: Crystal Abidin and Bondy Valdovinos Kaye, Anirban K. Baishya, Aarushi Bapna and Ajitesh Lokhande, Luther Blissett, Grant Bollmer, Stephanie Boulding, Lesley Braun, Anthony Burton, Caspar Chan, Clusterduck, Åke Gafvelin, Idil Galip, Martin Hassen, Geoff Hondroudakis, Max Horwich, Yasmeen Khaja, Andy King, Ivan Knapp, Jacob Sujin Kuppermann, Anahita Neghabat, Sarp Özer, Saeeda Saeed, Laurence Scherz, The Trans Bears, Sabrina Ward-Kimola and Scott Wark.

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