CRITICAL MEME READER III

INC READER #17

BREAKING THE MEME

EDITED BY CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND İDİL GALİP

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BREAKING THE MEME

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Institute of network cultures

Hogeschool van Amsterdam

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CRITICAL MEME READER III: BREAKING THE MEME

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INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE MEME

CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND İDİL GALİP

A young woman shares a photograph of herself on Instagram. She is bare faced, her hair is pulled back. Her eyebrows slope down, her gaze is vacant — the caption to the photo ends with 'everyday the pain increases'.

A video of the same woman, crying in a car. The caption says 'I lost my dreams, work, equipment and second home'. The video cuts from her, to a destroyed building, to scenes from a content creation hub. In the hub, a young man is at a desk editing videos while another sets up camera equipment. Here we come across the same woman, in the recent past: this time she is smiling and hugging a friend. Her smile is bright, her gaze full of joy.

This woman, Bisan, is a Gazan storyteller, filmmaker, and content creator who has found herself in the peculiar position of not only living through but also narrating an atrocity. Bisan posts everyday, she posts day and night, she posts the bombs, the dead bodies, the intermittent moments of happiness, the rubble, the pain, the suffering, and the ongoing destruction of her life.

Digital culture today is a twisted mirror reflecting a fragmented simulation of multiple realities. A scroll down Instagram is a dizzying and terrifying look into simultaneous atrocities (Palestine, Sudan, Congo), blasé meandering (GRWM, ASMR, OOTD), and maladaptive daydreaming (looksmaxxing, reality shifting, Snapewives). We live in a bizarre post-digital moment, where cultural production on platforms have become interlinked with ambivalent practices of atrocity voyeurism, platform censorship,[1] and embodied content. We live and die inside the platform.

The Ukraine-Russia war was deemed the first TikTok war by some journalists; similar things have been said about the live satellite coverage of the Gulf War and the networked nature of ISIS propaganda — Sontag[2] famously theorized about the staging of war photography during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Even the memefication of 9/11 within the then-burgeoning internet culture[3] leads us to think about the linkages between violent imagery and changing media regimes. Today, we see TikTok filters

1 Human Rights Watch, "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook," Human Rights Watch, December 21, 2023, ***https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and***.

2 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

3 Giselinde Kuipers, "Media Culture and Internet Disaster Jokes: Bin Laden and the Attack on the World Trade Center," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 5, no. 4 (2002): 450–70, ***https://doi.org/10.1177/1364942002005004296***.

and sounds that promise to aid Palestine if used in a video, 'but do you condemn Hamas?' memes, coded emoji use against platform censorship, as well as intensive mainstream media coverage of the genocide of Palestinians (or 'a conflict' as most Western outlets call it). However, beyond memes and emojis, what has had a deep and painful impact on everyday audiences are the videos, live streams, words, and images that make their way directly from Gazans' smartphones onto social media platforms. These atrocities are viewed at a so-called 'rational distance' by Western world leaders, as electoral politics in many parts of the world slide further into violent demagoguery and enact cycles of war over and again.

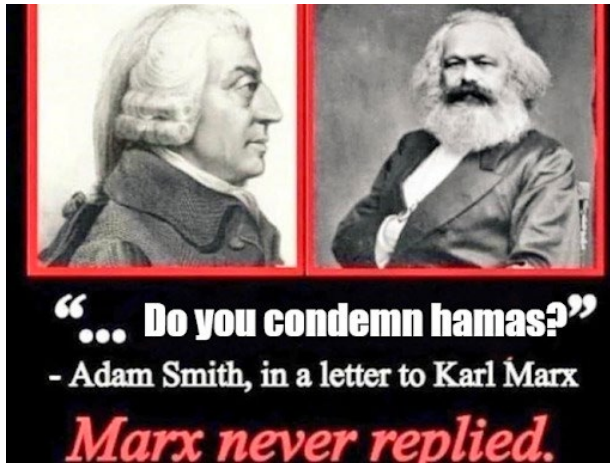


Fig. 1. Marx refuses to condemn Hamas

The rise of right populism and the prominence of the so-called culture war have not stopped since the previous Critical Meme Reader. We still ask the same questions while expecting different answers: What will happen to the world? How can we mobilize ourselves? How can we stop obsessing over speculative futures and deal with the present?

The Netherlands — where both of us are currently based — is following in the footsteps of the United States of America when it comes to choosing political representatives. We can only speculate what the similarities are between Donald Trump and the right-wing extremist politician with platinum blond hair who won the Dutch elections in November 2023. We are neither confirming nor denying that memetic clownery has something to

do with it. Extensive research has been conducted (see: Kasimov 2023[4], Steele 2023[5], Dreyfuss and Donovan 2022[6], King 2021[7], Tuters 2021[8]) on how memes played a major role in the storming of the Capitol, and one can only assume memes also played a role in the rise of Geert Wilders. However, what was most notable were the memes that surfaced coming from the marginalized groups specifically being targeted by Wilders: mostly Muslim people, (Dutch) Turkish, and Moroccan people, people looking for refuge, and queer (and specifically trans) people. The flood of memes where humor was used as a coping mechanism and representation for a collective fear and sense of pugnacity show that the meme is definitely not dead, despite opinion pieces, magazine articles, conference presentations, and even memes themselves stating so over the years.



Fig. 2.1: 'Marginalized groups from Wednesday evening, November 22nd at 21:00 [the moment the results of the election were revealed]: current objective: survive.'

4 Andrey Kasimov, Regan Johnston, and Tej Heer, "'Pepe the Frog, the Greedy Merchant and #stopthesteal': A Comparative Study of Discursive and Memetic Communication on Twitter and 4chan/Pol during the Insurrection on the US Capitol," *New Media & Society* 0, no. 0 (May, 2023), ***https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231172963***.

5 Ashleigh Steele, "Free Speech Platforms and the Impact of the U.S. Insurrection: Misinformation in Memes," (Masters diss. , The University of Bergen, 2023.

6 Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

7 Andy King, "Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 217-235.

8 Marc Tuters, "A Prelude to Insurrection: How a 4chan Refrain Anticipated the Capitol Riot," *Fast Capitalism* 18, no. 1 (2021): 63-71, ***https://doi.org/10.32855/fcapital.202101.006***.



Fig 2.2: 'Waiting for the Exit poll…'



Fig 2.3: 'That PVV'er [Wilders his party which translates to Party for Freedom] that though all the leftist bullshit would be over now. - 'Can you imagine? Leftist killjoys that stay themselves unapologetically and keep supporting each other never giving up everywhere!'

When you want to say something about memes, it is impossible to escape having to situate them. What usually happens is that us meme researchers fall back onto two definitions: Dawkins[9] (1976) and/or Shifman[10] (2014). How can we define memes beyond their work, in ways that are better suited to our current time, building on this work — yes of course — but in a way that leaves space for the meme to breathe? Honoring the meme's transgressive, everchanging nature, instead of limiting it into a static framework it never chose to be in in the first place. For meme studies to truly theoretically evolve as a field, we believe the meme needs many expanded definitions.

'Meme' is as pervasive a neologism as ever, used to describe a variety of digital media. Everything from bits of internet humor, image-macros, viral videos, to copy-pasta, urban legends, techno genres, dance routines, and bodily gestures, have been described as memes or at the very least, memetic in nature.

Initially a niche term, the meme — particularly the internet meme — has been adopted by the online public as a way to categorize the growing menagerie of online ephemera. The widespread acceptance of the term shows that it fulfills a role in how we understand, interpret, and talk about the eclectic media objects that we come across during our interactions with digital culture. However, the concept of the meme, and memetics as a field of study have been fraught with controversy for many decades.

In meme studies, the foundational thinking that grounds the concept of the meme has traditionally been one that seeks to understand culture through biological models of evolution: selection, replication, inheritance. It is equally important to underline that in various global digital cultures, online ephemera had not been described as 'memes' until recently, with local categorizations such as 表情包 (biao qing bao), caps, monte, and other context-specific neologisms taking precedence over the Dawkinsian 'meme'. These categorizations come with their own nuanced histories and specificities, and also offer us avenues to theorize digital culture beyond memes and memetics. Billions of people make and consume memes, but only a small percentage of those people critically reflect on the mechanisms behind these practices. With this theoretical deficit in mind, we ask the following questions:

> What could a transdiscipline of meme studies look like (Seong-Young Her, page 16)?
>
> Are internet memes sympoietic subjects (Sophie Publig, page 40)?
>
> How are they a cultural remedy and a tool for Black resistance (Alexis E. Hunter and Tiera Tanksley, page 100)?

9 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
10 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014).

Are memes the master's tools that *can* set the working class free (Alia Leonardi and Alina Lupu, page 127)?

Can memes be an archive for queer justice (Socrates Stamatatos, page 142)?

Is erotic fan fiction memetic, in a similar way that poetry is memetic (Eero Talo, page 189)?

What are the untold secrets of meme-breaking (Gustavo Gómez-Mejía & Rosana Ardila, page 206)?

What are the politics of publicly archiving memes (Adain Walker, page 217)?

What is the folklore of algorithms (Gabriele de Seta, page 233)?

Can AI meme and what does that mean for humor and being human (Morgane Billuart, page 254 and Ivana Emily Škoro and Marijn Bril, page 264)?

What would the meme think and feel, if it had a consciousness (Ray Dolitsay and Jasmin Leech, page 300)?

Could the meme be an incarnation of someone's grandmother (Enzo Aït Kaci, page 312)?

What happens when a theorygrammer answers Gavfelin's theoretical question and writes about the actual last meme in history (@simulacra_and_stimulations, page 365)?

Thinkers and (meme) makers from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds contributed to this reader, answering the above questions, and more, all intending to break and reassemble the ubiquitous concept of the meme in their own way. Let us be clear: it is not our intention to replace Dawkins' or Shifman's definition with another one that others must then use to situate their work. That is the opposite of our intention. And, honestly, that would be quite boring. We want to break the definition open with these different visions and keep it open. As this is the last Critical Meme Reader (at least for the time being), we want to let the meme choose for itself what it wants to stay, be, and become.

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METAMEMETICS

METAMEMETICS: THE NEW PHILOSOPHY OF MEME STUDIES

SEONG-YOUNG HER

The genic perspective is insufficient not only as a metaphor for thinking about and modelling cultural evolution, but also for understanding biological evolution. The simple rules of Darwinian 'evolutionary selection game' mask the complexity of the process underlying it, because evolution is a game that evolves its own rules.

— Eva Jablonka[1]

Lack of interest in the mechanism underlying the hereditary transmission of these characteristics is paradoxically also a strength, because it liberates those studies from an attachment to a specific mechanism or heredity.

— Michel Morange[2]

Memetics will be what we make it.

— David Hull[3]

The central thesis I present here is not new to memetics, at least not to the philosophy of biology: classical (Dawkinsian) memetics is rife with scientific and theoretical problems and must be radically modified (or altogether discarded). What is new here is my claim that the supposed failure of memetics, the interdiscipline, can become a crucial advantage for meme studies, the transdiscipline; and that the temptation of memeology, the multidiscipline, must be resisted (just as we resisted the temptation of sociobiology). The time is right for turning meme studies into an inclusive transdiscipline, given the development of modern data science and the digital humanities, as well as the boom in the sophisticated philosophical understandings of culture and the internet. Yet, data alone is not enough, just as a memetic theory alone was not enough. We need metamemetics, the philosophy of meme studies.

1 Eva Jablonka, "Lamarckian inheritance systems in biology: a source of metaphors and models in technological evolution," in *Technological Innovation as an Evolutionary Process*, ed. John Ziman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29.

2 Michel Morange, "Genetics, Life and Death," in *The Influence of Genetics on Contemporary Thinking*, eds. Anne Fagot-Largeault, Shahid Rahman, and Jean-Jacques Torres (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 55.

3 David Hull, "Taking Memetics Seriously: Memetics Will Be What We Make It," in *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43.

Dawkins' gene-centric view of evolution was highly influential both within the field of evolutionary biology and with the general public, and debates around Dawkins' ultra-Darwinism often occupied centre stage in many areas in the philosophy of biology.[4] While minor, arguably the most well-known (and controversial) aspect of these debates is the Dawkinsian view of cultural evolution, namely memetics. The backdrop to this controversy around memetics is the ongoing, lively debates within the broader field of cultural evolution.[5] The background to these debates within cultural evolution are the debates within evolutionary biology itself, in which the concept of the gene has itself remained a case of a 'floating reference',[6] which permits scientists to employ different natural classifications for a nonessential, functional phenomenon as appropriate to their individual investigative perspectives.

The prevailing position among contemporary meme scholars, particularly those with a new media background, is that the meme is an unscientific, albeit highly useful, metaphor. The popularity of this position owes much to the apparently dramatic demise of the Journal of Memetics a mere three years after Bruce Edmonds issued "Three Challenges for the Survival of Memetics"[7], Shifman's seminal paper, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker"[8] and Burman's influential history of 'meme' as a popular scientific concept, "The misunderstanding of memes: Biography of an unscientific object, 1976-1999".[9] Cited more than 1000 times (of those, 514 are articles with some variant of 'meme' in their title, out of approximately 10000 all such articles published since 2013), Shifman's article is arguably the most influential work on internet memes, and a founding work of memeology. Shifman advocates for a restrained Dawkinsian perspective, in which biological analogies are to be limited and human agency is emphasized.[10] Burman is conservative in the other direction, emphasizing that the meme concept is appropriate only within the confines of Dawkins' original argument, as a metaphor in the context of clarifying the notion of the gene as replicator.

---

4 Kim Sterelny, *Dawkins VS Gould: Survival of the Fittest* (Chicago: Icon Books, 2001).

5 Alberto Acerbi and Alex Mesoudi, "If We Are All Cultural Darwinians What's the Fuss About? Clarifying Recent Disagreements in the Field of Cultural Evolution," *Biology & Philosophy* 30 (2015): 481–503, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10539-015-9490-2.

6 Marcel Weber, *Philosophy of Experimental Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

7 Bruce Edmonds, "Three Challenges for the Survival of Memetics," *Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 6 (2002): 45–50. https://cfpm.org/jom-emit/2002/vol6/edmonds_b_letter.html.

8 Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 362-377. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013

9 Jeremy Trevelyan Burman, "The Misunderstanding of Memes: Biography of an Unscientific Object, 1976–1999," *Perspectives on Science* 20, no. 1 (2012): 75–104. https://doi.org/10.1162/POSC_a_00057.

10 Seong-Young Her, "Internet Memetics," *The Philosopher's Meme*, 2016. https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2016/11/15/internetmemetics/.

Burman, in a 2016 interview about his 2012 article, suggests that 'there's no such thing as a meme'; [11] but also, that memeticists should 'change their theory of memes to accommodate the change in the meta-theory of genes'; and, that 'we must distinguish between three very different uses of the word: the original proposal (replicator), the popularization (idea virus), and the contemporary (cat pictures with funny captions).' There is an apparent tension here between the pull of a powerful concept and the disappointment of discovering that it seems to lack a consistent referent. Marc Tuters echoes Burman by claiming, on the one hand, that 'meme magic is real but memes are not'; [12] while on the other hand also arguing that Gilbert Simondon's 'coevolutionary theory' (drawn from media theory, not from evolutionary theory) 'offers a way out of seeming deadlock.' The demand for a replacement for classical memetics within meme studies is evident.

I disagree with Burman and Tuters that memes do not exist, or that the 'original', 'popular', and 'contemporary' uses of the meme concept should be distinguished in order to be segregated. But I agree that memetics should be updated to reflect the metascientific developments of the interdisciplinary, constituent sources of memetics. Distinguishing the different meanings of 'meme' is an important part of that work. Furthermore, it is not only the various definitions of 'meme' which must be distinguished, but also the various conceptions of meme studies. Each of the following are distinct yet interconnected concerns: meme studies as done and understood by meme scholars; meme studies as understood by researchers beyond the discipline; meme studies as popularly understood. These three conceptions of meme studies very roughly correspond to the three modalities of 'meme' identified by Burman (contemporary, original, and popular, respectively).

'Darwin's separation of ontogeny and phylogeny was an absolutely necessary step in shaking free of the Lamarckian transformationist model of evolution … [yet] Darwinism cannot be carried to completion unless the organism is reintegrated with the inner and outer forces, of which it is both the subject and the object.'[13] Likewise, distancing internet meme studies from cultural evolution was a necessary step in shaking free of the fossilized popular understanding of evolutionary biology, with which memes continued to be analogized.

Piersma & van Gils argue that physiology, behaviour, and ecology can be genuinely synthesised, by incorporating lessons from developmental biology and multiple dimensions of inheritance.[14]

11 The MIT Press: Science, "Spotlight on Science: Jeremy Trevelyan Burman," *The MIT Press*, 2016. https://mitpress.mit.edu/spotlight-on-science-jeremy-trevelyan-burman/.

12 Marc Tuters, "Why Meme Magic is Real but Memes are Not: On Order Words, Refrains and the Deep Vernacular Web," in *Memenesia*, ed. Marc Watson and Jane Galle (Rotterdam: V2_, 2021), 46. https://v2.nl/publications/memenesia.

13 Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 106.

14 Theunis Piersma, and Jan A. van Gils, *The Flexible Phenotype: A Body-Centred Integration of Ecology, Physiology, and Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Analogically, meme studies should take up Shifman's suggestion that we reintegrate subfields which have diverged throughout their development:

> Whereas the distinction between memes and virality (as well as their separate modes of investigation) has been functional in the formative stages of these fields, at this phase blurring the lines may move both arenas forward (and perhaps even result in their merger). The study of internet memes would greatly benefit from addressing questions related to patterns of diffusion and influence, while research into viral content would be enriched by delving into the social and cultural meanings that such texts invoke. [15]

Each modality of meme concept can tentatively be seen as corresponding to one of three traditions within the lineage leading towards meme studies:

> Memetics: the study of the cultural evolutionary aspect of memes, the 'hard science' of memes
>
> Memeology: the study of memecultural social practices, the 'soft science' of memes
>
> Memeography: the study of memetic artefacts and their environments, the ' information science' of memes

Together, these traditions constitute the makings of meme studies (an additional tradition may be worth considering, namely 'memetic engineering', which would include the applied science aspects of meme studies), and their epistemologies need not converge any more than the epistemologies of geneticists and ecologists must converge in order for each discipline to constitute part of the broader umbrella of biology. This triad can be understood in analogy with the relatively new field of ecological evolutionary developmental biology (known as eco-evo-devo), an extension resulting from the integration of ecology with another integrated field, evolutionary developmental biology (known as evo-devo). The triad of memetics, memeology, and memeography is analogous to the triad of evolution, development, and ecology, and to the triad of genes, organisms, and environment. Just as eco-evo-devo seeks to understand the interactions between the organism's genes, development, and environment,[16] so too should meme studies seek to integrate its traditions and understand the interactions between memes, memetic artefacts, users, and their social

15 Limor Shifman, "Memeology Festival 05. Memes as Ritual, Virals as Transmission? In Praise of Blurry Boundaries," *Culture Digitally*, 2015, https://culturedigitally.org/2015/11/memeology-festival-05-memes-as-ritual-virals-as-transmission-in-praise-of-blurry-boundaries/.

16 Ehab Abouheif, Marie-Julie Favé, Ana Sofia Ibarrarán-Viniegra, Maryna P. Lesoway, Ab Matteen Rafiqi & Rajendhran Rajakumar, "Eco-Evo-Devo: The Time Has Come," In *Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology* 781 (2014): 107–125. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7347-9_6.

and technological environments. According to the triadic niche construction theory of hominid evolution, humans developed niches within ecological, neural, and cognitive domains in a way that mutually accelerated their evolution.[17] Likewise, the three traditions of meme studies should be integrated in order to promote a mutually accelerated evolution of each. Following the tradition of 'using memetics to grow memetics',[18] we can use these triadic analogies to further construct our understanding of the meme studies transdiscipline.

Similar subdisciplinary triads exist for other transdisciplines, such as the one within the study of games, which consists of game design, the philosophy of games, and game studies (the narrow academic discipline). While distinct, these subdisciplines need not be segregated. They are mutually supportive and partially overlapping, thereby belonging to a fuzzy set, enriching and expanding the concept of games together. Needless to say, the definition of 'game' within game studies is no less contentious than is the definition of 'meme' within meme studies. Within game studies, video games and metagames are distinct but inexorably linked objects of research; video games are often also metagames, games about games. The study of video games and metagaming practices each contribute to a deeper understanding of games. The study of memetic artefacts (namely, internet memes) and metamemetic concepts and frameworks (such as meme magic) can and should likewise mediate the study of those objects referred to as memes within the distinct traditions of meme studies.

The source of the deadlock that Tuters seeks a way out of is genic reductionism. It gives rise to the inherent paradox of contemporary memetics. Memetics developed out of a highly specific debate about the units of natural selection during the 70s when reductionism was a much stronger trend and became an increasingly outdated bridge between the sciences and the humanities. While reductionism has scarcely been 'supplanted' in evolutionary biology as Tuters suggests, a 'vague sense of dissatisfaction permeates the field despite recent developments in both phenotypic and molecular evolution… curious mixing of gene level and phenotypic level views [abound]'.[19] The hope of reductionists to reduce Mendelian theory to molecular genetics, distinct from reducing biological 'stuff' metaphysically, has been unsuccessful.[20] The demand for a replacement for gene-centrism is abundant, as is the supply of replacement candidates, and this has been so for quite some time. But

17 Atsushi Iriki and Miki Taoka, "Triadic (ecological, neural, cognitive) niche construction: a scenario of human brain evolution extrapolating tool use and language from the control of reaching actions," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 367, no. 1585 (2012): 10-23. http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2011.0190.

18 David K. Dirlam, "Using Memetics to Grow Memetics," *Journal of Memetics - Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 9 (2005), 461-468. https://cfpm.org/jom-emit/2005/vol9/dirlam_dk.html.

19 Carl Schlichting and Massimo Pigliucci, *Phenotypic Evolution: A Reaction Norm Perspective* (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 1998), 22.

20 Frédéric Bouchard, "Moving beyond the influence of molecular genetics on the debate about reductionism in philosophy of biology," in *The Influence of Genetics on Contemporary Thinking*, ed. Anne Fagot-Largeault, Shahid Rahman, and Jean-Jacques Torres (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 65.

because most meme researchers had an outdated view of foreign disciplines (generally little better than the popular scientific understanding), they each failed to notice just what parts of this bridge were outdated, except where it concerned their home discipline.

It's not only the new media studies scholars who see memes as a tantalizing conundrum, an apparent fixer-upper that needs a few modifications or concessions before it can be used to operationalise the meme. For instance, computer scientists researching memetic algorithms consider memes a cultural concept first and foremost, not a biological or computer scientific one. They therefore consider memetic algorithms to be inspired by how culture behaves[21]. More interesting still, memetic algorithms are a variant of genetic algorithms, which are algorithms inspired by attempts to emulate biological evolution. Despite Edmonds' dismissive attitude towards memetic algorithms expressed in his declaration of defeat, memetic algorithms are not only highly relevant to memetics but also represent one of the two most successful cases of meme studies to date, the other being the study of internet memes. They are particularly interesting as they retain a classical memetic understanding of memes, adapted to the purposes of simulations and algorithms. Moscato first introduced the concept of memetic algorithms by characterizing it as an expansion of his algorithms beyond genetic representations:

> I am not constraining a MA [Memetic Algorithm] to a genetic representation… Dawkins says "I am an enthusiastic Darwinian, but I think Darwinism is too big a theory to be confined to the narrow context of the gene." I have the same impression regarding GA [Genetic Algorithm] or MA to be confined to only genetic representations.

On the other hand, machine learning research about memes qua internet memes tends to take the concept entirely for granted: after all, the point is to enable computers to learn and perform without explicit rules and definitions. Hence, Meta's 'Hateful Meme Challenge' paper does not even define 'meme', even as it dedicates a section to defining 'hatefulness'.[22] Whether the exact underlying ontology is deferred to foreign fields or popular understanding, the pattern is roughly that 'meme' acts as a shorthand for some entity presumed to be worked out elsewhere by experts. It functions as a means to export some external database of knowledge, which in turn readily interfaces with the discipline into which it is imported. The meme is evidently effective as a conceptual stand-in, allowing researchers to carry out research about 'memes' without having to develop entirely new expertise.

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21 Pablo Moscato, *On Evolution, Search, Optimization, Genetic Algorithms and Martial Arts: Towards Memetic Algorithms, Technical Report C3P 826, Caltech Con-Current Computation Program* (Pasadena, CA: California Institute of Technology, 1989), 29.

22 Douwe Kiela, Hamed Firooz, Aravind Mohan, Vedanuj Goswami, Amanpreet Singh, Pratik Ringshia, and Davide Testuggine, "The hateful memes challenge: Detecting hate speech in multimodal memes," *Advances in neural information processing systems* 33 (2020): 2611-2624. https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.04790.

Memetics is a science of the artificial modelled after a natural science. It is equal parts grounded in the force of its conceptual scheme and in the hope that a unity of all sciences is possible. This hope of scientific unity has a long history in biology. Its contemporary form has its roots in Julian Huxley's popular account of biology as a purified, unified, and liberal progressive science. His positivist and liberal view of biology resonated with the public in the 1950s, before giving way to the Modern Synthesis by the 1980s.[23] Biology after Darwin is unique among the sciences which branched off from philosophy (such as physics or mathematics) in that it does not leave fundamental questions in the form of 'what is a number?' or 'what is time?' primarily to the philosophers.[24] Yet,

> the natural sciences are concerned with the structure and behaviour of things as they *are*, whereas the artificial sciences must necessarily describe objects from the perspective of what purposes they are or were intended to serve – that is, in the context of how things *ought to be*.[25]

Memetics occupies the peculiar position of being a science of the artificial modelled after a natural science which was already concerned with prescriptive questions of artificiality (such as selective breeding) and fundamental questions (such as 'what is a gene?'). Indeed, the very concept of the meme was developed in order to help define the gene.[26]

Meme studies, also a science of the artificial, must consider not only what meme studies ought to be, but also what the popular and extradisciplinary understanding of meme studies ought to be, and ultimately what memes ought to become. This is precisely what many meme scholars have been doing, leveraging an understanding of data and platforms to facilitate a more holistic theory of memetic evolution. Rogers & Giorgi, taking collections of memes rather than individual memetic artefacts as the unit of analysis, emphasize the 'specificity of the collection resulting from a database, templating, infrastructural linking, image thread, or search logic'.[27] Hagen suggests using 'meme tracing' techniques to gather instances of collective self-reference in subcultural spaces into collections called

23 Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, *Unifying Biology: The Evolutionary Synthesis and Evolutionary Biology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

24 Alexander Rosenberg, "Darwinism as Philosophy: Can the Universal Acid Be Contained?," in *How Biology Shapes Philosophy: New Foundations for Naturalism*, ed. David Livingstone Smith, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 23–50. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107295490.003.

25 Herbert A. Simon, quoted in Subrata Dasgupta, *Creativity in Invention and Design: Computational and Cognitive Explorations of Technological Originality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 7.

26 Seong-Young Her, "The Memeticist's Challenge Remains Open," *The Philosopher's Meme*, November 15, 2018, https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2018/11/15/the-memeticists-challenge-remains-open/.

27 Richard Rodgers and Giulia Giorgi, "What is a meme, technically speaking?," *Information, Communication & Society* 27, no. 1 (2023): 86. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2023.2174790.

'panoramic memes'. [28] These approaches emphasize the historical, infrastructural, and cultural contexts surrounding memetic artefacts to understand memes as always-already 'polysemous'.[29] [30] They square firmly with ecologically and developmentally informed views of evolution such as Developmental Systems Theory (and the analogy between polysemy and gene-environment interaction is a rich one). Furthermore, concepts (such as 'meme') are themselves polysemous and elude homogeneous definition[31]. The development of multiple definitions and conceptions of the meme is not a weakness but an advantage: it facilitates both the understanding and evolution of new, previously unimagined memes.

The benefits of retaining, modifying, and extending the meme concept are great: the meme is a highly evocative and widely known concept, which many academic researchers have found useful; it provides researchers with countless channels to interface with meme studies (and thereby contribute to its development). Cultural evolution is a promising approach to understanding culture, and memes present a good point of introduction; and the fact that the concept is also widespread in popular culture means that cultural productions are often informed by a notion that culture is memetic, which can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy (which makes the cultural productions indeed memetic and, therefore, perfectly sensible to identify and study as memes).

The primary value of memetics comes from its strategy of applying an evolutionary metaphysics to cultural contexts.[32] Meme studies should be an extension of this approach, in the same sense that the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis attempts to be an extension of the Modern Synthesis.[33] Like the proponents of EES, meme studies also faces the triadic task of answering empirical, historical, and conceptual questions regarding the status of meme research. There is a vast amount of such work that can be done under the umbrella of meme studies. The scope of memetic entities should be continually expanded, alongside improved transdisciplinary interchange with other disciplines. For instance, Zulli & Zulli suggest we extend the internet meme concept by including TikTok videos, citing both Dawkins and

28 Sal Hagen, "'Who is /ourguy/?': Tracing Panoramic Memes to Study the Collectivity of 4chan/pol/," *New Media & Society* 0, no. 0 (2022). DOI: 10.1177/14614448221078274.

29 Lillian Boxman-Shabtai and Limor Shifman, "Evasive Targets: Deciphering Polysemy in Mediated Humor," *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 5 (2014): 977–998, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12116.

30 Yuval Katz and Limor Shifman, "Making Sense? The Structure and Meanings of Digital Memetic Nonsense," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 825-842. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2017.1291702.

31 John Gerring and Paul A. Barresi, "Putting Ordinary Language to Work: A Min-Max Strategy of Concept Formation in the Social Sciences," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 15, no. 2 (2003): 201-232, https://doi.org/10.1177/0951629803015002647.

32 Robert Boyd and Peter J. Richerson, "Memes: Universal Acid or a Better Mousetrap?" in *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 143-162.

33 Tim Lewens, "The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis: What is the Debate About, and What Might Success for the Extenders Look Like?," *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society* 127, no. 4 (2019): 707–721, https://doi.org/10.1093/biolinnean/blz064.

Shifman along the way. [34] While the history of meme studies has been characterized by a radical shrinkage of scope (in response to the failure of Dawkinsianism), it is nevertheless followed by the current gradual expansion of scope. The horizon of meme studies should stretch far beyond a gene-meme analogy or even an analogy between culture and biology. It should aim at an understanding of culture and biology as continuous, revivifying the insight that culture is continuous with biological systems, which made sociobiology and classical memetics so promising. Ultimately, advances made within meme studies should contribute back to evolutionary biology, continuous as they are in their metaphysics.

So, while Dawkinsianism won't do, the meme concept is worth keeping. But if Dawkins is wrong about both cultural and biological evolution in important ways, what analogy between genes and memes is there to be retained? One answer is that Dawkins' thesis that cultural evolution is analogous to biological evolution is correct, as well as his secondary thesis that some aspects of cultural evolution are analogous to genic evolution. But because Dawkins' gene-centrism is rejected, a cultural evolutionary view involving memes need not be meme-centric, nor involve memetic determinism. The persistent failure of memetics parallels similar failures within the modern synthetic paradigm, many of which have been remedied through the advent of the extended synthetic paradigm. Genes exist, even if Dawkinsian genes do not; memes exist, even if Dawkinsian memes do not. In this way, the meme concept, as well as the concept of meme studies, are opened up to new modes of conceptual engineering which enable new interfaces between meme studies and other disciplines.

The benefit of 'blurring the lines' once again, between not just memes and virality but the various understandings of meme studies, is that each one of them, even the popular form, has advantages and unique insights to offer which the others do not. The indeterminacy of the meme concept, like the gene concept, is also its advantage, enabling a plurality of research programs to operate together, at times cooperating and, at others, competing (also like the development of the gene concept). Where reductionism is anathema to many within the humanities, essentialism is similarly unpopular within evolutionary biology, because it is a principal tenet that life evolves. An alternative to either reductionism or essentialism is an 'integrative pluralism', as opposed to unification.[35] A chief aim of meme studies should be the integration of the various disjoint branches of memetics, memeology, memeography, memetic engineering, and folkmemetics through the use of internet memes as model organisms, which in data-centric biology provide 'reference points' for just this task.[36]

34 Diana Zulli and David J. Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform," *New Media & Society* 24, no. 8 (2022): 1872–1890, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603.

35 Sandra D. Mitchell, *Biological Complexity and Integrative Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511802683.

36 Sabina Leonelli, *Data-Centric Biology: A Philosophical Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 145.

The term 'meme studies', as opposed to 'memetics' or 'memeology', is classic transdisciplinary phrasing: whereas multidisciplinarity is an additive gathering of knowledge from multiple disciplines, and interdisciplinarity coordinates the constituent disciplines by emphasizing common ground, transdisciplinarity involves breaking down disciplinary boundaries.[37] The phrasing is reflective of the theoretical strategy typically employed by transdisciplines, which is to designate some abstraction or phenomenon as the object of study, around which a new (trans)disciplinary worldview may crystalize, whilst at the same time helping to conceptually legitimize the object itself. Examples include game studies, comics studies, and area studies (such as Korean studies). Interdisciplines, such as biogeography, cognitive science, sociolinguistics, digital humanities, and medical anthropology, generally involve established disciplines with sophisticated metaphysics and ontologies of their own; the assumption is that the constituent disciplines can readily be made interoperable, and that the synthesis of their respective specialties can yield valuable new knowledge. Multidisciplines, such as health sciences, forensic science, international relations, and environmental science are sprawling and institutionally segmented, without the same aspirations towards epistemologically unifying their member disciplines. While classical memetics aspired towards interdisciplinarity (primarily by subsuming social sciences under evolutionary biology) and memeology largely remained a multidiscipline, meme studies has the makings of a transdiscipline: the pivotal strategic difference for meme studies is that it defers to particular objects in the world (namely, internet memes) in making various decisions about its methodology and metaphysics.

Defining the meme has long remained the holy grail of classical memetics. This is because memes are cultural analogues of genes, and the reductionist approach to biology yielded the tremendous success that is molecular genetics, which memeticists sought to emulate. Classical memeticists hoped that, by precisely defining and identifying the meme, memetics could reach the status of science proper in the way that genetics had done.

Although attempts at defining the internet meme are sometimes still made in earnest, it is rarely the primary concern. Much more typically, Dawkins (1976)[38] or Shifman (2013) [39] are perfunctorily invoked before the paper moves onto more exciting matters than ontology. This pragmatic approach, which enables prioritizing crude empirical research above philosophical debates (recommended to memeticists by David Hull at the 1999 memetics conference)[40], has proven highly successful for meme studies. But interdisciplinary intellectual debt is created by

37 Respectively, the metaphors of an encyclopaedia, a bridge, and a jigsaw puzzle seem appropriate. See: David Alvargonzález, "Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, Transdisciplinarity, and the Sciences," *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 25, no. 4 (2011): 387-403, DOI: 10.1080/02698595.2011.623366.

38 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

39 Shifman, Limor. "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, no. 3 (2013): 362-377. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12013.

40 Hull, David. "Taking Memetics Seriously: Memetics Will Be What We Make It." In *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, edited by Robert Aunger, 43–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

this strategic deference to designated experts in some field beyond the scope of a particular work. This debt accrues interest in the form of foundational vulnerabilities.

In computer programming, complex software often makes use of preexisting libraries of code written and maintained independently by other people. Such code, referenced from within the codebase but maintained outside of it, is a dependency. Issues downstream can quickly compound if dependencies are not kept updated, because any bugs or security issues are inherited. Much the same is true for transdisciplinary theories such as meme studies: issues compound not only as intellectual debt, but also through the proliferation of work built atop outdated information. For instance, consider a contemporary sociological researcher who disagrees with Dawkins' views on cultural evolution. Dawkins may know a lot about evolutionary biology, but (the sociologist thinks) he doesn't know much about culture and sociology. The sociologist cites Dawkins' 1976 description of how culture might evolve memetically, in order to disagree that culture is analogous to biology. Unless another evolutionary biologist or a philosopher of biology is cited (those cited by Dawkins notwithstanding), the evolutionary biology imported by the sociologist will be a Dawkinsian one. Hence, even as the sociologist might subsequently redefine the meme in sharp contrast against the gene and the meme-as-gene-analogue, that negative redefinition will be shaped by a distinctly opinionated perspective on evolution as a whole.

The impact of extradisciplinary deference is further compounded for interdisciplines: some researchers hailing from disciplines which are neither part of the life sciences nor the cultural studies often defer to Dawkins not only as an expert of evolutionary biology, but also as a cultural scientist. For instance, many machine learning papers cite Dawkins as theoretical fodder to operationalize internet memes, adopting the Dawkinsian gene-culture analogy at face value by taking both his characterization of evolution and culture for granted. Hence, the window of interdisciplinary interfacing becomes fixed here, and is reaffirmed through a chain of intra-disciplinary discourse which constantly refers back to this particular source for definitional, ontological purposes.

The issue of extradisciplinary deference is exacerbated in cases where some secondary work becomes the preferred liaison from the home discipline, adding yet another layer of abstraction (on top of the already narrowed view of the other discipline). Limor Shifman makes just such a move, primarily in her attempt at reining in the gene and returning individual persons as the 'boss'[41] of the cultural evolutionary process. Citing Rosaria Conte,[42] Shifman calls for memeticists to 'treat people not as *vectors* of cultural transmission, but as *actors* behind this process'[43]. In a later paper written with Segev, Nissenbaum, and Stolero, Shifman endorses a view of memes based on quiddities, which are defined as 'recurring features that are unique to

41 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World," *365.*

42 Rosaria Conte, "Memes through (Social) Minds," in *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83-119.

43 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World," 366.

each family and constitute its singular essence'.[44] Together, these positions comprise a return to the pre-Dawkinsian orthodoxy in viewing natural selection as differentially selecting between organisms rather than genes,[45] as well as to an essentialist, morphological typology of life.

Prima facie, this is a non-issue: memes are not biological organisms, nor intended to be simulations of life. But the received view of memetics from Shifman, in swapping out aspects of Dawkins' gene-centrism for parts more palatable to communications scholars, ends up blockading the path to keeping the inner workings of meme theory up to date (a task traditionally handled by philosophers of biology and cultural evolutionary theorists). Furthermore, it isolates meme studies from interfacing with a broader range of disciplines, such as computer science. While the move minimizes 'discipline conflicts',[46] it is a strategic mistake that forfeits the potential of meme studies as an inclusive transdiscipline. Nor does an agent-centric view of cultural evolution automatically achieve the aims of giving individuals their due as beings with free will and agency. According to Levins and Lewontin:

> Classical Darwinism places the organism at the nexus of internal and external forces, each of which has its own laws, independent of each other and of the organism that is their creation. In a curious way the organism, the object of these forces, becomes irrelevant for the evolutionist, because the evolution of organisms is only a transformation of the evolution of the environment. [47]

The situation for meme studies resembles the major transition in evolutionary biology, which became possible thanks to technological advancements such as ecological simulation and computational genomic methods. But even more, the situation is similar to the one once faced by game studies. While game studies, the study of 'not one medium, but many different media', successfully defended against 'colonizing attempts from [cinema, literature, and new media studies]',[48] 'it certainly never was, and never will be, a discipline or -ology, a coherent domain defined by a single set of methods, empirical objects, and research questions and motivations.'[49] Like the 'blurry boundaries' Shifman praises between memeology

44 Elad Segev, Asaf Nissenbaum, Nathan Stolero, Limor Shifman, "Families and Networks of Internet Memes: The Relationship Between Cohesiveness, Uniqueness, and Quiddity Concreteness," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20, no. 4 (2015): 419, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12120.

45 Kim Sterelny and Philip Kitcher, "The Return of the Gene," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 7 (1988): 339-361, https://doi.org/10.2307/2026953.

46 Bernard C.K. Choi and Anita W.P. Pak, "Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, and Transdisciplinarity in Health Research, Services, Education, and Policy: 2. Promotors, Barriers, and Strategies for Enhancement," *Clinical and Investigative Medicine* 30 (2007): E224-E232, https://doi.org/10.25011/cim.v30i6.2950.

47 Levins and Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist,* 88.

48 Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1 (2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html.

49 Espen Aarseth, "Meta-game Studies," *Game Studies* 15 (2015), http://gamestudies.org/1501/articles/editorial.

and virality studies,[16] Aarseth is content to leave game studies as 'a fuzzy set, equally hard to define as its mother object, games.'[46] Games, the paradigmatic example of Wittgensteinian family resemblance, may be operationalized as fuzzy sets.[50] It is possible that game studies, and additionally memes and meme studies, may also be conceptualized along these lines, in the same way that Pigliucci suggests Wittgensteinian family resemblance as a solution for the species problem.[51]

Deterding, however, finds in his scientometric analysis of game research that game studies has attained but a 'Pyrrhic Victory', consisting of 'homogenous epistemic cultures [that] retain internal rifts between humanities and social sciences.'[52] This Pyrrhic victory can be avoided by meme studies through the reintegration of its traditions around a metascientific core. This reintegration involves embracing memetics, memeology, memeography, folkmemetics, and other approaches to meme studies as part of a fuzzy set, while at the same time resisting the epistemic homogenisation of meme studies (whether along the sociobiological line of memetics or the humanities line of memeology). To secure a reliable metascientific core for meme studies, meme studies researchers should favor an intradisciplinary deference to primary research on internet memes, and develop tools, infrastructures, standards, and networks for the sharing of data and resources. They should also reject extradisciplinary deference that substitutes for engagement with unfamiliar disciplines and methodologies, which inevitably tends towards insularity. Nowhere is the value of such transdisciplinary inclusivity more apparent than in the influences for Shifman's own work. Although Shifman misinterprets Conte as advocating for the role of 'human agents', Conte's original article (which was 'most important' to Shifman's 2013 article[53]) is focused on agents in the sense of being 'limited autonomous agents', as components in a model of social environments such as intelligent software agents, Multi-Agent Systems and Artificial Societies.[54] The internet provides an increasingly, overwhelmingly rich interface through which a portion of each agent within its system may be observed and understood. Not only is there selection and evolution among memes, there is also selection and evolution amongst the agents themselves, modulated and amplified through the design of online platforms which act as the great ecosystems of memes, which themselves are constantly being (niche) constructed.

50 Francesco Veri, "Transforming Family Resemblance Concepts into Fuzzy Sets," *Sociological Methods & Research* 52, no. 1 (2023): 356-388, https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124120986196.

51 Massimo Pigliucci, "Species as Family Resemblance Concepts: The (Dis-)Solution of the Species Problem?" *BioEssays* 25 (2003): 596-602.

52 Sebastian Deterding, "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 535, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016665067.

53 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World," 366.

54 Conte, "Memes through (Social) Minds," 83-119.

As Conte emphasizes, decision-making agents that select for memes are essential for modelling cultural evolution. [55] Although model agents that simulate cultural evolution do not have the type of agency which Shifman mistakes Conte as advocating for, the point of reference in models must ultimately be the phenomena being modelled (namely, social environments). Ultimately, the data collected by meme scholars (whether from memes found in the wild or simulated in the lab) should be the principal focus that unites the discipline and facilitates collaboration, as Leonelli outlines in the context of biology. Leonelli redefines (research) data as 'any product of research activities, ranging from artifacts such as photographs to symbols such as letters or numbers, that is collected, stored, and disseminated *in order to be used as evidence for knowledge claims*'.[56]

The internet and memetics are a 'match made in heaven' as Shifman suggests.[57] This is true not only because memes are abundant online, but because the digital environment enables a detailed study of memetic data in a way that has never before been available. Data online can be readily captured with much higher fidelity than with real life social environments, and we may even 'consider Twitter and memes as the drosophila of our social sciences, which will help decode the elementary processes of replications'.[58] However, it must be made clear that the usage of internet memes as model organisms does not mean that internet memes are the paradigm cases of memes. Drosophila melanogaster were instrumental in the success of Mendelism not because they were exemplary organisms, but because they breed quickly and have just four pairs of extremely large chromosomes in their salivary glands. Internet memes are likewise expedient, but will not be unproblematically representative of memes in an expansive sense.[59]

Peeters et al.[60] present an exemplar of a data centric meme studies that is much more Contean than Shifman's own. Using historical data of 4chan /pol/ and Encyclopaedia Dramatica, Peeters et al. conduct a corpus linguistic analysis and discover Deleuzian-Austinian (as opposed to Wittgensteinian) 'language games' that develop stigmergically. However, they reject the cultural evolutionary framework on the grounds that memetics (here, Peeters et al. use memetics to stand in for Darwinian theories of culture generally) 'lacks an account of the role of media environments in co-shaping the evolution of ideas' and is 'medium insensitive' (however, medium insensitivity is a useful trait for a theory, enabling 'substrate neutral' explanations that are not restricted to, say, insects in the case of stigmergy).

55 Conte, "Memes through (Social) Minds," 83-119.

56 Leonelli, *Data-Centric Biology*, 77.

57 Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World," 365.

58 Dominique Boullier, "Médialab Stories: How to Align Actor Network Theory and Digital Methods," *Big Data & Society* 5, no. 2 (2018): 10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718816722.

59 Rachel A. Ankeny and Sabina Leonelli, *Model Organisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), doi:10.1017/9781108593014.

60 Stijn Peeters, Marc Tuters, Tom Willaert, Daniël de Zeeuw, "On the Vernacular Language Games of an Antagonistic Online Subculture," *Frontiers in Big Data* 4 (August 2021): 1-15, https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2021.718368.

Peters et al.'s dismissal of Darwinian cultural evolutionary theory is partly based on a misguided book by Tony D. Sampson,[61] and falls into the trap of extradisciplinary deference. 'In memetics, the medium in which an idea is transmitted is typically dismissed as an inert channels through which the determining fitness algorithm is transmitted... Memetics is a theory that ultimately argues that the illusion of conscious freewill is attributable to a code', claims Sampson. According to Sampson, Tardean-Deleuzian 'hypnotic contagions', as opposed to Darwinian cultural evolution, drive social contagion. The criticisms of memetics Sampson discusses in the book are levied not at the then-contemporary literature of the 2010s, but that of the 90s. Furthermore, Sampson's representatives for the memetics camp (here standing in for neo-Darwinians in general) include contentious popularizers such as Blackmore (*The Meme Machine*) and Aaron Lynch (*Thought Contagion*) who focused on sensationalist topics such as whether memes preclude free will.

Henrich, Boyd, and Richerson, three major proponents of another medium-sensitive, co-evolutionary, co-shaping view of cultural evolution known as Dual Inheritance Theory, put it thus:

> The disputants take the main issue to be whether or not culture is highly analogous to genes. If so, then their evolution is to be explained by Darwinian fitness; if not, Darwinism is useless... The proper approach is to recognize that the analogy between genes and culture is quite loose, and to build up a theory of cultural evolution that takes into account the actual properties of the cultural system.[62]

Henrich et al. advocate for a 'methodological pluralism' within cultural evolutionary theory, which integrates insights and data from a genuinely diverse set of fields ranging from learning theory and statistical mechanics to game theory and anthropology. Ecological-Economic Processes, one component of the cultural evolutionary program they propose, has become particularly relevant with the advent of economic meme assets.[63] Even without the cybercultural dimension, economic processes are readily characterized in evolutionary, if not memetic, terms. Schlaile suggests introducing a new program of 'econommetics' into the more established field of evolutionary economics by combining memetics and memeology.[64]

Peeters et al.'s usage of Deleuzian pragmatics is another case of extradisciplinary deference in the same form as Shifman's extradisciplinary deference to Dawkinsianism.

61 Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

62 Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, Peter J. Richerson, "Five Misunderstandings About Cultural Evolution," *Human Nature* 19 (2008): 134.

63 Michele Costola, Matteo Iacopini, Carlo R.M.A. Santagiustina, "On the 'Mementum' of Meme Stocks," *Economics Letters* 207 (2021): 110021. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2021.110021.

64 Michael P. Schlaile (ed.), *Memetics and Evolutionary Economics: To Boldly Go Where No Meme Has Gone Before* (Springer Nature, 2020).

It relies on Austin's pioneering work (from the 50s/60s) on illocutionary speech acts, through Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical interpretation of the linguist (from the 80s). Thus, cultural evolution is dismissed on extradisciplinary deferential grounds, based on an outdated interpretation of Neo-Darwinism, and additional extradisciplinary dependencies are introduced to fill the gap, which also turn out to be outdated. The danger of such deference is not only that it introduces dependency issues to the framework (after all, classical memetics already performs this role in frameworks which have not had Dawkins swapped out for Deleuze). It also precludes attempts at updating the dependencies for the most integral components of the interdiscipline. Instead, they are replaced with more familiar intradisciplinary substitutes, whether this be Simondonian coevolution or Deleuzian pragmatics. This tendency to replace one extradisciplinary dependency with another, rather than update it, may be one reason that interdisciplines tend towards a lack of actual interdisciplinarity.[65] The problem with meme studies is not that it selected the wrong foundations half a century ago, but rather that it has not properly updated its dependencies. Contrast this with Francico Yus' work on the cyberpragmatics of Internet memes,[66] based on the work of Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber,[67] anti-Dawkinsian cultural evolutionists. Yus integrates up-to-date frameworks and methodologies from distinct fields such as relevance theory, cyberlinguistics, comics studies, and humor studies, as well as from memetics, memeology, and memeography. The result is an expansive practice of meme studies.

Borrowing a term from the fields of contemporary evolutionary theory—as opposed to the out-dated variety of memetics, Peeters et al. apply stigmergy to internet memes. They conceptualize the repurposing of 'kek', from a social metagame within World of Warcraft (in which chat from opposing factions were scrambled, turning 'lol' into 'kek') into a meme-magical extremist trope by /pol/, as an instance of stigmergy. Stigmergy, originating in the 50s as a concept, occupies a similar niche to memetics in that its mainstream usage is limited to swarm intelligence and entomology, but is sometimes utilized in cultural studies for its potency as a metaphor. Despite Peeters et al.'s disavowal of memetics as outdated and Darwinian cultural evolution as 'medium insensitive', this usage of stigmergy can be considered an example of the triadic structure of meme studies. Corpus linguistics, stigmergy, and Deleuzian language game theory respectively slot into the triadic scheme of memeography, memetics, and memeology; each component respectively focuses on memetic artefacts, memes, and metamemes. Prior work in the lineage of data-centric meme studies supports this suggestion that this is an example of a modified memetics and memeology. Using data collected from Picbreeder, a collaborative evolutionary art platform, Secretan argues that memetic evolution is

65 Veri, "Transforming Family Resemblance Concepts into Fuzzy Sets," 356-388.
66 Francisco Yus, *Pragmatics of Internet Humour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31902-0.
67 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

often also stigmergic.[68] Heylighen, a major classical memeticist, also suggests that open-source software development involves stigmergy.[69] Stigmergy and memetics, even in its classical form, are not mutually exclusive, and instead support the case for methodological pluralism.

Game studies also provides another point of commonality between memes and stigmergic swarms: the Deleuzian language games identified by Peeters et al., in which users game the platform affordances of wikis and imageboards, may be best understood as stigmergically played metagames, like the 'swarm harassment campaign' of GamerGate.[70] Peeters et al. also point out the reflexive performativity of Deleuzian language games. Not only are game studies and meme studies both sciences of the artificial, they are also both unusual in their high degrees of reflexivity. The production of memes is open almost by definition, and many meme researchers also produce memes and run memepages; some memecultures are also academic in nature, and some are even about meme studies. Likewise, gamers and game developers also often consume games about games and game studies literature, whether indirectly through reviews or video essays, or directly through reading papers and watching talks. This reflexivity is not merely a matter of bilateral influence but an ecological integration. Game studies scholars are engaged in games and metagames as part of their research practices and in the metagames of academia; meme studies scholars generate, evolve, and pass on memes about memes through their research. Additionally, games are a frequent source of memes, and memes increasingly feature in games; metagames such as those within streamer culture constitute both games (which are also metamemes) and memes (which are also metagames).[71] [72] This points to the fact that games may be understood memetically and memes may be understood ludically.

A significant portion of the reflexive performativity which Peeters et al. find within the language game of /pol/ concerns the rise of meme magical concepts during 2016-2018:

> While it would be misleading to say that the users of these terms actually believe in the power ironically ascribed to these practices, the simple act of

68 Jimmy Secretan, "Stigmergic Dimensions of Online Creative Interaction," *Cognitive Systems Research* 21 (2013): 65-74, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsys.2012.06.006.

69 Francis Heylighen, "Stigmergy as a Universal Coordination Mechanism: Components, Varieties and Applications," in *Human Stigmergy: Theoretical Developments and New Applications*, eds. Tom Lewis and Leslie Marsh (Cham: Springer, 2007).

70 Seong-Young Her, "GamerGate as Metagaming," *The Philosopher's Meme*, May 16, 2021, https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2021/05/16/gamergate-as-metagaming/.

71 Alexander Rudenshiold, "'Live' and Leftist: Twitch, Political Livestreaming, and Hasan Piker," (M.A. Diss., University of Virginia, 2022), https://doi.org/10.18130/d1ws-rg21.

72 Seong-Young Her, "'Live' and Leftist: Twitch, Political Livestreaming, and Hasan Piker (2022)," *Meme Studies Forum*, 2022, https://forum.memestudies.org/t/live-and-leftist-twitch-political-livestreaming-and-hasan-piker-2022/207.

> signification represented by giving these things a name positions them as performative artefacts around which the subculture imagines itself in a self-reflexive manner.[73]

In a theoretical move that is useful for understanding this situation, Lankshear makes the point that a 'post-knowledge epistemology' operates within postmodernity: exchange of data seems to have become a sufficient condition for information, and such information may be used and acted upon without any belief or understanding.[74] Tuters' point that 'meme magic is real but memes are not'[75] fits seamlessly into both Lankshear's post-knowledge epistemological framework and Peeters et al.'s framework of Deleuzian language games. Users involved in memetic subcultures behave 'as though they were possessed of their own agency—into the flow of which speakers then find themselves immersed... whether people are serious in their views, the fact is that they make memes real by using them.'[13] Tuters' description of how memes are made real applies as much to memes as to games, whether they be video games, language games, metagames, or diagram games.[76]

As demonstrated by the natural fit of the Deleuzian language games frame in the analysis of memes, hybridization between game studies and meme studies is likely to be fruitful. According to Conte, hybridization across social and evolutionary simulation research

> provides new opportunities for memetics: memetic phenomena can be observed in artificial societies with learning and evolutionary agents, as well as with intelligent agents... learning and intelligent agents will merge into a greater extent than has been the case so far.[77]

Conte's expansive vision was substantively realized in the new discipline of computational social science, outlined in the 'Manifesto of Computational Social Science' as

> a truly interdisciplinary approach, where social and behavioural scientists, cognitive scientists, agent theorists, computer scientists, mathematicians and physicists cooperate side-by-side to come up with innovative and theory-grounded models of the target phenomena.[78]

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73 Peeters et al., "Vernacular Language Games," 11.

74 Colin Lankshear, "The Challenge of Digital Epistemologies," *Education, Communication & Information* 3, no. 2 (2003): 167-186, DOI: 10.1080/14636310303144.

75 Tuters, "Why Meme Magic is Real but Memes are Not," 46–59.

76 Seong-Young Her, "Memes Are Not Jokes, They Are Diagram-Games," *The Philosopher's Meme*, September 10, 2017, https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2017/09/10/memes-are-not-jokes-they-are-diagram-games/.

77 Conte, "Memes Through (Social) Minds," 90.

78 Conte, Rosaria, et al., "Manifesto of computational social science," *The European Physical Journal Special Topics* 214 (2012): 327, https://doi.org/10.1140/epjst/e2012-01697-8.

The memetic component has yet to be integrated. Revisiting computational and biological thinking may prove useful in the process of further hybridization, and provide new ways for disciplines to interface with meme studies.

Another promising point of interface for meme studies is with artificial intelligence and machine learning. Applying a memetic frame to machine learning, and analogizing between machine learning, meme studies, game studies, and biology, also helps to identify the components for an expansive meme concept. Machine learning models harbor latent spaces, a mathematical space in which representations of data exist closer or further apart depending on their respective similarity at many dimensions. The clusters of concepts within latent spaces may be loosely conceptualized as memes, and the latent spaces themselves as a reified form of evolutionary landscapes (they are of course different from the evolutionary environment itself, which encompasses the selective pressures exerted on the model). So understood, latent spaces expose memes (as gene analogues) which hitherto lacked memetic artefacts (as organism analogues), to scrutiny: artificial intelligence enables a way to study memes (analogous to studying DNA or the video game code) before their corresponding memetic artefacts (analogous to organisms or video games) exist in the first place. One example is the use of prompt engineering to excavate folkbiological concepts embedded in art history.[79] Such memeculturally informed folkbiology provides yet another interface with biology as well as with classical memetics, namely the study of animal culture such as birdsongs (pioneered by Alejandro Lynch, not Aaron Lynch).[80] Of course, items within latent spaces are not memes in themselves any more than DNA strands are genes in themselves or video game code are games in themselves. Rather, they are data about memes in themselves.

Each of these artefacts facilitates processes and embodies abstractions. There is always 'a meta-level of activity' around such artefacts, which Evnine[81] refers (in the memetic context) to as memographic practices (analogous to metagames or the environment). According to Evnine, memes are 'abstract artefacts' and 'sets of norms for the production of things (images, actions, tweets, book titles, etc.) and users produce instances of these memes by following the norms in the set', and not the instances of those norms or the contents of those sets.[82] [83] The equivalent view (that games are their rulesets) is common enough

79 Seong-Young Her, "Frog After Frog: Prompt Engineering With Alternate Translations," *Artificial Intelligence Art*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.21428/f13786d0.a8196ff9.

80 Esther Sebastián-González and Patrick J. Hart, "Birdsong Meme Diversity in a Habitat Landscape Depends on Landscape and Species Characteristics," *Oikos* 126, no. 10 (2017): 1511-1521. https://doi.org/10.1111/oik.04531.

81 Simon Evnine, "The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet (and Other) Memes," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 58, no. 3 (2018): 303–318, https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayy021.

82 Claudia Vulliamy, "What Is A Meme?," *The Philosopher's Meme*, December 30, 2021, https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2021/12/30/vulliamy-response/.

83 Simon Evnine, "Memes and Humor: Reply to Claudia Vulliamy's 'What is a Meme?'" *The Philosopher's Meme*, December 30, 2021, https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2021/12/30/vulliamy-response/.

within game studies that Boluk and LeMieux go so far as to argue that 'videogames aren't games—they're tools, toys, instruments, equipment, mechanisms, and media for making metagames'[84] (though elsewhere they endorse what Evnine calls 'a benign ambiguity' regarding the use of 'meme' to refer both to memetic artefacts and their attendant norms, proposing that some video games are also games and metagames[85]).

According to Developmental Systems Theory (DST), the unit of evolution is not the gene, but the whole system including the gene, the organism, and the environment. Adapting DST to memes and creating a Memetic Systems Theory,[86] we can define memes as the whole system consisting of the memetic artefacts, memetic norms, and the memetic environment. The memetic environment would include everything from social media platforms to users, and the affordances of the platforms and the psychology and behavior of the users would be as essential to the analysis. This expansion of the meme concept enables access to new data, just as Peeters, et al.'s corpus linguistic research reveals patterns that may otherwise have not been accessible. Even more importantly, it allows the integration and exchange of data across the disparate traditions within meme studies, allowing data to travel in the Leonellian sense.[87]

More than benign, the polysemy of the meme is what enables its expansiveness. This expansive meme concept should integrate memetic, memeological, and memeographic modalities without having one subsume another. For this, we need a philosophy of memes that can replace Dawkinsianism without a regress into an essentialist and pre-Darwinian understanding of memes and cultural evolution. Additionally, it should wholly embrace the synthetic nature of memes and meme studies: more than any other discipline, even more than game studies (which creates its own games even as it analyses games) or metaphilosophy (which creates new philosophies through the study of philosophy), meme studies is engaged in the construction of cognitive ecosystems even as it studies them. Metamemetics is both the study of meme studies as well as the study of memes, albeit a very specific kind. Just as a post-knowledge epistemological engagement with meme magic makes it real (as real as any metagame), meme studies as a transdiscipline will be one which can direct its own evolution. New philosophies (and new memes) of meme studies should be continually developed in order to support this evolution. Let's make meaningful memes, because meme studies will be what we make it.

84 Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, "What Should We Do With Our Games?," *Itch*, 2018, https://alt254.itch.io/what-should-we-do-with-our-games.

85 Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452958354.

86 Her, "The Memeticist's Challenge Remains Open," https://thephilosophersmeme.com/2018/11/15/the-memeticists-challenge-remains-open/.

87 Leonelli, *Data-Centric Biology*.

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TOWARDS A SYMPOIETIC THEORY OF MEMETIC EVOLUTION

SOPHIE PUBLIG

In 2021, 'Traumatized Mr. Incredible' made his rounds on social media: the beloved All-American hero from *The Incredibles* (2004), who has been a regular visitor to different memescapes, appears burned out from years of fighting villains. The disillusioned image was generated by Nathan Shipley aka @CitizenPlain as an experiment of reverse toonification using Elad Richardson and Yuval Alaluf's pixel2style2pixel image translation framework.[1] To 'toonify' an image (in most cases, a photographic portrait of a person) means to generate it in a cartoon or anime style. 'Reverse toonification' is thus the generation of photorealistic images from cartoon characters. While the 'original' Mr. Incredible is known for his wide smile, known from various memes celebrating wins, reverse-toonified Mr. Incredible does a 180 turn, looking distraught and unsettling.

Shipley's generation went viral on Twitter and hit a sweet spot in the uncanny valley, leaving users fascinated by the technical possibilities and at the same time perturbed by their results. The AI-generated image was further alienated using a grainy black-and-white filter, similar to the technique of deep-frying memes. This was placed in juxtaposition with the original cartoon character and captioned 'The teachers copy', with Traumatized Mr. Incredible labeled 'What the students get'.

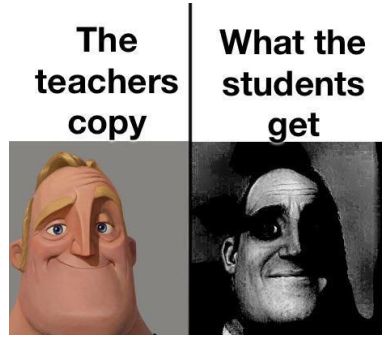


Fig. 1: The meme alludes to the bad quality photo prints on exams. Source: post by u/PARILIZEDpArrOT243 'The Teacher's Copy/What the Students Get'. Reddit.

Over the course of 2021, many more uncanny mutations of the character appeared through techniques of remixing with other images, perverting the once innocent and healthy-looking dad into a form of creepypasta that culminated in the progressive meme template 'Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny'.

1 See Nathan Shipley's website: http://www.nathanshipley.com/gan.



Fig. 2: The downfall of memes suggests a narrative of meme culture deteriorating through its own mainstreaming on the internet. The decline of Mr. Incredible's condition is juxtaposed with various examples that 'killed' meme culture. (from top to bottom) Advice Dog, Jeff the Killer, Meatspin, #GamerGate, clickbait compilation videos, Logan Paul's Suicide Forest video, Minimalist Loss.jpg, Bench Tails, Tide Pod Challenge, Soyjak characters showing memes on Reddit. While some of the examples are of shocking or pornographic content, later fads such as the Tide Pod Challenge came with serious consequences to the users involved. Source: Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny. Know Your Meme. 28 January 2022. https://i.kym- cdn.com/photos/images/original/002/299/743/aae.jpg

The 20-panel meme suggests a gradual downfall of the character by combining different media including the image generated by Shipley's reverse toonification algorithm, deep fried black-and-white photo filters, multiple images of skeletons and creepy faces (some of them from real serial killers), doomed captions going from bad to worse, and, on TikTok and other audiovisual platforms, eerie audios taken from the creepypasta Suicide Mouse or Emergency Alert System sounds [2]. Over the following months, many more mutations of the meme as well as new templates such as 'People Who Know About X vs. People Who Don't Know' emerged.

Considering the diversity of fragments making up the meme as well as its gradual evolution, Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny serves as a prime example of internet memes emerging from symbionts akin to living beings. In analogy to Lynn Margulis' and Donna Haraway's understanding of symbiosis being the main driver behind processes of evolution, internet memes can be understood as sympoietic subjects: that is, as heterogeneous agents of nature, culture, and technology engaging in intra-actions producing memes. Based on a vital materialist understanding of life, a theory of sympoietic subjectivity deconstructs previous definitions of internet memes that have adhered to an ontologically bifurcated understanding of nature and culture: what if we do not take an anthropocentric interpretation of Darwinism as the basis of memetic dynamics, but a sympoietic comprehension highlighting processes of collaboration? Memes need to be seen as posthuman subjects abiding by the same logics as entangled living beings: if we understand life as mediated by living beings, then on the internet life is remediated[3] by internet memes.

The framework of vital materialism is characterized primarily by agential, process-oriented, and systemic thinking re-defining fundamental phenomena such as life. Although there is no 'official' theory of life in vital materialism or critical posthumanism, we certainly do not refer to the classic check-list approach recounting the attributes an organism has to fulfill in order to be considered alive: reproduction, metabolism, response to outside stimuli, heredity, evolution, homeostasis, growth, and cellular organization. This approach creates an ontology on the binary basis of inclusion and exclusion that is exhausted rather quickly, especially with regard to creations such as artificial life and digital identities. Creatures that only partly adhere to these requirements, like viruses or artificial neural networks, are not considered alive, while others lose or have been born without the possibility to procreate. Since we as humans tend to treat living and human-like creatures with more responsibility and respect, critical posthumanism calls for a renegotiation of the concept of life along the lines of a systemic process of heterogeneous agents forming co-dependent eco-systems. Rosi Braidotti subsumes this approach in the term zoe-geo-techno-assemblage: 'Life is

2 See for example: mr_incredible11, "Mr. Incredible Meme (You swim in)," TikTok, February 15, 2022, https:// vm.tiktok.com/ZGJt2dSho/.

3 Remediation refers to the emergence of one medium within another, a characteristic of digital media. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 2000), 59.

not exclusively human: it encompasses both bios and zoe forces, as well as geo- and techno-relations that defy our collective and singular powers of perception and understanding.'[4]

The conflation of the biological concept of life and ethics is intentional: on the one hand, posthumanism seeks to reposition humans as inherent parts of their environment, which itself is an ethical undertaking; on the other hand, due to the emphasis on different forms of agency, there is simply no way around ethics when taking action. According to Haraway and Braidotti, a great deal of social injustice stems from the self-conception of anthropocentrism, or the belief that White, 'Western', educated humans are the summit of creation. Since the image of the human is so explicit yet applied universally—e.g. in disembodied roles of spectators, the data sets used to train algorithms, the basic references for the development of pharmaceuticals—we have to take into account the intricate and multiple perspectives of the manifold number of *others* to correspond to the many shades of grey in existence. The posthuman project is to find new sets of practices, ideas, technologies, methods, and models to confront the issues that we, as species with varying levels of liability, agency, and privileges, are recursively creating. This is especially so in light of the rapidly developing field of technology: 'what understandings of contemporary subjectivity and subject-formation are enabled by a post-anthropocentric approach? What comes after the anthropocentric subject? How one reacts to this change of perspective depends to a large extent on one's relationship to technology.'[5]

Technology has always been a steady influence on evolution and our understanding of life, not just since the advent of genetic engineering and constant connections. A negative stance on technological development is more likely to result in a general cultural pessimistic stance, only focusing on the parts of it that decrease our standard of living. Concerning memes, this becomes noticeable in a form of hopelessness towards the development of art and culture, especially with due regard to AI, the degeneration of artistic skills, the use of stolen data, the rejection of precise authorship, and criticism of the ever-accelerating spectacle, micro trends, and hypes. An overtly positive stance, as can be seen in the techno-optimistic transhumanist tycoons of Silicon Valley, downright perfectly exemplified by the broadly advertised-yet-canceled cage fight between Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, may advocate for blanket surveillance, personalized ads, technology-based warfare, and the general rejection of any humanistic and physical values in favor of uploading one's consciousness into the matrix. Rejecting these extremist ideologies, I find the total abolition of social media or assistive technologies unrealistic and undesirable; instead, we need more critical reflections of their creation, biases, and exploration, and a timely regulation instead of aimless bans. One of the ways in which meme research can become posthuman is a further development of the basic definition of memes as sympoietic beings.

4 Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge,* eBook (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 45.
5 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 58.

Historically, the turning point in evolutionary biology most important for this is marked by Lynn Margulis' endosymbiosis theory (from here on abbreviated as SET). While engaging in a distinctly Darwinist understanding of evolution, SET understands collaboration across different species as the driving force behind it, in contrast to many interpretations of Darwin's theory of natural selection based on competition over scarce resources. Many rationalist Darwinists, including Richard Dawkins and his syndicate known as The Four Horsemen of Atheism, interpret survival as a struggle that makes enemies of all involved. When Darwin first published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he suggested that life behaves according to the principles of natural selection.[6] Here, for the first time on empirical grounds, life was described as a dynamic giving a rhythm to the spreading of living matter. Darwin's idea was heavily influenced by Thomas Robert Malthus, who had a formative influence on the idea of 'survival of the fittest': Malthus postulated that population grows geometrically while food production grows arithmetically, which will lead to insufficient resources in the long run, resulting in famine and poverty, and ultimately dictating the struggle for survival.[7] Although never introduced by Darwin as a competitive imperative, the insufficient receptions of evolution boiled it down to the imperative of 'survival of the fittest', where 'fittest' became synonymous with the strongest or most dominant. Since we heavily rely on metaphors in biology,[8] this interpretation of 'survival of the fittest' legitimates individualist desires leading to dog-eat-dog societies, thus reciting narratives that rule out the coming-together of different species. In the worst cases, this gave way to eugenics and other practices of 'improving' the genetic pool such as forced sterilization or incentives for procreation only for people deemed 'fit'. We may not forget that such practices, bred out of the research on racism in the 19th century, were abused for political purposes that ultimately resulted in the most horrible deeds of humanity.

The misinterpretation of the 'survival of the fittest' overshadows its actual message regarding the relational bond of creatures and their habitat: those that are well adapted to their environment are more likely to survive and thus pass on their genetic information.[9] Nevertheless, this definition of life as natural selection does not imply anything really except for a co-dependency between organism and environment. Is novelty in evolution always

6 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1859), 126-127.

7 See Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: CreateSpace, 1989).

8 Scott F. Gilbert and Clara Pinto-Correira., *Fear, Wonder, and Science in the New Age of Reproductive Biotechnology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5.

9 This is famously demonstrated with the 13 different species of so-called Darwin Galapagos finches: during his big expedition on the HMS Beagle in 1835, Darwin recognized that the little birds he encountered while traveling the archipelago showed small differences in phenotype on each island. He reasoned that the slightly different environments and foods caused the finches to gain and lose traits according to their habitat while the birds spread across the archipelago. Darwin called this process natural selection: the better you suit your environment, the more dominant your traits become. The contingent relation between an organism and its environment later becomes a fundamental premise of ecological theory. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species,* 397-398.

connected to the habitat? Is competition the only motivation behind change? Moreover, situating Darwin's work in *his* habitat uncovers all kinds of oddities: for instance, that his field of study was actually theology, that he married his cousin, that his other cousin coined the term 'eugenics', or that he allegedly ate one specimen of all the species he 'discovered'. Darwin, who enjoyed a privileged upbringing in 19th century England, was also living at a time heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and industrialization; a time of flourishing capitalism due to the colonial tearing apart of the planet, the beginning of automatization, and the forming of separate scientific disciplines. In this regard, Darwin is a role model of a Modern man who believes in science over mythology and the supremacy of Western European men over all other living beings.[10] Therefore, Darwin's theories on natural selection are heavily influenced by early Capitalism, apparent improvement through competition, and the conviction that humans are able to 'discover' all the big secrets of nature and eventually draft a 'theory of everything'. This is also reflected in the typical anxieties of these times such as overpopulation, the limitations of resources, and the primitive-civilized binary opposition legitimizing exploitation. In this respect, Darwin's investigations provide a starting point for the observation of organisms in relation to their environment, but are embedded in a deep-set anthropocentrism.

Somewhere along the evolution of biological disciplines, the inherent relation between organism and environment got lost. This is exemplified by Dawkins, who falls into the trap of abstracting life from living beings a good hundred years later. In *The Selfish Gene*, he postulates that life is nothing more than the hereditary transfer of genes throughout bodies, which is why they are called 'selfish'.[11] But if genes only actualize the teleology of life itself, is this not yet another projection of anthropocentrism? And, in analogy to Darwin's situation, do not the realities produced by the narrative of 'selfish' genes only caring for their own survival simply mirror the conditions of late capitalism? Haraway remarks on the paradox uttered by Dawkins to view genes as something other than part of oneself; after all, genes are part of the body. It seems absurd to claim that the body would work against itself and not in its entirety. In fact, as Haraway argues, this point of view resembles a form of Christian eschatology:[12] due to the developments of technoscience, the gene becomes an immaterial symbol for life itself, *using* the body to produce more life. Dawkins' firm dualism draws an almost transhumanist understanding of a disposable body merely necessary to

10 For example, Darwin divides humans into different races according to skin color and physiognomic features and connects that directly to morality and intellect: 'Nor is the difference slight in moral disposition between a barbarian, such as the man described by the old navigator Byron, who dashed his child on the rocks for dropping a basket of sea-urchins, and a Howard or Clarkson; and in intellect, between a savage who does not use any abstract terms, and a Newton or Shakespeare. Differences of this kind between the highest men of the highest races and the lowest savages, are connected by the finest gradations.' Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Men and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 35.

11 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

12 Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness @Second Millennium. FemaleMan© Meets OncoMouseTM* (London: Routledge, 1997), 133.

be located in this world, the inexhaustible source of life promising to recreate itself indefinitely across all material processes of decay. As remarked by Haraway, this corresponds to Platonic- Christian dogmatics, with the body once again becoming a devalued object that must be overcome, while the genes are viewed as transcendental and impossible for matter to interfere with. The consequence would be that nothing we do really matters as long as those genes can use our bodies as taxi cabs. As long as they're transmitted to another vessel, the meaning of life is affirmed. But if life's only purpose is, as Dawkins claims, really to just pass on genes, where do the big jumps in evolution happen? The contingency and complexity of living are more adequately discussed in Margulis' examinations of SET theory, which declares processes of symbiosis as fundamental to life:

> Life, although material, is inextricable from the behavior of the living. Defying definition—a word that means 'to fix or mark the limits of'—living cells move and expand incessantly. They overgrow their boundaries; one becomes two become many. Although exchanging a great variety of materials and communicating a huge quantity of information, all living beings ultimately share a common past.[13]

In contrast to the 'selfish' gene, Margulis' understanding of life knows no firm boundaries and pours out sometimes here and sometimes there, but always on the basis of cooperative processes. The theory of endosymbiosis proposes that evolution hinges upon the amalgamation and collaboration of individual organisms to become more complex and renders living 'the system in which members of different species live in physical contact'[14]. Margulis demonstrated this based on the evolution of eukaryotic cells, whose evolution was understood as the development of certain features making an organism more complex. The spirochetes, for example, evolved to make it possible for the cell to move. The mitochondria act as powerhouses for the cell, meaning they generate a specific organic compound to supply the cell with energy. The evolutionary logic at work is hierarchical, akin to a tree diagram, starting with something simple that becomes more complex over time. In SET, however, the idea is a bit different:[15] Margulis argues for a horizontal approach where organisms don't evolve hierarchically but mix and mingle and sometimes create new species. Her groundbreaking work on the cell argues that the different parts of the cell were originally individual protozoans that came together to form a new 'superorganism': in the case of the eukaryotic cell, it all started with an archaebacterium—a protozoon fond of sulfur and heat. This bacterium merged with another one that was able to swim. Imagine merging as a form of engulfing or devouring; one protozoon lives on inside the other. They get on really well and procreate a lot, and when they do so they both pass on their genes, thus creating a new form of cell: the common ancestor of all animals, plants, and fungi. Later joined by a protozoon able to metabolize oxygen, as well as cyanobacteria able to digest photosensitive bacteria, the last universal common ancestor (LUCA) to all

13 Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 4.
14 Lynn Margulis. *Sympoietic Planet: A New Look at Evolution.* (Amherst: Basic Books, 1999), 5.
15 Margulis and Sagan, *What is Life?*, 57-113.

complex living beings came into existence. This highlights how our very own evolution is more of a result of queer bacterial sex[16] instead of a logical sequence that gets more and more complex. If we fast forward to the evolution of Homo sapiens, we are not looking at an individual, but an intricate network of more than 39 trillion organisms in every human being. Margulis therefore refers to us as 'symbionts' instead of individuals. The term symbiogenesis refers to the coming-together of a new species:

> Symbiosis, the term coined by the German botanist Anton deBary in 1873, is the living together of very different kinds of organisms; deBary actually defined it as the 'living together of differently named organisms.' In certain cases cohabitation, long-term living, results in symbiogenesis: the appearance of new bodies, new organs, new species. In short, I believe that most evolutionary novelty arose, and still arises, directly from symbiosis.[17]

Here, we can already draw some parallels to the behavior of memes: just like early single-celled organisms, memes live by circulating through digital habitats and mutating at every possible point of contact with online communities. So-called cross-over memes are common phenomena where established memes or meme characters simply appear or are 'fed' into new memes.



Fig. 3: Are Ya Winning, Son? is a Rage Comic on 4chan parodying gamers and the restrained relationship to their fathers. Instead of a stick figure sitting at the PC, we see a cat boy reading Leftist theory. The cat boy is often depicted as a human-cat-hybrid and comes from otaku culture. He was immensely popular on Theorygram and philosophy meme pages like @catboy_fisher. Are Ya Winning, Son? Catboy Version. @catboy_fisher. Instagram. From the author's archive.

16 See Eben Kirksey, "Queer Love, Gender Bending Bacteria, and Life after the Anthropocene," *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 6 (2018): 197-219.

17 Margulis, *Sympoietic Planet*, 33.

The result is like a mix of popular and novel formats that form new relations with one another and create fresh memes. In other cases, divergent variations of the same 'original' meme emerge and evolve differently, ultimately blurring the lines between the meme and its habitat. We have seen this happen to Pepe the Frog: originally created as part of a comic strip, the green amphibian with the googly eyes quickly became a darling of various online communities. Numerous variations from Crying Pepe to Smirking Pepe could be found on every corner of the internet. Although Pepe originated from a Californian comic by Matt Furie, the frog's success has also led to great popularity in the politically opposed US-American alt right community.[18] Accordingly, it didn't take long for numerous racist, antisemitic, white supremacist, and other vitriolic mutations of Pepe to circulate that ultimately landed him a spot on the Anti-Defamation League's list of hate symbols. While Pepe's violent history will always be a part of the character, the combined efforts of various users led to his redemption in many digital cultures.[19] Pepe illustrates how multiple contradictory versions of the same original meme can co-exist simultaneously, through identifying Pepe from the comic as the LUCA, and all his subsequent iterations as mutations.

In an effort to situate the ostensibly objective narratives around evolution, Haraway went to great lengths to demonstrate that SET is not only a mechanism of biology, but can serve as a model for subjectivation, too. In her interpretation of symbiogenesis known as sympoiesis, Haraway defines the notion as follows:

> Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means "making-with." Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [. . .] Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for world-ing-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.[20]

Sympoiesis is a mutation of autopoiesis, a term coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in the 1970s to describe living beings as systems. Autopoiesis, which translates to self-production, is characterized by the premise that the producer and the product are inextricable: 'The being and doing of an autopoietic unity are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization.'[21] The dynamic model of autopoiesis makes its doing the subject of its existence: quite literally, *life becomes living*. Maturana and Varela give the example of the cell as an autopoietic unit, at the same time showing up the limits of their theory: since the cell hinges on clearly marked boundaries in order

18 See Arthur Jones, dir. *Feels Good Man.* Ready Fictions, Wavelength: Giant Pictures. 2020.

19 See Casper Chan, "Pepe the Frog is Love and Peach: His Second Life in Hong Kong," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image,* ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw, (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 289-306.

20 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58.

21 Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge,* (Boston: Shambala, 1987), 49.

to realize its being-doing, autopoiesis cannot adequately account for the great leaps of evolution as well as the generation of 'new' organisms. M. Beth Dempster therefore coined the term 'sympoietic systems' and defined them as lacking such operational closure and rigid boundaries.[22] These fuzzy, flexible systems are ontologically open and can spontaneously intermingle with other beings. This is what Haraway denotes as the *enfolding and generative unfurling* of autopoiesis: situated systems that neither create themselves nor sustain themselves in a 'selfish' manner, but always exist in close relation to another sympoietic organism. Taking this interpretation to its logical end makes clear that sympoiesis is not only the rhythm, but the very material of living beings. This also coincides with Margulis' conception of life:

> Life—both locally, as animal, plant, and microbe bodies, and globally, as the biosphere—is a most intricate material phenomenon. Life shows the usual chemical and physical properties of matter, but with a twist. Beach sand is usually silicon dioxide. So are the innards of a mainframe computer—but a computer isn't a pile of sand. Life is distinguished not by its chemical constituents but by the behavior of its chemicals. The question "What is life?" is thus a linguistic trap. To answer according to the rules of grammar, we must supply a noun, a thing. But life on Earth is more like a verb. It repairs, maintains, re-creates, and outdoes itself.[23]

This great emphasis on living over life also gives sympoiesis its ethics and politics: once doing is the name of the game, we have to situate not just what, but *how* we are doing stuff. Sympoiesis thus accounts for the dynamic ethics of living: first, the relational model makes it easier to demarcate 'singular' events in the processual flow of being without abstracting life from living beings. Secondly, due to its inherent codependency, the observer is always already situated within the sympoietic system without allocating the role of an outside spectator as in, for example, first-order cybernetic models.[24] Thirdly, in contrast to autopoiesis, sympoiesis accounts for evolutionary alterations thanks to its inherent flexibility. The shift toward dynamic models of living accounts for the continual evolving, mutating, and exchanging of all creatures.

The sympoietic logic of devouring and engulfment is also evident in Wojak comics, which appeared online for the first time around 2010. The chronological emergence of the line

22 M. Beth Dempster, "Sympoietic and Autopoietic Systems: A New Distinction for Self-Organizing Systems," in *Proceedings of the World Congress of the Systems Sciences and ISSS 2000,* eds. J. K. Allen and J. Wilbey. Presented at the International Society for Systems Studies Annual Conference, Toronto: July 2000.

23 Margulis and Sagan, *What is Life?*, 14.

24 This is especially relevant when doing meme research, as it situates the researcher in the sympoietic system of a meme. Choosing materials from one's own social media account, for example, is a subjective undertaking with regard to how personalized algorithmic feeds limit content accessibility. Acts of situating should therefore be approached from the methodological traditions of ethnography and science & technology studies.

drawing of the popular character with a *warm face* falls into the period of rage comics, another heterogeneous set of character comics with distinct properties created in MS Paint. Since Wojak only really rose to popularity in the mid-2010s, the meme evolved differently from rage comics and, over the years, Wojak comics devoured and substituted the rage comic characters like Trollface and Me Gusta, which slowly disappeared from daily usage.

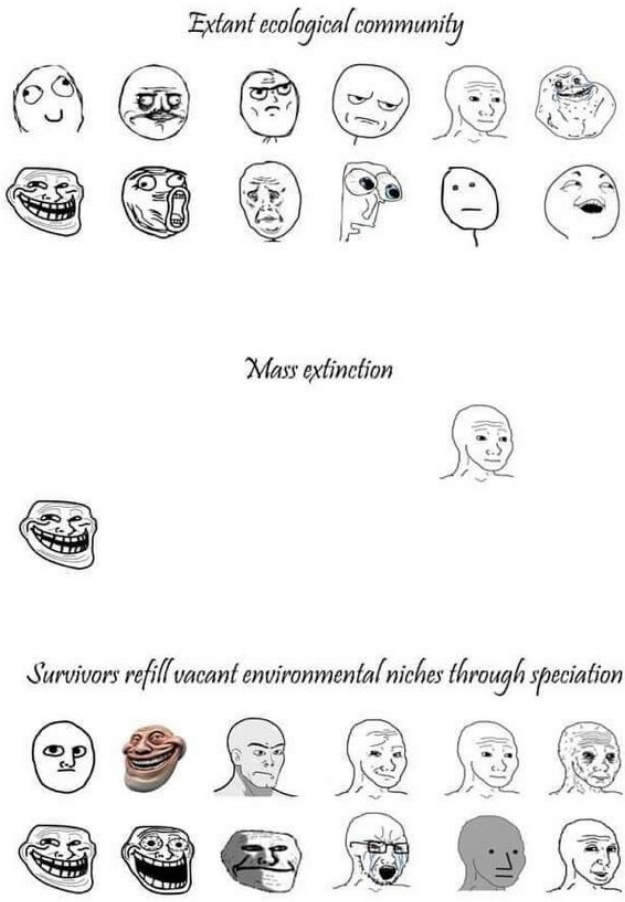


Fig. 4: A meme on mass extinction and re-vitalization through niche specification. Only Trollface and Wojak survived the mass extinction, proliferating many more versions through variations. Note that although Rage Comics roughly coincide with Wojak comics, there were rarely any cross-overs due to Wojak only gaining traction in the late 2010s (in contrast to Rage Comics from the early 2010s). Source: Extinction and niche construction of rage comics and Wojaks. Know Your Meme. 14 February 2022. https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/002/310/216/8b9.

Although they have come from different parts of the internet—Wojak can be traced to the Polish image board Vichan while most rage comics are 4chan originals—their meetings had a decisive influence on the further course of their development.

Sympoiesis does not hinge on the stark dichotomy of inside and outside, and favors processual over static understandings of being. Because it is always possible to engulf or merge with something else, boundaries are generally porous and situational, which gives us a framework to think and narrate the story of life from a different perspective. While in Darwin's as well as in Dawkins' times, individualism at any cost was desired, we are now in need of stories of living-together. Haraway also adds to Margulis' notion of symbionts and proposes the term holobionts that can be translated as 'entire beings' or 'safe and sound beings.'[25] The etymological proximity to holism—a long-runner of ecological theory—should not be understood as an egalitarian interpretation of we-are-all-the-same: holobionts act more as knots in a knitted pullover, with perhaps different species holding each other to create new patterns. They escape a permanent categorization as subjects or objects through never-ending alterations in their constitution. Symbiotic relations hold them together—without them, we would all be dispersed across time and space and never able to form anything more complex or meaningful than a protozoon. In contrast to popular understandings of symbiosis, the term simply means 'living-with' and does not automatically imply a win-win relation. In critical posthumanist theory, this translates to becoming-with the multispecies assemblage of beings on this planet. Instead of systematizing and taxonomizing living beings, we should mingle with them, become-with them, and take part in the infinite play of evolution on this planet. However, this does not account for a refusal of modernity or illusionary return-to-nature! We need to keep in mind that, first and foremost, we are naturalcultural holobionts not superior to any other form of life, but rather that we make-with, learn-with, and think-with them. Intuitively, this is exactly what we have been doing with memes: a meme emerges from different symbionts and circulates on the internet where it may find its way to other people or not. If it does, other people engage with it through affects and emotions and use their technological entanglements with hardware and platforms to further spread the meme. Some users might remix it with other symbionts, thus inducing a spontaneous evolution before spreading it further. The meme then continues to live on; it might become an inside joke for a group of people or might become part of a series, or a work of art. In any case, memes may only undergo evolution in conjunction with other organisms. It does not matter at all that memes are not human: in fact, the technological mediations of people on social media known as users are not really human either. They mingle with filters and emojis and photoshop, they have their own language and writing and customs. But this is not an invention of the internet, it only affirms the inhuman inside that genetics has been speculating about for a while: since the Human Genome Project, researchers have identified more and more genomes that are not 'originally' human, but have been obtained through horizontal gene transfer

25 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 60.

from a variety of species.[26] There is no such thing as a 'pure' human subject (or a 'pure' memetic subject): we are conglomerates of all kinds of organic and inorganic material consolidating in one body at a specific time and place. Adopting a relational stance enables us to acknowledge that every affect has an effect on something or someone, whether that be a policy concerning the pollution of the environment or considering where the food you are ingesting comes from.

Ironically, in order to be able to identify memes as loosely secluded living assemblages, the final key to frame memes as sympoietic subjects re-introduces temporary boundaries in order to grasp memes as entities. Similar to Margulis' remarks on endosymbiosis, yet based on the principles of quantum mechanics, in Karen Barad's theory of agential realism, phenomena emerge into existence through intra-action when different agents meet. This further supports the assumption that the seclusion of subjects and objects is an illusion. Matter, or 'the stuff of the world', is composed of different elements, but in and of themselves, these know no boundaries. What forms subjects is their interference within time and space. Barad does not deny that there are beings that are closed-off from their environment, for example, through the barrier of skin—but ontologically, we are all part of the big mass of particles and waves constituting our universe, not unlike Braidotti's zoe-geo-techno-assemblage. What 'cuts' us into different shapes and sizes are so-called agential cuts:

> A specific intra-action (involving a specific material configuration of the 'apparatus') enacts an agential cut (in contrast to the Cartesian cut-an inherent distinction-between subject and object), effecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object.' That is, the agential cut enacts a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy. In other words, relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions [27].

In other words, an agential cut is a phenomenon of temporary separateness, for example, 'cutting out' a human offspring from the merging of an ovum and sperm forming a zygote. This being 'begins' with birth and 'ends' with death, yet on a larger scale it is created from the same mass of particles it will again return to. However, in regard to complex widespread phenomena like memes, these agential cuts can be dispersed vastly across time and space. This can be observed in memes suddenly going viral after being on the internet for years: SpongeGar, the prehistoric version of beloved cartoon character Spongebob Squarepants, was widely used on the internet to signify crude, visceral forms of behavior. Although the

26 See Alastair Crisp, Chiara Boschetti, Malcolm Perry et al, "Expression of multiple horizontally acquired genes is a hallmark of both vertebrate and invertebrate genomes," *Genome Biology* 16 (2015).

27 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 333-334.

episode the still was taken from aired in 2002, the meme only gained traction after 2012, when it appeared in an ironic video titled *Remembering Spongegar* as if the character was some long-lost ancestor.[28] From there, it was primarily shared as an image macro, thus mutating into another form and continuously expanding the territory it inhabits. We can see that there is no definite beginning or end of this meme, but it is 'intra-actively enacted relative to a specific phenomenon.'[29] This is because with every intra-action—and especially global intra-actions affecting many agents—the cards are shuffled anew. Every intra-action influences my view on everything because with it comes a whole new set of virtualities for further mutations and trajectories of evolution.

Merging Barad's, Braidotti's, and Haraway's propositions with regard to memes gives the following definition: a meme emerges through the meeting of two or more sympoietic agents or symbionts. These agents may take on many forms, including images, snowclones, fads, videos, text, dances, audio, 3D models, among others. The notion of sympoiesis already situates the merging of symbionts as a memetic process of remixing or entangling of previously discrete entities. In memes, this is apparent in techniques such as photoshopping and audio remixing or satirizing and duetting.[30] After the meeting of sympoietic agents, the meme circulates through the sharing of users online and mutates in relation to its habitat, which is constituted by the platforms it inhabits and their distinct user bases. In this regard, a meme is always situated in the digital eco-systems it emerged from and is shaped by their specific values and outlooks. When we think of memes as part of our living assemblage, it's not the memes that suddenly become alive, but that we as people become materialized. We are subject to the same form of evolution and development, communicating through the same channels and interpreting each other with similar characteristics. The meme thinks, communicates, moves, multiplies, lives, and ultimately dies like us, and we experience our respective changes step by step. Our sympoietic life intermingles online and offline worlds, which means that social responsibility is analogous to technological responsibility. Memes serve as a starting point to reflect on our liability toward living among our own digital creations, in the ethical tradition of Frankenstein, which will be all the more relevant concerning the growing applications of technological devices in education, medicine, infrastructure, mobility, and care work.

Understanding memes as agents engaging in sympoiesis unfurls the definition of memes as 'cultural units' by Dawkins and as 'digital items'[31] shared online by Limor Shifman.

28 Egypt84935582, *Remembering Spongegar,* YouTube, July 10, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbXFhcnbARs.

29 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 339.

30 These techniques can also be subsumed under the category of hacking. See McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

31 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014), 7-8.

Dawkins' definition of memes as 'units of cultural transmission . . . or imitation'[32] in analogy to the biological units of genes initiated an academic discussion on cultural evolution that adhered to the same restrictive factors as the rationalist comprehensions of genetic evolution that gave birth to the field of memetics. However, due to the reductionist understanding of Darwinian natural selection in memetics, the assumption that culture must have grown in the same way became dominant. Instead of passing on genes containing genetic material, humans act as vessels carrying memes consisting of cultural information. Dawkins' ultra-rationalist approach also needs to be situated in the specific context of US-American research, where opposing Darwinism in the field of evolutionary biology was tantamount to endorsing Christian creationist myths of intelligent design.[33] Of course, this does not make Dawkins' endeavor to separate nature from culture any less problematic against the backdrop of the Anthropocene, considering the trajectories of thinking in binary oppositions such as nature/culture, mind/body or subject/object and their inherent relation to colonialism, the patriarchy, and extractivism.

In 2014, Shifman's analysis of pre-internet and early internet memes within the field of memetics and concerning what determines the viral success of a meme, put memes again in the center of academic discourse. One of the factors contributing to Shifman's ongoing relevance is the shift from situating memes in the field of evolutionary biology to media and communication studies. This allowed for a more specific engagement with the dynamics of internet culture, including methods such as sharing and remixing as well as the media-specific implications of internet memes. Her analysis follows Dawkins' approach to cultural evolutionism, which is most apparent in her discussion of the-meme-as-gene. Shifman criticizes the reductionism toward complexity and the somewhat arbitrary adoption of biological mechanisms as memetic metaphors, stating that 'it is not necessary to think of biology when analyzing memes. The ideas of replication, adaptation, and fitness to a certain environment can be analyzed from a purely sociocultural perspective.'[34] While a clear demarcation of the field of meme studies might have been relevant to kickstart internet meme research ten years ago, the exclusion of disciplines seems unnecessary especially concerning the urgency of the post-Anthropocene. In fact, embracing a sympoietic framework is also in line with Shifman's critique of Dawkins' reductionism. At times, however, the neglect of biological metaphors in favor of situating meme research in the social and cultural studies leads to conflicts between the underlying strict Darwinist framework and practices of sharing and circulation: for example, Shifman's critique of the epidemiological model of the-meme-as-virus understands memes as infectious germs nesting in the internet's immune system. Following Henry Jenkins, Shifman argues that this approach denies users' agency and states that 'this metaphor has been used in a problematic way, conceptualizing people as helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination

32 Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene,* 176.
33 Haraway, Modest Witness, 133.
34 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 12.

of meaningless media "snacks" that infect their minds.'[35] While users are certainly more involved in the emergence, circulation, and mutation of memes than the meme-as-virus analogy suggests, and Shifman makes great efforts to locate viral practices in online communication, the viral seduction of some memetic content could also be interpreted as a form of nonhuman agency. For example, not being able to resist that catchy song getting stuck in your head—anybody who has ever been caught in a TikTok echo chamber will probably agree—is very similar to a viral infection, as are some of the memes that took the internet by storm and have successfully proliferated and spawned offspring, such as the sassy Shiba Inu known as *Doge*. While the image of a helpless and passive person being infected by viruses might not be the most flattering metaphor for human agency, identifying viral processes as a form of nonhuman agency also enables more precise critiques of distinctly concealed processes: for example, of viral marketing fostering the commercialization of memes. A sympoietic understanding of viral memes makes the shared responsibility among human and nonhuman agencies relationally traceable.

Returning to Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny, a sympoietic analysis takes into account the symbionts coming together and intra-actively generating meaning from the meme template. In correspondence to Mr. Incredible's visible deterioration, the downfall of memes is recalled through the narratives of Advice Dog, Jeff the Killer, Meatspin, #GamerGate, clickbait compilation videos, Logan Paul's visit to the suicide forest, Minimalist Loss.jpg, Benchtails, the Tide Pod Challenge and, ultimately, Soyjak comics on Reddit. While incorporations of other memes into Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny reference the history of memetic discussions over the past two decades and establish a somewhat pessimistic stance on the mainstreaming of internet culture, at the same time, new mutations growing out of the template further stimulate its evolution. The entanglement of memes and human behavior foreground their shared sympoietic character: their assemblage may encompass references to pop culture and the news, the technocapitalist platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, the memes that inhabit those platforms, the algorithms calculating their spreading, the server farms saving their data, the cables under the sea transmitting them from one node to another, the satellites in orbit receiving electromagnetic signals, the devices we use to retrieve memes, including all the extracted minerals from the planet, our shared language, the policies and laws we enforce to control access, the cultural conventions determining our humor, the myriad pets posing for images, and probably many more agents employing agential cuts generating 'one' meme. An understanding based on sympoiesis goes beyond the definition of the meme as an image, symbol, or digital item by focusing on the relational structures of the various conditions of emergence, and thus also addresses relevant discourses, emotions, and technologies. A sympoietic interpretation overlaps the boundaries of disciplines and situates processes of mutation, adaption, and circulation in the framework of endosymbiotic theory and its philosophical engagements—which does not render methods and theories from other disciplines

35 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 11.

adverse. Memes are never 'purely' biological nor sociocultural, but heterogenous agents of nature, culture, and technology. Understanding memes as sympoietic agents shifts the perspective to commonalities and communities, to ethics and politics, and roots meme research in the post-Anthropocene.

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DISASSEMBLY AND REASSEMBLY: THEORIZING A MEME-RHIZOME

PHIL WILKINSON

We should stop believing in trees, roots, and radicles. They've made us suffer too much.[1]

Meme studies is totally tubular, and we should be approaching it as such. A recurring affective motif in academic and academic-adjacent writing on memes is the palpable sense of frenetic consternation as we try, desperately, to ontologically, epistemologically, or axiologically pin them down. I write this inspired by the bewildered writing of Arkenbout et al. [2] because their bewilderment is understandable and required. Anyone who claims to study memes but does so with their psyche unmarred is either lying, intellectually lazy, or ontologically dead inside.

Perhaps the reason *'memes as units of culture'* has persisted for so long is its reassuring simplicity, especially useful for those who are now having to write on memes as they manifest in their disciplinary field of view. Is it fair to expect every author on meme studies, directly or indirectly, to wade into the ontological 'Gordian knot' of memes' signifying forms and asignifying forces? Perhaps not, but we can certainly do better if only by acknowledging their complexity.

Here, then, I make two cases. First, memes should be theorized rhizomatically. Adopting a rhizomatic approach positions memes as the culturally diffuse, ontologically boundaryless, (a) signifying 'bastard offspring'[3] they are. Memes are not 'units' of culture[4], dormant and distinct from each other or culture at large, but are instead multiplicities, active, differential, and futile to demarcate.[5] We do not talk about the meme (singular) but instead the meme (multiplicity), constituted by elements that can be differentiated but never entirely disconnected. For clarity, I will refer to this theorizing of memes as a meme-rhizome.

Second, the field of meme studies and we as meme theorists[6] should also be viewed rhizomatically. We must become bastards ourselves.[7] Memes cannot be understood in ontological isolation, but as frenetic assemblages of affect, identity, socio-technical system, economic

1 Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 15.

2 Chloe Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw, "Introduction: Global Mutations of the Viral Image," in *Critical Meme Reader #1: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloe Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 8–17.

3 Arkenbout, Wilson, and De Zeeuw, "Introduction," 10.

4 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

5 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 1994).

6 Or however we chose to self-identify. As will make sense later, I prefer 'grower of intellectual potatoes'

7 After all, '*if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.' - Nietzsche*

logic, political advocacy, cultural bricolage, etc. To understand these intractable, shifting lattices, we must become intellectual opportunists in the spirit of Latour and Deleuze. I think in many ways we are already adopting this approach – even if we don't necessarily see it. This book itself is testament to a burgeoning rhizomatic approach as it calls on various interdisciplinary, undisciplined, signifying, and asignifying connections to memes.

Intellectual Potatoes

Historically, meme studies have been less totally tubular, and more a tuber totality. The impetus for Deleuze and Guattari's work on the rhizome was to counter an arborescent model of human knowledge. Arborescence refers to a tree like structure that presumes a genesis root, centering significance and signification, of which all other branches are subjects. This inherently imposes a hierarchical, quasi-sequential presumption and invites issues of universalism. After all, we are all branches on the same tree.

As outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, and developed by others, this metaphysical model appears in many disciplines. For instance, the European philosophical canon is often presented as a linear, inherited, and hierarchical development '—it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'.[8] Perhaps ironically, this arborescence has also been identified and critiqued in Dawkins' field of evolutionary biology. Indeed, had we fully embraced Dawkins' initial conception of memes we may have followed a similar trajectory to the study of evolutionary genetics - overcoming our own encounters with teleologism, essentialism, and decontextualization. The long running intellectual argument of nature vs nurture has finally been settled with definitive, rhizomatic ambiguity. There is an inherited component to our genetic structure, sure, but it is more complicated than simple genetic arborescence.

From epigenetics we now know that environment has a direct impact on genes – turning them on and off depending on environmental factors. Further, the emergence of *'horizontal gene transfer'* as a '*paradigm shift'* refers to the lateral movement of genetic information between organisms, thus genetic material is shared outside of the normal means of parental inheritance or even species. So not only should memes not be understood through an arborescent lens of evolutionary genetics, neither should evolutionary genetics itself. Instead, memes, and our collective inquiry, should be understood rhizomatically.

Rhizomatic thinking draws from the biological definition of underground horizontal plant stems that create connections of various length, thickness, and concentration.

8 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, Corrected (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

These rhizomes then can form new plant systems and connect with other local environmental or ecological systems. As described by Deleuze & Guattari:

> The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers.[9]

Viewing ourselves rhizomatically then immediately frees us from any sense of intellectual debt, or inherited apologies we must make for Dawkins and Shifman. Like distant relatives with out of touch views who are still invited to family gatherings. The history of our field can be rewritten – Shifman did not 'emerge from the ninth circle with foreknowledge of memetics to come'.[10] No, they just formed a tuber – a potato of a theory – upon which we have made continuous connections, giving it a robust vitality. Shifman and Dawkins' potatoes are not the centre of inquiry though, nor are they the root: they exist in a horizontal system of connections.

A Customary Warning on Deleuze and Guattari

In reading for this chapter, I encountered a recurring preamble that preceded any substantive discussion of Deleuze and Guattari. This motif reads a like a metaphysical warning label for the potential inaccessibility but philosophical potency of their writing. As one academic warns:

> The prose is dense and schizophrenic. The essay consists not in an argument, but in the ecstatic elaboration of a metaphor, a web of interconnected concepts, the development of a new vocabulary without a pause for explanation or so much as a simple definition.[11]

The philosophical writing of Deleuze and Guatarri is a performance intended to *invoke* new understandings and connections rather than provide them. Much of the writing within *A Thousand Plateaus* reads as a breathless, poetic allegory. There was no intended meaning – for them, that would be a self-defeating exercise – just a potentiating of connections. *A Thousand Plateaus* was written to promote intellectual and affective (a)signifying connections in the reader[12] rather than subjectivate a concept.

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9 Guattari and Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 7.

10 Sabrina Ward-Kimola, "'A Vaguely Erotic Mime': Mimetic Text VS. Optical Tacticality," in *Critical Meme Reader #1: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 42.

11 Dan Clinton, "Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. 'Rhizome,' in A Thousand Plateaus. Annotation by Dan Clinton," Theories of Media, Winter 2003, https://csmt.uchicago.edu/annotations/deleuzerhizome.htm.

12 "*Sending you positive metaphysical vibes besties!"* Deleuze and Guattari, probably.

My goal is to shamelessly, but sincerely and respectfully, co-opt the conception of rhizomes and I do so in the pragmatic philosophical spirit of Bruno Latour:

> I'm like a dog following its prey, and then the prey arrive in the middle of a band of wolves which are called professional philosophers[...] My intention was not to fall in with the wolves and to have to answer all of these guys while trying to catch my prey.[13]

The concept of rhizomes may have utility, but this is a utility that is hard fought for and contingent. There is already a useful botanical metaphor for an ontological and interdisciplinary flattening – and a focus on nondeterministic connectivity. However, it extends beyond the metaphorical - and it would not be like Deleuze[14] and Guattari to provide us with something as readily deployable as an explanatory metaphor. In conceptualizing this meme-rhizome I took inspiration from Latour to: 'recruit as many heterogeneous allies as possible … to write stories that do not start with a framework but that end up with local and provisional variations of scale'.[15] So here is my offering of the rhizome-meme concept, my little potato of a theory if you will.

Rhizomatic Meanings and Memeings

The meme-rhizome is perhaps best understood as a flat ontology of becoming and unbecoming through connections. The focus is not the subject or object, as they are not distinct, but rather the focus is on continuous creation and destruction of connections within and across mutating conceptual multiplicities. There are no fixed definitions of differentiation between individual memes, subjects and objects, or forces of subjectification. There are no memes, *singular* - only memes, *the substantive multiplicity*. That is, memes are not inherently individualized elements or a subset of some larger subjectivated strata of online culture, political discourse, or affective expression for instance.

When discussing individual memetic elements we start with the meme-rhizome; within this we may begin to subjectivate constituting elements. This individuation of elements arises only through creating differentiating connections. These elements may include, but aren't limited to, disciplinary strata, affects, sociolinguistics, visual imagery, or technical form. To borrow one of their more philosophically lucid paragraphs, Deleuze & Guattari write that:

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13 B Latotur, G Harman, and P Eredelyi, *The Prince and The Wolf: Latour and Harman at the LSE* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), 41.

14 Besides, Deleuze hated metaphors - *'the metaphor is redundant, since it implies some true primary meaning'*.

15 Bruno Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative," in *Knowledge and Reflexivity*, ed. S Woolgar (London: Sage Ltd, 1988), 174.

> A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. [. . .] In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification.[16]

This articulation of books, and admonishment of univocal thinking, can be directly applied to the meme-rhizome in this manner. To treat a meme as a distinct entity, a unit of culture, ignores connections that give rise to new understandings and potential meanings. The proliferation of memes and meme culture also speaks to a rhizomatic nature that 'ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles.'[17] Within current studies there are lines of articulation that examine, for example, the political expediency of memes, their affective compositions, or their manifestations through the socio-technical system of the internet. Indeed, as Hondroudakis writes:

> Meme culture is a process of mediation latticing the gulf between the scales of affect and identity, information, and social system.[18]

Behold an instance of the meme-rhizome constituted by differentiated elements according to psychosocial, technical, and societal dimensions of meaning. We can already see the meme-rhizome as the mutating connective lattice, the mediation, the various assemblages of connections between these semiotic scales. As the meme-rhizome is the thing between things it is acentric and, much to our collective chagrin, it resists a universalizable definition. We will not develop a new conceptualization of memes that reterritorializes it in perpetuity. Territorialization is a temporary state in a system of constant deterritorializing and reterritorializing flux.

> There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity.[19]

With the meme-rhizome, worries about centralization or disciplinary domination are neither aspiration nor limitation. What we have is a changing assemblage of differential meanings that connect and reconnect to other rhizomatic conceptions. So, when we do leave the territory of *'memes as units of culture'*, it will not cease to exist, nor will it be the evolutionary root of our current inquiry – it will exist alongside all the other conceptualizations of memes,

16 Guattari and Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 3.
17 Guattari and Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 7.
18 Geoffrey Hondroudakis, "Deeper and Higher: Memes as Scalar Abstraction," in *Critical Meme Reader #1: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 188.
19 Guattari and Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 7.

cultures, expression, visual languages and so on. The meme-rhizome has no central node, nor a seminal root, there are instead continuous lines of connection navigable, viewable, measurable, across whatever subjective dimension we choose. We can validly view memes in various ways, but none of these views becomes the central point from which all other views must arise or pivot.

The key consideration here that extends the meme-rhizome beyond a simple metaphor is its insistent connection seeking, propagating indiscriminately into different pre-subjectivated fields of view. It forges connections with dimensions of artistic merit, emotional affordance, identity reinforcement, technical production, etc. Connections disappear and reappear, redevelop, and remix; they are weaponized, commercialized, and politicized and, and, and... If we are serious about our inquiry then we must be equally as insistent in forging new connections. In doing so we will continuously demonstrate the limits of current understanding whilst frenetically assembling new understandings in perpetuity.

A Concerning Number of Rickys

Any rhizomatic understanding of memes should be asignifiably rupturable at any point, with any new (a)signified connection made in its place. We should be able to create new conceptual connections, a la lines of flight, that force reconsideration. As such, all connections are valid – no matter how ephemeral they may become.

The following story is an allegorical illustration of this. One day at school my fellow 7-year-old scientists and myself conducted an experiment to measure the biodiversity in our local field. We used the established sampling method of throwing a white square frame around the field and counting whatever flora and fauna we saw in it. My research partner Ricky and I were much more deliberate in our placement. It just so happened that Ricky was in the frame every time we placed it. Consequently, we produced significant findings. This local field had a unique biodiversity with, on average, 12 daisies, 2 ladybirds, and 4 Rickys for every square metre. We reported these results to our teacher with much delight. Unfortunately, our results were declared an 'outlier' (complete nonsense) and our 'findings were suppressed' (the teacher told our parents). Had our results been included, they may have introduced an evaluative dimension to the activity - critiquing issues of sampling methods, or discussing how easy it is to manipulate results. Or, we may have just formed a new assemblage that had a 'fun' dimension.

When we talk about ceaseless connections in the meme-rhizome, we do not limit ourselves to what is readily subjectivated. The connections break free from existing strata, moving along lines that introduce new modes of coding or understanding. Connections can be made that 'combine very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic,

gestural, and cognitive'.[20] They can asignify, change meaning in ways that can perhaps be felt or expressed creatively, but not easily articulated or subjectivated. Hence, as this collection requests, there is a need to follow the meme-rhizome along these lines through whatever creative, expressive, or affective dimension we see ahead of us.

The promise of the meme-rhizome concept, then, is one of ceaseless connections that we can start to follow toward new understandings. As articulated by Deleuze and Guattari, in its ceaseless creation of connection the rhizome does not care for disciplinary or ontological boundary. With this view, the meme-rhizome is a multiplicity within which ontology becomes a dimension of differentiation between connected elements. We may use the attribution of bastard-offspring as a differential element to individuate and connect constituent elements. They are connected, but not hierarchically so, and not in isolation from other connections. Meme subjectivities and memetic (a)subjectification exist within the flat-ontological register of the meme-rhizome.

Substantiating Memetic Substances

The meme-rhizome is formed, unformed, and reformed according to whichever connections we wish to create or follow. Within this we can make differential connections of ontological positioning. So 'the medium is the message'[21] only if we decide to differentiate the two, otherwise it just *is*. A way to conceptualize this is, yes, another science allegory – this one I substantiate from Gafvelin's use of 'dissolving'[22] in their speculative and misplaced hope for the 'death' of their essentialist conception of meme-culture. When something dissolves, it doesn't disappear: its composition simply changes such that it is no longer as easily recognizable, or differentiable, from an initial frame of reference.

The substance that once contained the meme, whole and signified, now contains the dissolved meme, decomposed and asignified, but still present and still connected. The signified and asignified exist within the same substance, differentiated by ontological dimensions, or by degrees of assembly or disassembly. Taking the chemical allegory further, there must also be connection to the forces through which things are assembled or dissembled. A substance does not dissolve or materialize inertly, it does so due to chemical forces within a substance and/or exterior forces of heat or pressure. The meme-rhizome then must contain assembled connections to the forces of its own (a)signification.

20 Guattari and Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.

21 Marshall Mcluhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 1964).

22 Åke Gafvelin, "On the Prospect of Overcoming Memeculture, Or, The Last Meme in History," in *Critical Meme Reader #1: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloe Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 176–86.

There is a sense of recognition of the meme-rhizome's propagation across, and into, a range of socio-cultural domains. Further, there is increasing recognition that this connection is more than just transient, tangible significations, but instead the meme-rhizome acting as a subjectivating force of (a)signification in these domains. It's not just that political discourse now features memes, it is that political discourse is becoming memier. Memes don't just appear as isolated objectivities, they are symbolic [23] of an underlying mimetic force that subjectivates meaning.

Complicating things, if we are interested in exploring the impact of this 'memetic force' then we must do so through its assemblage with other forces that subjectivate meaning. McLuhan's quote would become less pithy, of course, as we would argue that *the medium, in connection to an assemblage of subjectiviating forces, of which memetics is one, gives rise to meanings within the message.* Gafvelin's articulation of an essentialised and neatly demarcated conception of meme-culture is in service to imagining its death. Given the propagation of the meme-rhizome's (a)signification, we can no more easily imagine the death of meme-culture than we can imagine the death of culture proper. Further, without consideration for the forces of mimetic (a)signification, it is premature to assume that this death is desirable.

In the *Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckman outline forces of legitimation, the mechanisms and trajectories by which subjectivities become increasingly legitimate in society, going through a process from common-sense acceptance and eventual institutionalization. They argue that '[t]he edifice of legitimations is built upon language and uses language as its principal instrumentality.'[24]. Given that the meme-rhizome is apparent in legitimatizing forces of political discourse and capitalist messaging, what other assemblages of legitimation do they intersect with? Further, at what point do we view the meme-rhizome as a legitimating force in its own right?

Weber conceptualized rationality as a driving force of legitimation through which capitalism centralizes and enforces its power.[25] Through rationality we can signify importance through stratified measurability, or by choosing not to measure something at all. The hyper-irrationality of the meme-rhizome then, its resistance to measurement and capacity for participatory construction, presents a potentially mediating force. Memeability, not measurability, becomes legitimate.

23 Or 'symptomatic' depending on your predilection for memes.

24 Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin Group, 1966), 82.

25 K Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought* (SAGE Publications, 2006).

Following this, Foucault argued that discipline is a technology of power.[26] Power is exercised through discipline's various manifestations, such as criminal punishment or the normative values enforced in academic disciplines and professional bodies. The meme-rhizome demonstrates a capacity for self-propagation and resilience in contexts that seek to suppress or co-opt them. Nothing kills a meme quicker than its cynical co-option for political or capitalistic intentions. Further, they are also frustratingly resistant to any disciplinary definition, such that we can't demarcate what is or isn't a meme. Again, perhaps we have another mediating force through the meme-rhizome's un-disciplinarity.

Albert Camus, Nietzsche's more inspirational counterpart, argued that it is the nature of human existence to seek meaning in this existence even though there is no meaning inherent to this existence. We will ask '*What is the meaning of life?'* and life will shrug indifferently. This is absurd - the paradox of seeking meaning that will never come. Camus argues there are three responses to this. The first two are suicide or philosophical suicide - the act of becoming an existential bottom and finding meaning through some other dominant subjectivity. The third, however, is revolt and embracing the search and creating our own meanings.[27] The meme-rhizome, to me at least, has this absurdist energy. The meme-rhizome's attribution of nihilistic, insincere, and post-ironic dimensions reads as an acknowledgement of an absurdist truth, but a rejection of philosophical suicide at the altars of religion, capitalism, or academic disciplines.

The propagation of the meme-rhizome can be read as a desire for collective meaning, or something collectively meaningful. As Florian Schlittgen suggests, perhaps it's propagation is through a human desire for connection through relatability, to capture *'a very specific, tiny resonance: same.'*[28]. Unlike Plato, we shouldn't presume mimesis (derogatory) is nihilistic, reductively devaluing of some underlying aesthetic beauty or truth. Like Aristotle, we should view the absurdist reductionism of the meme-rhizome as an exercise in reclaiming and reflecting recognizable existential truths.

A Semiotic Quantum Superposition of Directional Desires[29]

With an ontologically horizontal view, with no distinction between subject or object, the meme-rhizome effectively exists within a state of semiotic quantum superposition. Borrowing from quantum mechanics, superposition refers to the fundamental principle that

26 Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Random House, 1977), https://doi.org/10.1093/bjps/axv048.

27 A Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O-Brien (Penguin Books Ltd, 1942).

28 Florian Schlittgen, "You'll Never Feel Alone - Thoughts on Relatability," in *Critical Meme Reader #2: Memetic Tacticality*, ed. Chloe Arkenbout and Laurence Scherz (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2022), 295.

29 Note to the editors: I am sorry this is the most pretentious thing I, or anyone, has ever written…

a given system, or element of that system, can exist in multiple states simultaneously. Measurement captures the system as if it was in a fixed state, but the system behaves in ways only explicable if it exists in multiple states. The meme-rhizome has this characteristic of superposition, existing in numerous states simultaneously. Answering the following question becomes easy then:

> 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? [30]

The answer is yes. Memes potentialize all these things, or they can be signified as doing so depending on our preference and frame of reference. The more important question is: why are we asking these questions of memes to begin with? That is, what answers do we seek? What 'state' do we wish to measure? The meme-rhizome does not pose questions to us, we ask questions of it. We will also not be able to completely, unequivicoally, answer these questions. The meme-rhizome is a complex, mutating multiplicity connecting to other complex, mutating multiplicities. It has affective, creative, cultural, linguistic, ontological etc. dimensions. This does not mean that our efforts are futile, or that a definitive territorialization of the meme-rhizome is the goal.

The questions we ask and the answers we provide may be transient and cover limited dimensions. This does not mean that they are not valuable. Indeed, the meme-rhizome may have subjectively attributable dimensions of superficiality, transience, or illegitimacy. However, to dismiss them as such also dismisses attributes of identity formation, affective representation, and existential relatability. Both inside and outside of the academy, I am tired of defending memes because it feels like I'm not actually defending memes but instead some other humanistic dimension that the meme intersects with. To dismiss them as not worthy of consideration or study is to, by association, dismiss important motivations in the human-condition.

My hope is that the meme-rhizome is somewhat liberating, if only by giving us permission to acknowledge complexity, before deciding on what specific set of connections we wish to follow or create ourselves. The meme-rhizome invites, and demands, that we approach the study of memes as freeform, compositional, and as undisciplined as the subject matter we find ourselves confronted with. I also hope it gives us permission to follow new connections with reckless, purposeful, abandon. Just like the meme-rhizome gives no regard to disciplines, we should not just be interdisciplinary in approach,

30 Arkenbout, Wilson, and De Zeeuw, "Introduction: Global Mutations of the Viral Image," 16.

but undisciplined. Don't just ask 'what does it mean', also ask 'what else could it mean?'. Go broad,[31] get creative, be instrumental, go conceptual, make connections. Play with philosophy, grow potatoes, quote your shampoo bottle, whisper into a jar the submit it to a conference. Be frenetic, be memetic, get rhizomatic with it and follow your desires.[32]

But I digress.

As Deleuze and Guattari reflect in the writing of *A Thousand Plateaus*, their articulation of rhizomes and related concepts is accomplished through an assemblage of tools, techniques, narratives, rhetoric, examples, etc. This assemblage of enunciation is itself connected to an assemblage of desire. This understanding of desire is critical for our engagement with the meme-rhizome. Desire is a productive, affirmative, force of rhizomatic systems – we follow and create connections according to what our desires are.

In education research, there is an operationalization of 'rhizomatic education' that focuses on forging connections across the curriculum. We can criticize this as a means of reinforcing the curriculum as the central signifier of importance. However, this was their desire – to operationalize the metaphysical ephemerality of rhizomes into something with educational utility. The alternative is demonstrated in some creative fields and approaches to reconceptualizing memes, where rhizomatic approaches lean heavily into decentralized ephemera: an open-ended, almost performative asignification to the extent of limited explanatory significance.

Between education and the creative arts, we have two extremes. On one end the rhizome is a utilitarian framework for connection. On the other end the rhizome is **gestures vaguely in no direction and every direction all at once**. My desire in offering the meme-rhizome is that it can facilitate (re)assemblages with, well, whatever our little academic hearts desire. With sincerity, my goal is to provide something more open-ended than an instrumentalist 'definition' of the meme-rhizome, but something with more explanatory potential than an exploration of memes as pure, acentric, asignified, affective expression.

Frankly, I'm internally conflicted with this - to insist upon imposing asinine requirements like academic clarity, linear articulation, or explanatory utility is to potentially dominate the meme-rhizome through either the lens of academic subjectivities, or conventions of some academic discipline or other. I am, however, an academic and other academics are interested in this area, even if they don't identify as a meme-theorists or equivalent. So, we must be aware of how the meme-rhizome connects to the academia-rhizome. For all its boring, non-frenetic rigidities. I hope there are connections to be made, especially those the enable (a)signifying forces of the meme-rhizome to shape academia.

31 Imagine me slowly standing as I say this.
32 I'm yelling now.

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MEME-AS-A-PROCESS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH TO DIGITAL CULTURE ITEMS

VIKTOR CHAGAS

A Conceptual Troublemaker

The functionalist turn of meme studies, around a decade ago, consolidated a new understanding of the meme closer to the native interpretation assumed by digital platform users. Rather than a unit of cultural transmission, the meme came to be defined as a group of digital items.[1] If before it was difficult to specify what a meme was, due to the vast scope of the concept, now its empirical operationalization has become very simple. It is not that the concept of meme has ceased to support other interpretations. But, today, it is virtually impossible for common sense to dissociate the meme from a digital media language, with its own genres and formats. This shift was strongly favored, as Nissenbaum and Shifman argue, by the development of an economy of meme generator tools.[2] The templates provided by these tools helped to consolidate formats that became instant classics, such as the image macro and the look-alike. The language of memes became associated with these formats, as if memes were synonymous with image macro. This way of addressing memes, however, leads contradictorily to an understanding of the phenomenon as an individual piece in its final form. Instead of being a collection of texts, as it was enunciatively proposed, memes are generally defined as static images, animations, or viral videos. This is a conceptual paradox that we need to address.

While the original definition of the meme, dating back to the 1970s, does not solve the problem either, at least it brought a relevant provocation through a reference to evolution by natural selection. Although the three categories used by Dawkins to analyze the properties of memes (fidelity, longevity and fecundity) refer strictly to their circulation and viralization processes and not to their ontological properties, they do describe the meme as a process.[3]

When I refer to the meme as a process, I have in mind the way in which Labor History and Cultural Studies have appropriated this meaning. According to E. P. Thompson, history conceived as a process values the lived experience of individuals: their real life and the

1 Limor Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014).
2 Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman, "Meme Templates as Expressive Repertoires in a Globalizing World: A Cross-Linguistic Study," Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 23, no. 5 (September 2018): 294–310. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy016.
3 Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

relationships they establish with each other and with the world.[4] In practice, this requires stripping away any essentialist interpretation of historical facts in order to understand how men and women, as historical subjects, think and act under certain conditions or circumstances. That is, history is subordinated to a chain of events from which the historian's interpretation stems. Thinking of the meme as a process suggests not only that it is conditioned by a previously determined social, geographic, and historical reality, but also that its trajectory as a meme is marked by appropriations, and there is no way to define a meme a priori without taking these conditions into account. Even because these appropriations or deviations, to use Appadurai's jargon,[5] give rise in the case of memes to variants of concern. Thus, as when a Renaissance artwork acquired by a Jewish person and stolen by the Nazi army in World War II has a few layers of aura added to its social life due to this history of deviations, something similar happens with a meme with a detour in its trajectory as an object. The difference is that, unlike what happens with a material good, the meme is a digital asset and therefore can co-exist with the variants that it pollinates.

Take a simple example as a starting point: the Neil deGrasse Tyson Reaction meme is usually presented visually as a rage comic character, which emerged in 2011 from a defensive gesture performed by the astrophysicist in an interview, and usually carries the caption 'Watch out guys, we're dealing with a badass over here.' Despite its international fame, in Brazil this same meme was translated and subsequently distinctly interpreted. Its caption usually refers to an interjection that simultaneously denotes surprise and mockery and incorporates an ambivalent masculinity slang, 'ui!' (something like an in-between of 'wow' and 'oh my', in a free translation). The result is a meme with a completely different meaning from the original. There is also its Hispanic variant, which is known as 'ay si ay si'[6] ('oh yes oh yes', in free translation). Understanding the meme as a process is, through a holistic view, to be able to understand the individual impact of each of these variants in the trajectory of the meme as a collective entity. It's almost as if we couldn't talk about a meme biography, but a prosopography. The idea of process is therefore in line with the use of the category by phenomenology and by Cultural Studies. In this way, and only in this way, can we observe the meme in its untimeliness and fluidity. This is important because the attempt to distinguish what is and what is not a meme from a practical point of view often fails. Most of the time, this kind of exercise is limited to a characterization of the meme based on its final materiality. Understanding that the meme can be a process allows us to problematize this meaning, and recognize that a meme can be one thing and another at different times and now.

4 E. P. Thompson, The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978. See also: E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," The Socialist Register 2 (1965): 311–362.

5 Arjun Appadurai, The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

6 See: *https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/neil-degrasse-tyson-reaction*.

The Phenomenology of the Meme

Studies that empirically analyze memes collected from social media often have a hard time characterizing what is and what is not a meme. Not only do many memes not suit more classic formats (such as image macro, exploitable, look-alike), but they also challenge the very frontier of the meme, mixing with several other genres (the cartoon, the written joke in a screenshot).

Furthermore, we often only become aware of an emerging meme when it already occupies our hearts and minds. Segev and collaborators draw attention to how the ability of a meme to reproduce itself in various contexts is essential for it to adjust to changing circumstances, but they claim that 'this state of flux leads to a tendency to define memes only retrospectively, once they have propagated.'[7] In other words, it is hard to define when a meme has reached its final materiality, in that it is a herculean task to delimit what is original and what is an intertextual reference in a meme. One cannot observe historical milestones in procedural history, so a meme is only noticed when already succeeded. The mistaken understanding of the meme as a product and not as a process also deceives marketers in search of the formula for the successful meme. Of course, empirical research can help to understand what patterns of success memes share with each other. This was primarily Shifman's argument,[8] and also, with some caveats, that of Knobel and Lankshear,[9] and of Burgess.[10] But in all such cases, memes are observed in retrospect, not during their course. This approach has a series of consequences, including in research that needs to rely on the historical permanence of digital databases. In an era in which digital platforms are increasingly closing their APIs and making it difficult for researchers to access data,[11] this has become a huge obstacle. Still, without saying that there is no other path to take, the alternative to interpreting the meme as a process is the simplistic conception of the meme as an individual product not related to a larger whole.

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7 Elad Segev et al., "Families and Networks of Internet Memes: The Relationship Between Cohesiveness, Uniqueness, and Quiddity Concreteness," Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 20, no. 4 (July 1, 2015): 417–433, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12120.

8 Limor Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme," New Media & Society 14, no. 2 (2012): 187–203, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811412160.

9 Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production," in A New Literacies Sampler, eds. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 199–227.

10 Jean Burgess, "'All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us'?: Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture," in Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube, eds.Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008), 101–109.

11 Axel Bruns, "After the 'APIcalypse': Social Media Platforms and Their Fight Against Critical Scholarly Research," Information, Communication & Society 22, no. 11 (2019): 1544-1566, doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1637447.

Wiggins and Bowers propose the concept of the emergent meme to designate the instant when a piece of viral content becomes a meme.[12] They argue that while the viral implies the mere reproduction of the same content over and over again, the meme results in subsequent appropriations of meaning. Thus, a viral phenomenon can transform, along its trajectory, into a meme. The moment when a viral phenomenon becomes a meme is usually characterized by a single notorious piece of content. For example, the video of Gary Brolsma performing the song 'Dragostea din tei', by the pop band O-Zone, was responsible for giving notoriety to the character Numa Numa Guy and his dance, a very well-known family of memes. The notions of an emergent meme and the borders between virality and memes only make sense if we manage to think of the meme as a process. The procedural approach to the meme allows us to explain not only the so-called emergent meme, but also the constitution of variants of interest and variants of concern, throughout its memetic trajectory.

It may seem like a mere theoretical exercise, but let's take another empirical example. During my research on political memes in Brazilian elections, I identified an exemplary case, along a synchronous Twitter (currently X) content collection.[13] At that time, back in 2014, Internet memes were still relatively new in the Brazilian context, and our first election race commented on by memes was an audience success. But, despite the conclusions our research team reached over the strategic character of political humor, the study also led to a series of empirical decisions regarding how we operationalized this analysis. At one point, our team asked what criteria we could use to distinguish an image captured from Twitter from a meme itself. We just couldn't come to a consensus on what characteristics we should emphasize in our codebook definition. However, we then came across a useful sequence of images gathered from one of our meme extraction sessions on Twitter. Images were collected during one of the televised electoral debates with presidential candidates. The three images below refer to the candidate Marina Silva, current Minister of the Environment in the third Lula Government, who was running as a third-wave candidate in the 2014 elections. Marina is an internationally recognized environmentalist, and she was a unionist companion to Chico Mendes in Acre, state of the Brazilian Legal Amazon. But, she is also a Neo-Pentecostal evangelical leader, which leads to an ambiguous position either as a progressive or as a traditionalist. This ambivalence was striking throughout the 2014 election, when Marina backtracked when confronted with moral issues, such as same-sex marriage. In the first television debate, Marina was compared to Ethyl Phillips, a character from the television series 'Dinosaurs.' The reason for the comparison is still uncertain today. But it is sometimes attributed to the fact that Ethyl was also an

12 B.E. Wiggins and G. B. Bowers, "Memes as Genre: A Structurational Analysis of the Memescape," New Media & Society 17, no. 11 (2015): 1886–1906, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814535194.

13 Viktor Chagas, Fernanda Freire, Daniel Rios, and Dandara Magalhães, "Political Memes and the Politics of Memes: A Methodological Proposal for Content Analysis of Online Political Memes," First Monday 24, no. 2 (2019): 1-21, https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v24i2.7264.

ambiguous character, sometimes appearing as an antagonist to Earl Sinclair, sometimes as a supporting cast-member for the charismatic Baby. In addition, Marina wore organic jewelry that gained prominence in the national media, and the images of Ethyl chosen for memes often featured the character wearing large necklaces and earrings.



Fig. 1: Marina Silva's memes. Source: Dataset from the Research Laboratory for Communication, Political Cultures and Economies of Collaboration, Fluminense Federal University. Memes extracted from Twitter in 2014.

However, although the comparison seems clear in the second and third images, the first one simply shows a screenshot of the television series without further contextualization. Not even the caption of the tweet explained what it was about. It was only possible to apprehend the meaning of the joke and capture the intertextual reference when the meme had already consolidated itself through more classic formats. In the second image, we have a kind of proto image macro. It is not exactly a meme, as usually conceived, since the caption only identifies the character. In traditional image macros, the caption is responsible for adding a semantic layer and sustaining laughter from a generally narrative dimension, not a descriptive one. In the third image, we clearly have a look-alike, with a frame-by-frame comparison of two characters, Ethyl and Marina. Suffice it to say that data collection via streaming allowed us to identify the development of this same joke and observe the emergence of each variant. But beyond that, this short sequence also made us question the very nature of the meme. After all, if we can consider the third image as a meme, why wouldn't the second, and even the first, be memes as well?

Our research team's methodological choice mirrored something that Denisova, in her book published shortly afterwards,[14] also argues: that for the sake of empirical simplification, it is sometimes easier to characterize every image from social media as a meme. This reduction, however, may ultimately mean a loosening of the epistemological limits of the meme. Even so, it is necessary to keep in mind that this paradox is an integral part of the very nature of the meme as a process, because to really understand the meme as a collection of items and not an individual product it is necessary to recognize at least three conditions: material indeterminacy of the meme or its instability as a product; the lack of boundaries between the original and the references; and its long duration.

Material Indeterminacy

Treating memes as a product and not as a process prevents us from recognizing one of their main characteristics: the fact that they are inconstant contents, subject to perennial modifications and resignifications. Therefore, it is very difficult to determine when a meme has or has not assumed its final materiality. In reality, memes are pieces of content marked by an intrinsic incompleteness, which can even turn against themselves.

In the example below, a figure collected from a far-right WhatsApp discussion group in February 2022, shows the former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro being encouraged by Jesus Christ. The translucency effect of the image gives the scene a spiritual atmosphere. And the nationalist tone is due to the Brazilian flag and colors, which appears superimposed on a sheep. The meme brings the caption in Portuguese 'Vá e impeça a guerra, Jair!' ('Go and stop the war, Jair!' in direct translation). The image began to circulate around the week before Russia declared war on Ukraine, on February 24, 2022. At the time, the then Brazilian president made an official visit to Vladimir Putin in Moscow on February 18, in the expectation of negotiating agricultural fertilizers. While the Russian government used the visit as a way of demonstrating strength, sending the message that Russia would not be isolated from the rest of the world, the Brazilian government clumsily tried to convey a similar discourse, according to which Bolsonaro was a world leader. The agenda for the bilateral meeting, however, would not bring any mention of the impending war. And the official declaration of war would be made exactly one week later.

The confused rhetoric of the Brazilian chancellery continued to fuel memes for and against Bolsonaro. The Brazilian president had already been heavily criticized for his poor conduct during the pandemic period, which resulted in intense spread of misinformation and the death of hundreds of thousands of Brazilians due to the delay in vaccination. The media and political opposition already portrayed Bolsonaro as inconsequential and incompetent, and then, a new version of the same meme appeared with an addition that

14 Ryan M. Milner,."Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes," AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research 3 (October 2013): 1-5, https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8725.

completely changed its meaning. In the additional frame, Jesus Christ appears seated, in a downcast and reflective pose, with the caption 'Damn crazy, fucking incompetent!'.

Thus, while in the first variant of the meme there is a traditionalist message with strong support for Bolsonaro, in the second there is an explicit criticism of the government. The addition of a frame changed not only the form but the stance of the meme. Furthermore, although in this case we can speak of two distinct memes, they actually form part of the same semantic family, even if, as in the case of Marina Silva's meme, it is a further development of the original one. It is still possible to find variations on one side and the other, with the image of the current president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva paired with the same message 'Go and stop the war,'; one can even find the image of the current vice-president Geraldo Alckmin with the caption 'Go and attempt a coup,' referring to the parliamentary coup suffered by then-president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, sponsored by her vice-president at the time, Michel Temer.



Fig. 2: Go and Stop the War memes. Source: Dataset from the Research Laboratory for Communication, Political Cultures and Economies of Collaboration, Fluminense Federal University. Memes extracted from WhatsApp (first) and from Twitter (second, third and fourth) in 2022.

Variations occur, therefore, at different levels: an additional frame, images of other characters superimposed on the original, altered subtitles, and so on. Defining what a meme is by the form it takes is a risky principle. Most of the time, the meme is an idea still in development, a work in progress, and what we consider today a finished form can be the raw material of the next batch. ##Lack of Boundaries Between Originals and References

Marina Silva's look-alike is not the only example of a meme that pairs the image of a politician with pop culture characters. Quite the opposite: there are several similar cases. In 2018, for instance, then-senator Alvaro Dias ran for president with the modest conservative party Podemos. With 50 years of political life, Dias has always been a politician of regional expression, but when participating in television debates he became the target of satirical humor that makes fun of candidates. Dias' supposed plastic interventions were mocked in comparisons between the politician and the villain Joker, immortalized by Jack Nicholson in theaters.

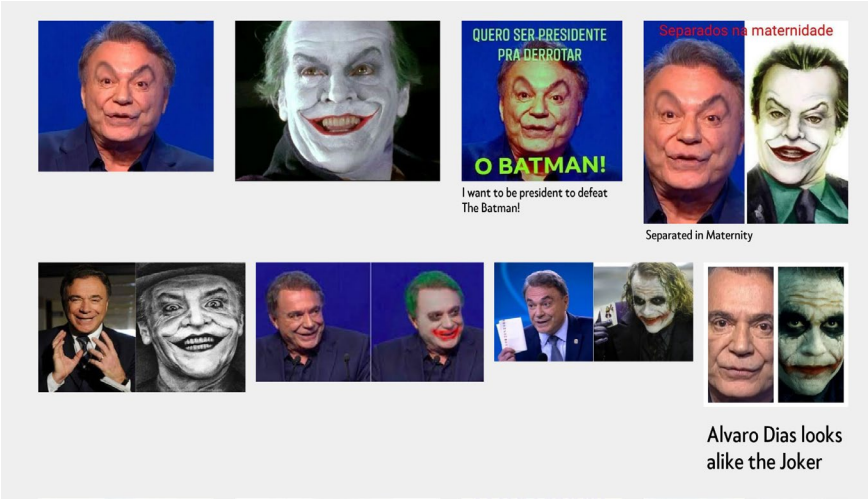


Fig. 3: Alvaro Dias' memes. Source: Dataset from the Research Laboratory for Communication, Political Cultures and Economies of Collaboration, Fluminense Federal University. Memes extracted from Twitter in 2018.

There was a huge flood of similar memes, as if many people were telling the same joke at the same time. It's hard to say exactly which version is the first, which is the authentic joke. In such a context, we must recognize that this common cultural pool is a feature of pop and media culture, which becomes, as Milner points out, a kind of lingua franca.[15] Shifman, Levy and Thelwall argue that memes can function as imperialist agents in spreading humor with references to globalized pop culture[16] . They claim that we often

15 See Ignacio Gómez García, "Los iMemes como Vehículos para la Opinión Pública." Versión: Estudios de Comunicación y Política, no. 35 (March-April 2015): 147-159. And also: José Ivanhoe Vélez Herrera, "Influyendo en el Ciberespacio con Humor: iMemes y Otros Fenómenos," Versión: Estudios de Comunicación y Política, no. 35 (March-April 2015): 130-146.

16 Limor Shifman, H. Levy, and M. Thelwall, "Internet Jokes: The Secret Agents of Globalization?," Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 19, no. 4 (July 2014): 727–743, doi: 10.1111/jcc4.12082.

share references to foreign media productions, usually from the United States, and that this would result in little diversity to local meme cultures. In the Brazilian case, although these global pop references are also omnipresent, it is surprising how they are linked to local contexts and characters, giving rise to a humor that balances generality and singularity.

An exemplary case of this balance is the meme known as Dinofauro. Dinofauro is a neologism created from the word dinosaur, referring to a fictional character created from a photo of a blue toy dinosaur with a retracted or retrognathic jaw. A key part of the humor here involves an attribution of a speech impediment to this character. The original image circulated in North American online communities from a joke made by a user with the toy in a department store, who subtitled it 'Tyranathaurus Rexth,' probably in allusion to an earlier meme of the dog called Tuna, who became known on humorous fan pages like 9GAG as Phteven, a corruption of Steven. In Brazil, the image of the blue dinosaur went viral again in 2014 and spawned a dozen pages on Facebook, such as Dinofauro Azul (currently O Dinofauro) and Dinofauvo Fanho (now extinct). The phenomenon was curiously explored simultaneously by different entrepreneurs and only stabilized after a few months, with a page that prevailed over the others, and today has the trademark for commercial exploitation of action figures and industrial products in general. Tracing the origin of this meme is an almost impossible task given the profusion of parallel stories. How and why at certain times do several people seem to have the same idea?

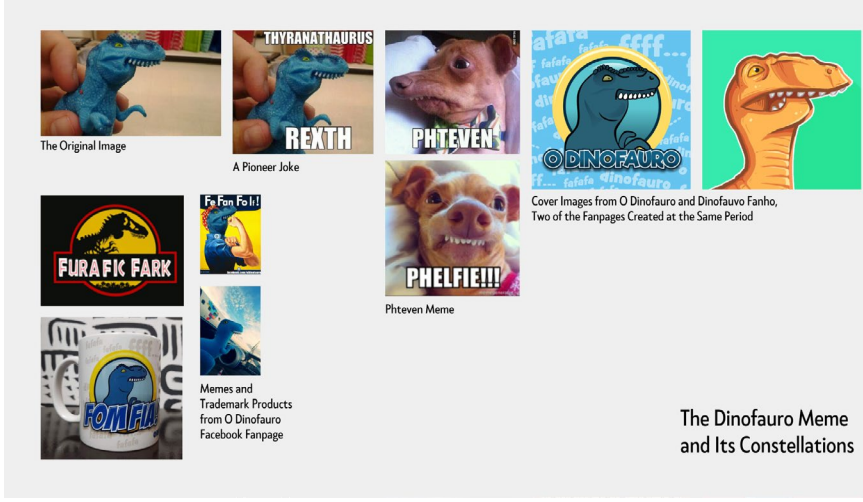


Fig. 4: Dinofauro's memes and its constellations. Source: Dataset from the Research Laboratory for Communication, Political Cultures and Economies of Collaboration, Fluminense Federal University. Memes extracted from Facebook (Dinofauro's) and from Know Your Meme (Phteven's) in 2016.

The notion of the meme as a process is strongly inspired by the legacy of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, according to whom it is necessary to refuse the figure of the inventor as an individual actor[17]. Invention, they argue, is always the result of a social fact. Similarly, memes can rarely be attributed to a single creator. Even those that are known to have a specific author lack prior references that establish meaning and that are often confused with the trajectory of the meme itself. Burgess argues for a generative creativity, a behavior that is expressed by some formulaic and recombination patterns. The meme as a process is the ultimate expression of a digital *zeitgeist*.

Long Duration

As a meme expert, I am often asked by journalists about the first meme on the Brazilian internet. My answer invariably falls short of expectations.

Understanding history processually means rejecting or disfavoring the interpretation of history as marked by isolated events that erupt to the surface of facts. Processual history has as characteristics the lived experience of its participants and a timeline of long duration. It is opposed to history *événementielle*, which is marked by civic dates and illustrious characters. The meme as a process is perfectly aligned with this approach. Therefore, it is very difficult to identify definitive historical milestones. Precisely because memes are derivative works, permeated by references to other texts, it is not easy to reconstitute this evidence and assign an ultimate stance to each of these events. While processual history is the product of causality, its timeline has a duration that often prevents one from simply detaching events.

For example, one of the first YouTube viral videos to spawn in different memetic versions in Brazil was Bátima Feira da Fruta, a satirical re-dub of an episode of the famous 1960s television series 'Batman', in which the characters Batman and Robin are played respectively by Adam West and Burt Ward. The parody was amateurishly created by Fernando Pettinati and Antônio Camano in 1981 and recorded on a VHS tape. In the episode, the original dialogue is replaced by politically incorrect dubbing, full of dirty words and jokes of a sexual nature. After an initial period of word-of-mouth circulation, the recording was recovered in 2003 and circulated as a digital version. In 2006, it hit YouTube and other streaming platforms; in 2012, it also gave rise to a collaborative comic series. The curious thing about this chain of events is that there are different time frames for the origin of this meme. Was the meme born in 2012, when it achieved popularity as a product of local pop culture? Or was it 2006 when it was uploaded to YouTube? Or in 2003, when its very first digital copies circulated? Or even in 1981, when the parody was actually performed? Choosing one of these dates over the others is like artificially choosing a primordial cause and ignoring the fact that the trajectory itself constitutes the chained origin of this meme.

17 See for instance Michel Callon, "The Sociology of an Actor-Network: The Case of the Electric Vehicle," in Mapping the Dynamics of Science and Technology, ed. Michel Callon, John Law, and Arie Rip (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), 19-34.



Re-Dub Episode from Batman TV Series



Joker: "I am over. My d*** doesn't go up anymore"

Poster from the Meme



Batman: "No, you idiot! It is your MOTHER and your FATHER dressed for the fitness ball!"

Comic Teaser

Batima: Feira da Fruta

Fig. 5: Batima Feira da Fruta's memes. Source: Dataset from the Research Laboratory for Communication, Political Cultures and Economies of Collaboration, Fluminense Federal University. Memes extracted from YouTube (first cap) and from Google Images (second and third) in 2023.

Incidentally, the very concept of a meme is the result of such historical comings and goings. As a term coined in the 1970s, even before the popularization of the commercial internet, it is perfectly possible to find memes not only prior to the internet, but to the very creation of the concept. Therefore, defining the first meme is simply inconceivable. The meme as a process takes into account that milestones are invariably arbitrary. Perhaps it is less important to know who came first, the chicken or the egg, and more to understand the course of events, the variants that emerged along its epidemic trajectory, and the possible circularities and deviations of its social life.

And What Are the Practical Implications of This?

From a practical point of view, the meme as a process helps us to operationalize the concept empirically. Instead of ignoring digital content that in the future could become a meme in the usual formats, we privilege a theoretical treatment based on a retrospective and historical gaze, which recognizes the structural elements and shifting, interactive relationships of these memes. Far from resulting in an abstract and merely theoretical proposal, this approach posits an interpretive perspective for memes in opposition to the way they have been analyzed by the positivist/functionalist literature. Thus, I argue that process philosophy can be combined with a process tracing method, so that an inductive level of the structural elements of the meme prevail over an allegedly objective account of its material dispositions.

Perhaps it would be useful, from this moment on, to adopt something similar to the Hispanic literature on meme studies[18].This literature, particularly affiliated with Semiotics, draws a distinction between the internet meme (or *imeme*, as they call it), i.e., the family or group of digital items, and the *rimeme*, i.e., the individual piece or individual instance that makes up that collection.

Understanding the meme as a process allows us to go beyond its individual instance, as non-relational content, and see it as part of a corpus of texts or a data set, a collective construction and a derivative work which, for the most part, does not have a definitive shape but is constantly changing. We often advocate for this definition, but when we go to study memes, we leave it aside, in the expectation of producing an objective science based on quantifiable observations and generalizable and replicable results. While this type of approach has helped to consolidate meme studies, giving legitimacy to the object, it is time to turn to methods that allow us to undertake a thick description of memes and recognize that, more than an ontology, it is necessary to consider a phenomenology of memes.

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18 See Ignacio Gómez García, "Los iMemes como Vehículos para la Opinión Pública." Versión: Estudios de Comunicación y Política, no. 35 (March-April 2015): 147-159. And also: José Ivanhoe Vélez Herrera, "Influyendo en el Ciberespacio con Humor: iMemes y Otros Fenómenos," Versión: Estudios de Comunicación y Política, no. 35 (March-April 2015): 130-146.

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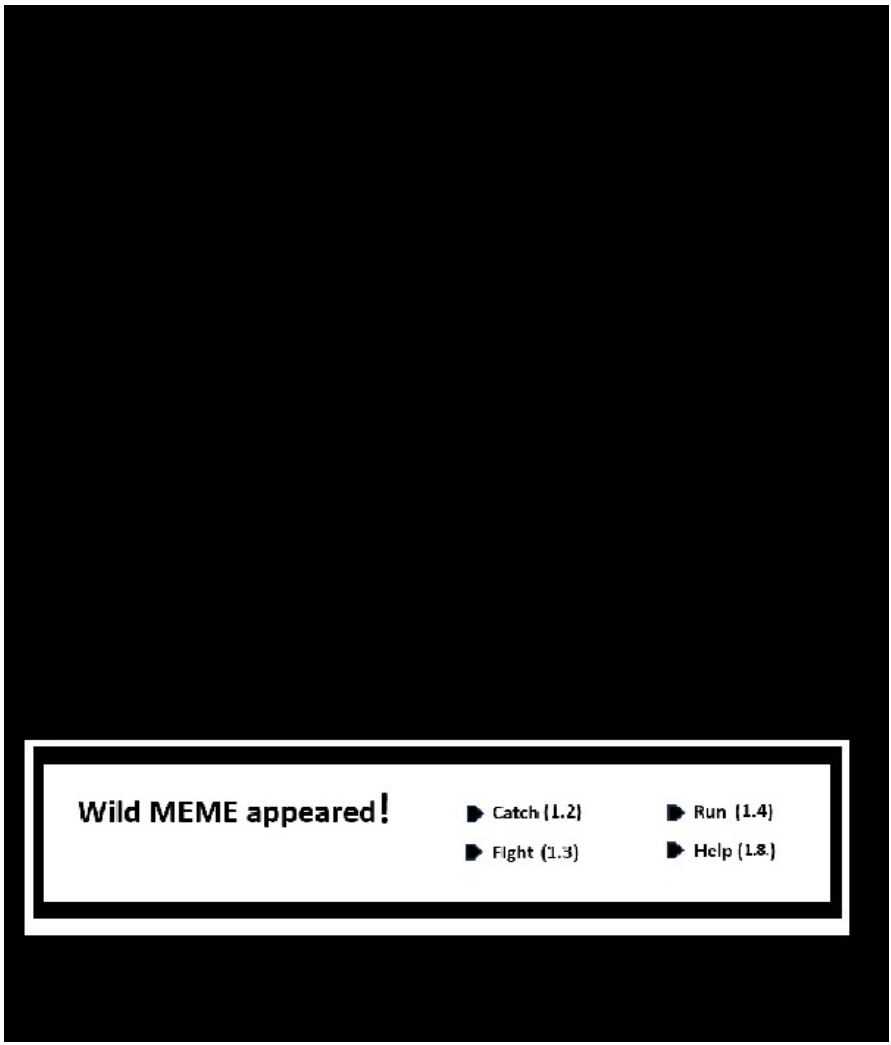
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MEME M:)EME: MAKING DITTO LAUGH

LIAM VOICE

Welcome to the Wonderful World of Memes!

You are a platform scroller. You live in an ecology of interacting cyberfauna, in a digital Zoöme. Chats are your habitat. You swim through content streams. You traverse through the long reads, in-flora-mation, and shit(posts). Suddenly. . .



Choose your own path. Pick an option and follow the prompts (i.e. continue reading on the current path or follow the ➡ to a new section)

1.2. Catch

You feel a connection to this meme. You have been recognized; you feel seen. You laugh. You want to capture it! It will be useful later when you are sharing memes with friends (➡1.7 or continue), trading for social capital, and identifying yourself as a member of your community. You save the meme for your extensive personal collection. (➡1.5)

1.3. Fight

You engage with the meme. You send out your own meme, one from your collection (**➡1.5 or continue**). You send an image macro that does the idea better, or is funnier, or better represents 'you'. The meme acts as your proxy, fighting for your perspective in the arena of ideas. Afterwards, you return to scrolling. (**➡1.1**)

1.4. Run

You were just exploring your feed and hoping to find something interesting. Or your group chat was buzzing and you were trying to follow the conversation. But then you were interrupted; you were stopped in your tracks by this meme. You hope it is something good, something funny, something that resonates, but you realize you've seen this meme before. It's a common one. You try to ignore it. You may even have to go through the motions (e.g. typing "LOL! or 😂 or LMFAO! or 💀 or IJBOL[1]!" with a face unmoved) before you escape and keep on scrolling. (**➡1.1**)

1.5. MeMe

This is your roster, your Meme Team. They are those you quickly deploy, while the rest of your collection is safely stored in a larger repository, on a computer, or backed up on an external hard drive. These stored memes in your collection sometimes become 'lost, incomplete memes without context' and await to be discovered anew, deployed again, and 'appointed a new destination'[2]. When their time comes again, you need a refresher of context (**➡1.6 or continue**). Your Meme Team, however, are your favorites. Their context is less likely to be lost; they

1 Elena Cavender, "Ijbol isn't a Korean word. It's just a sillier version of lmao," *Mashable*, July 6, 2023, *https://mashable.com/article/ijbol-explained*.

2 Laurence Scherz, "Making Poetry Babies in an Online World", in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, eds. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: INC, 2021), 101.

are for frequent or daily use. You carry them around in your pockets on a smart device that organizes and holds them safe. They are pocket memes. You search through these memes for one to tactically deploy (➡**1.3**) or share with others (➡**1.7**).

1.6. MeMeDeX

What's that meme? Sometimes you need help. Luckily, there are larger collections of memes with which to compare this one meme (e.g. Imgur, reddit, etc.). There is a repository of information you can rely on, a broader crowdsourced collection of memetic knowledge available to aid your understanding: 'Know Your Meme'. It's a database – a meme index, if you will. You look up the meme, and with this knowledge you better understand the meme: its context, the community, and the digital environment in which it roams. You are better able to choose a course of action. (➡**1.1**)

1.7. Link

You want to share this meme. You send it to your friends; or you post in your group chat; you post it on your timeline; or you upload it to the subreddit you frequent, to share it with your favorite online community. You forge and maintain a connection with others. (➡**1.1**)

1.8 Help

Pokémon is a Japanese game franchise and the name for the fictional creatures around which the franchise is based. The creator, Satoshi Tajiri, used his love of insect collecting as inspiration for the game[3], and indeed the influence of real-world flora and fauna is clear in many of the designs. There are a wide variety of Pokémon, each with their own powers and abilities. The main aim of the game is to identify (➡**1.6**) and capture (➡**1.2**) all the different species of these fantastical creatures. They are captured and stored easily in 'Poké Ball' devices which fit in the player's pocket (➡**1.5**), hence the etymology of the name: a contraction of 'pocket monsters'. *Pokémon*'s spirit of acquisition, epitomized in the motto 'Gotta catch 'em all!', reinforces the logic of capitalist power relations[4]. Our memetic practice shares this spirit of acquisition as we, intentionally or not, amass a collection of memes via engaging and exploring our digital culture.

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3 Jason Bainbridge, "'It is a Pokémon world': The Pokémon franchise and the environment," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no.4 (2014), 402.

4 e.g. Buckingham and Sefton-Green, "'Gotta catch 'em all': structure, agency, and pedagogy in children's media culture." *Media, Culture & Society*, 25, no.3 (2003): 383; Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkely: University of California Press, 2006); Bainbridge, "Pokemon world".

It seems inevitable that 'collecting would lead to trading'. Tajiri recalls that when he saw the connecting cable for the Game Boy he imagined 'an insect moving back and forth across the cable'[5], and thus made sharing and trading a key aspect of *Pokémon*'s gameplay (➡**1.7**).

Sharing with others allows tendrils of acquisition to spread beyond the individual. Despite being hidden behind the seemingly benign digital rhetoric of 'sharing' and 'connection'[6], both memes and Pokémon perpetuate a capitalist ideology of excessive consumption.

The comparison between the cuteness of individual Pokémon, such as Pikachu, and the cuteness of memes, is also an apparent one. Memes like the Advice Animals image macros and, famously, LOLcats, often peddle a harmless, nonthreatening, or innocuous vibe, if not overt cuteness. Thus, they are casually and uncritically dismissed by some as merely silly online jokes. However, the 'meme as Pokémon' metaphor reveals complex power relations concealed by cuteness.

Another core aspect of the gameplay is for players to 'battle' (➡**1.3)** using their chosen Pokémon, who each have their own powers and special abilities. In these battles, Pokémon gain experience points (XP) and, after earning a certain amount, will grow a level and, eventually, evolve. There is no level indicator for trainers, but they too gain experience with each battle: they learn better tactics – the best moves to deploy and when. Just like memes, individual Pokémon are used strategically; they are 'tactical devices'[7]. It is well established that memes are valuable weapons, deployed in the memetic warfare that rages in the battlegrounds of online feeds[8]. Memes, meme creators, and meme sharers earn experience when they engage in memetic battle, and eventually evolve to be better equipped for each new environment. These kinds of practices are somewhat neglected in Dawkins' original meme metaphor, but the premise of *Pokémon* immediately provokes thoughts of ploys, politics, and power.

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5 Howard Chua-Eoan and Tim Larimer, "Beware of the Pokemania," TIME, November 14, 1999, *https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,34342-1,00.html*, 3.

6 Jenny Kennedy, "Rhetorics of Sharing: Data, Imagination, and Desire," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and their Alternatives,* ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 127-136.

7 Chloë Arkenbout and Laurence Scherz, "Introduction: Memetic Tacticality," in *Critical Meme Reader II: Memetic Tacticality,* ed. Chloë Arkenbout and Laurence Scherz (Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2022).

8 e.g. Sarp Özar, "Your Feed is a Battleground: A Field Report on Memetic Warfare in Turkey," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021); Caspar Chan, "Pepe the Frog Is Love and Peace: His Second Life in Hong Kong," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021).

Furthermore, the 'meme as Pokémon' metaphor pushes us to think about meme death. It reminds us that any proclamations that the meme is dead are premature. Although there are instances of the franchise engaging with the concept of Pokémon death[9], it is significant that when Pokémon fail in battle, they do not die. When their HP (Hit Point) bar zeroes, they 'faint'. They have incredible resilience. Should one Pokémon falter, not only does another burst forth to take its place, but the Pokémon itself is rarely permanently broken. They are healed and restored to the Team to be deployed again in a new context. And, in failure, there is often experience.

Individual memes are also resilient and stubborn. They circulate in digital culture round and round, reinforcing themselves over and over, like the Pokémon whose power of speech is limited to saying their name again and again. Even when you thought a meme had peaked, even when the meme was tired and looked defeated, even when you thought the battle of ideas had been won, memes are capable of remarkable resurgence. They pop up again, buoyed by XP and a higher HP. Even the memes that do retreat from view are not truly gone. These memes are archived, not just in repositories and meme collections but in our collective memories, waiting to be (re) discovered and (re)deployed.

Just as Pokémon are put to work for the player, memes also do work for us. They perform in an arena our physical bodies cannot, in the immaterial digital world of information. Memes function as 'extensions of the self', moving 'the boundary of the human beyond its fleshy limits'[10]. Indeed, our relationship with memes blurs the boundaries of discourse and materiality: of the corporeality of hard technology and physical bodies, and the immateriality of language, emotion, and imagination. Memes are often able to 'articulate personal emotions, experiences, and perspectives'[11] better than words can. A meme is

> a tool that is readily available for re-use in the everyday, can be collected and carried around on mobile devices, and deployed at appropriate moments to do identity work…as an instrument that can be reiteratively and strategically deployed to display the self and its associations to others.[12]

Memes have their own power. This power affects us far beyond the intentions of the original creators or sharers of the meme. Once deployed, memes are not necessarily *bound to* the intended arena; they may instead *bound away* in unanticipated directions.

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9 Ashley Darrow, "Peaceful in Death: Encountering Death in the Pokémon Universe," in *Death, Culture & Leisure: Playing Dead*, ed. Matt Coward-Gibbs (Bingly, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020).

10 Katie Barclay and Leanne Downing, *Memes, History and Emotional Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 26.

11 Barclay and Downing, *Memes, History…*, 25.

12 Barclay and Downing, *Memes, History…*, 25.

They are appropriated and reappropriated by others (e.g. Pepe the Frog meme); they are *entextualized* and *recontextualized.*[13] Pokémon belong to a trainer, but some are abandoned and wild. Likewise, memes are untameable, uncontrollable, unruly – not necessarily going where, or doing what, you want them to do. Nevertheless, we also build relationships with memes. They comfort us; they help us find ways of living through the turbulence of politics[14] and of life.[15] Memes are our companions, much like Pikachu accompanying Ash, through thick and thin. Echoing Donna Haraway's 'companion species',[16] memes are 'not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with'; they are not just good tactical devices in the battle of ideologies; they are also 'here to live with'. They are our partners in culture[17]. We are co-constitutive; we create and shape memes, memes create and shape us.

2.1. "Ditto! I choose you!"

Ditto is a Pokémon resembling a pink gelatinous blob with vestigial facial features, whose only ability is to transform. Initially, Ditto's design seems more inspired by a concept than a creature, but there are biological resonances. Ditto resembles an organism like an amoeba that is able to change its shape[18], and its transform move evokes the totipotent ability of certain cells to transform into any other type of cell. Ditto also has a connection to technology and digital culture. Junichi Masuda and Ken Sugimori of Game Freak (Pokémon's developer) claimed the inspiration for Ditto came from a stalwart of computer mediated communication: the smiley emoticon :).[19] Whereas Dawkins' meme concept and the viral metaphor are somewhat restricted by their appeal to real-world biology, Ditto and Pokémon are biology-adjacent; it is biology infused with imagination, meaning there is more room to maneuver. Indeed, there is a broader lesson here in turning to creative fiction to playfully probe concepts and create more flexible ones.

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13 Caspar Chan, "Pepe the Frog Is Love and Peace: His Second Life in Hong Kong," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021).

14 Hollis Griffin, "Living Through It: Anger, Laughter, and Internet Memes in Dark Times," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no.3 (2021): 381-397.

15 Anthony McCosker and Ysabel Gerrard, "Hashtagging depression on Instagram: Towards a more inclusive mental health research methodology," N*ew Media & Society* 23, no.7 (2021): 1899-1919; Also see Barclay and Downing, *Memes, History…*, 14.

16 There's a pleasing etymological resonance here, as the term 'species' is derived from *specere* 'to look at, to see, behold' and from the root 'spek-' meaning 'to observe' (Etymonline.com, 2023, s.v. species), which is apt given memes predominantly being a visual based practice (images and videos). Although we shouldn't necessarily deny the existence of sound-based memes. Are music and songs not simply memes by other names?

17 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 6.

18 "*Ditto (Pokémon)"* Bulbapedia. Correct as of March 18, 2019 ***https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Ditto_(Pok%C3%A9mon)***

19 Bulbapedia, "Ditto".

According to the Pokédex, the in-game electronic encyclopedia, Ditto is 'capable of copying an enemy's genetic code to instantly transform itself into a duplicate of the enemy'.[20] Ditto's Bulbapedia[21] entry further suggests:

> [Ditto] is capable of transforming into an *exact* replica of any physical object, including its form and abilities. However, if Ditto tries to transform into something based on memory, it may get some of the details wrong. Each Ditto has its own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to transforming. The anime and the TCG [trading card game] have shown that occasionally a Ditto cannot change its face. Ditto will also be unable to remain in a transformed state if it starts laughing.[22]

When we consider this Pokémon lore, we see that Ditto *does not always* transform into an exact replica, but sometimes an imperfect copy. Thus, we potentially have different interpretations of the Ditto-as-meme metaphor, each incorporating different conceptualizations of the meme, epitomized in the viral vs memetic distinction. If we need Ditto to speak to how memes are often thought of in the popular consciousness — as viral images or videos that spread verbatim and are viewed by a very large number of people[23] — then we should consider the user's practice of sharing the image/video as Ditto transforming into an exact replica and thereby adding to the numbers of the already existing viral meme. They are Dittoing the meme.

However, the limitations and weaknesses of Ditto's copying ability speak to a second interpretation: as an image or video meme that spawns many variations[24]. This would be what Shifman calls memetic in that it is not a 'single cultural unit' multiplied exponentially, but rather it is 'always a collection of texts'[25]. To help, let us perform a thought experiment: How does Ditto transform? According to the Pokémon lore, Ditto copies the DNA of the opposing Pokémon. In the real world, DNA replication would likely involve needles and swabs for tissue samples, and the whirring machines of laboratory technology. Ditto obviously does not have this kind of operation, so the most logical means of DNA replication would be if Ditto *already* has the DNA. The blueprints of every other Pokémon must exist within Ditto. Ditto, then, is a bundle of potential, a multiplicity within a singular form. Ditto-as-meme, therefore, also questions and challenges the notions of individuality and collectivity. Ditto itself should be seen as a '*group* of digital items' and a 'relational entity'[26].

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20 Bulbapedia, "Ditto".

21 Bulbapedia is a popular Pokemon Wiki site: ***https://bulbapedia.bulbagarden.net/wiki/Main_Page***

22 Bulbapedia, "Ditto", my emphasis

23 Jean Burgess, "'All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong To Us'? Viral Video, YouTube and the Dynamics of Participatory Culture," in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube,* ed. Geert Lovink and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2008)

24 e.g. Alice Marwick, "Memes," *Contexts* 12, no.4 (2013): 13.

25 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 56.

26 Shifman, *Memes*, 41; Sara Cannizzaro, "Internet Memes as internet signs: A semiotic view of digital Culture," *Sign Systems Studies* 44, no.4 (2016): 572.

A second useful thought experiment is to consider what would happen if a Pokémon were to lose a limb. Assuming Pokémon are capable of losing a limb, and one were to do so, what would happen when that Pokémon encounters a Ditto? If Ditto merely mimics what they see, then the Ditto would create a copy without the limb too. However, given Ditto's means of replication, Ditto would transform into the Pokémon with the limb intact. This is because Ditto copies the DNA of the other Pokémon, and the DNA would be for the 'complete' creature since the loss of a limb would be the result of an environmental outside event and the missing limb is not encoded in the DNA.

Thus, Ditto-as-meme would not be copying the content or, in the words of Burgess, 'copying the product' but rather engaging in the 'copying of instructions'[27]. This relates to the concept of copy fidelity, which refers to 'qualities of the meme that enable it to be readily copied and passed from mind to mind relatively intact'[28]. While the 'copying the product' model of replication occurs in digital culture whenever a user encounters the same content they have seen before, and therefore applies to the first sense of Dittoing the meme, the use of Ditto as a more sophisticated model for meme discourse relies on Ditto following a 'copying the instructions' model of replication. What gets copied are the instructions to make the meme recognisable as that meme - the format of the meme. For example, we see how the fidelity of the instructions is relatively strong in the Distracted Boyfriend (DB) meme.

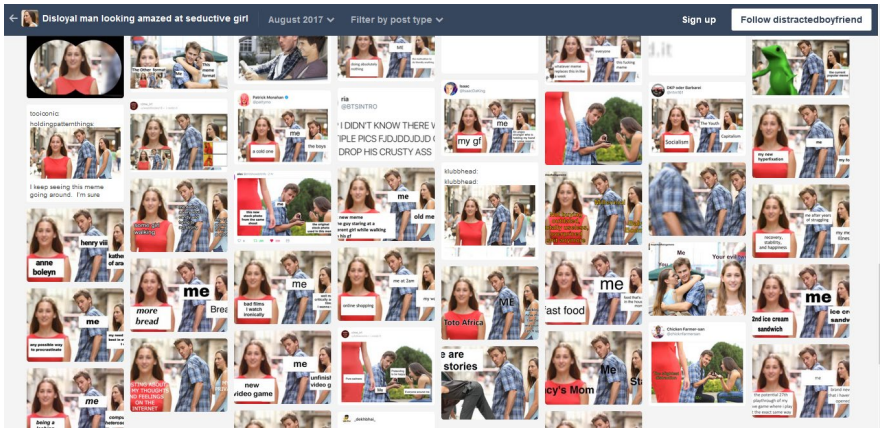


Fig. 1: Selection of DB memes on the Tumblr blog @distractedboyfriend, August 2017

27 Burgess, "Viral Video", 108

28 Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, "Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production," in *A New Literacies Sampler*, ed. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 201.

However, Ditto is able to *do* even more. Ditto is actually *more than metaphor*[29]. In **Section I**, you may have gotten caught in the loop (e.g. following 1.1. ➡ 1.3. ➡ 1.1. ➡ 1.3 ➡ 1.1. ➡ . . .) deliberately placed in the chapter. Ditto is an intervention, providing a way of coping with the conditions of digital culture, specifically the 'eternally recurring' digital content and reiterating memes epitomized by this loop. Ditto is a 'spiritual exercise'[30], suggesting how one *might* live in digital culture.

2.2. Making Ditto Laugh

For this intervention to work, we should think of every meme we encounter (including our own) as an already transformed Ditto. If we see the replication process of meme iterations in these terms, we are able to intervene, and we are able to disrupt. In arguing for a critical disruption to social media monopolies, Caroline Bassett has suggested that 'disruption might be attempted through a toolset – silence, disruption of language, and the exploitation of language's capacity for polysemy (the metaphor and the lie) – that is not often considered as apt for such a task'[31]. Indeed, without wanting to appear flippant or to marginalize the significance of the experience of the digital flow, I propose a ludic, or comic, addition to this toolset.

To intervene in the memetic replication process, we must disrupt Ditto's ability to transform. How are we to do that? We must laugh, and we must make Ditto laugh! As mentioned, Ditto cannot maintain the copy if it laughs. However, not just any laugh will do. It is not a defensive nor a decadent laughter we need, nor do we require a laugh of resignation. Rather, we need a healthy, playful, and purposive laughter. This is the kind of laughter Bassett might call a 'form of communicational revolt'[32]. It is not exactly 'turning the meme or meme-culture on its head'[33], but rather a shaking of the body, and a revealing of the network of power relations behind memetic culture.

But seriously, how do we make Ditto laugh? What is Ditto's sense of humor? Ditto's sense of humor reflects its attributes of multiplicity, transformation and evasion, its amorphous and unstable sense of self. So, we must look to theories and theorists that share these attributes.

29 I'm evoking Donna Haraway's use of the phrase here. e.g. Haraway, Donna and Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 82.

30 e.g. Todd May, "Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise in Foucault and Deleuze," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 5, no.2 (2000); Babette Babich, "Nietzsche's Spiritual Exercises," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory,* ed. Michael A. Peters (Frankfurt am Main: Springer, 2016).

31 Caroline Bassett, "Silence, Delirium, Lies?," in *Unlike Us Reader: Social Media Monopolies and their Alternatives,* ed. Geert Lovink and Miriam Rasch (Amsterdam, Institute of Network Cultures, 2013), 158.

32 Bassett, "Silence," 149.

33 Åke Gafvelin, "On the Prospect of Overcoming Meme-Culture, or, The Last Meme in History," in Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021).

One of Foucault's more famous published quips is useful here. In a review of Deleuze's books, Foucault states that 'perhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian'[34]. The consensus is now that Foucault may have been following the age-old adage to open with a joke, albeit a rather esoteric one. Deleuze himself considered it so, at least. He dismissed it as a quip designed to incense those that were not 'in on it'. Deleuze, it seems, *was* in on it; in response to a critic, he suggests 'that [Foucault's] little remark's a joke meant to make people who like us laugh and make everyone else livid'[35].

Foucault's own explanation appears in a 1978 interview[36]. He suggests that he used the term 'century' [le siècle] in its pejorative sense, referring to the obsequious flattery of 18th century courtiers. Due to his fame, Foucault felt he had become encircled and stifled by similar fawning[37]. It is a cutting remark but not aimed at Deleuze necessarily. It seems Foucault confronted the daunting excess of fame, yet accepted it, and laughed at it. Foucault laughs at himself by making a joke, and giving a warning, to his friend. Foucault was able to turn what is challenging into something comedic. Indeed, reflecting on his relationship with Foucault, Deleuze suggested that despite Foucault's ability to see injustice, it "never stopped him from turning the intolerable into humor. Once again, we laughed a lot. It was not indignation. We were not indignant. It was two things: seeing something unseen and thinking something that was almost at a limit"[38].

However, we may never truly know what Foucault meant despite his apparent explanation. For Foucault revels in being elusive and shifting position at will. In one interview, Foucault responds to questions about what his speciality is, about his shifting positions, and about where he is coming from. He responds,

> No, no, I'm not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you. What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing – with a rather shaky hand – a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself…[39]

34 Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, ed. Nicolae Morar, Thomas Nail, and Daniel W Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 38.
35 Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations,* trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 4.
36 C J Stivale, "Comment peut-on être deleuzien?," in *A Deleuzian Century?,* ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 136
37 Paul Rabinow, "Meeting Deleuze," in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, ed. Nicolae Morar, Thomas Nail, and Daniel W Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 286.
38 Gilles Deleuze and Paul Rabinow. "Foucault and Prison," in *Between Deleuze and Foucault*, ed. Nicolae Morar, Thomas Nail, and Daniel W Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 290.
39 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 2010), 17.

Foucault did not want to be pinned down. He is evasive, and we see that his humor is too. It is one thing then the other, then back again. It is two contradictory things at once. We assume, then, the polysemic nature of Foucault's humor. We see the intensive labor the quip performs: it pushes the comprehension of itself to the limit. With this statement then, Foucault used the, at times, hyperbolic language of academic reviews to reaffirm a philosophical friendship, while also to annoy their critics. He disguised in the form of flattery a critique of the very notion of flattery. Foucault encoded a warning to his friend about the nature of inevitable fame (that he knew Deleuze would despise) within a 'joke' that only he and those initiated in his philosophy would recognise as such. It is at once a joke, a warning, a prophecy, and perhaps even a subtle jab.

So, what does this mean for Ditto? I take this to be indicative of Ditto's sense of humor. This is how Ditto must be made to laugh: iterations should be pushed to and beyond their polysemic, linguistic, and referential limits. Where are the limits of Internet memes? I see linguistic and visual puns and meta memes as the limits to be pushed beyond.

2.3. A Nietzschean Laugh

Nietzsche's philosophy is also laden with laughter, both in rhetorical style and in content. Of significance is laughter's relation to Nietzsche's famous thought experiment of the Eternal Recurrence (ER). It asks how you would respond if a demon came to you in 'your loneliest loneliness' and said:

> This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust![40]

Nietzsche asks: would you curse the demon, or would you proclaim them a god? Most would consider the idea of the ER as paralyzingly pessimistic, and as too daunting a prospect. However, of significance for Ditto is the return of this thought experiment in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* After a vision in which the ER is once again presented, Zarathustra encounters 'a young shepherd, writhing, choking, convulsed, his face distorted; and a heavy, black snake was hanging out of his mouth'[41]. The snake had bitten down, become lodged in the shepherd's throat, and could not be pulled loose. Zarathustra implored the shepherd to bite the snake's head off. The shepherd did so and spat the decapitated snake's head clean out.

40 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974), Book IV, Aphorism 341.

41 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Classics, 1975), Part III, Chapter 2: Of the Vision and the Riddle.

The shepherd's reaction is to laugh! The snake in the vision represents the ER and evokes the ancient symbol Ouroboros, the symbol of infinity with a serpent eating its own tail. The shepherd choking on the snake must surely represent the inability to come to terms with, or to 'swallow', the idea of ER.

Nietzsche considered ER 'the core of his prescription for life and health'[42]: it is a way of living well. This ethical or moral principle of ER is applied to Ditto as a model for living well digitally. Ditto not only describes the replication processes in memetic practice but also provides a 'prescription' for how to cope with the excess of those very processes, and one's very existence in digital culture.

In a digital culture swimming in information, the volume of content and the repetition of memes gets exhausting. It is daunting too, much like the prospect of ER. It is difficult to confront this reality, let alone escape it. We feel caught in the digital flow, despite our disillusionment. Our smart phones can't be put back into the box, and account deletion and detox, as Geert Lovink suggests, 'implies social suicide'[43]. We must endure; we must find a way to live in it, and to 'stay with the trouble'[44], as Haraway would say, of living in digital culture.

How does this laughter manifest itself? It is not enough that the DB meme, for instance, causes users across social media platforms to laugh. This is not the kind of laughter that disrupts Ditto's transformation. How do we make Ditto laugh the 'right' laugh? As Bassett suggests, 'the focus is on finding and enabling resources in language'[45]. We should pun, we should play with language, we should poke fun at the images. We should appropriate and repurpose the repetitions and inject them with a self-aware, self-referential humor. Rather than getting bogged down, we're making the repetitions matter for us. As Rosi Braidotti suggests, the job to be done is 'to inject a visionary, imaginative but not utopian energy into the world with words, texts, concepts, festivals and public engagements. We need to send out counter-codes'.[46] These counter-codes echo the principles learned from Bassett, Braidotti, Foucault, Deleuze, and Nietzsche expressed above. They are polysemic, self-referential, and evasive; they laugh at themselves, and they are playful in the face of all that seems intolerable.

2.4. After the Laugh

Ditto's laugh shakes its body, and it cannot retain its shape. The meme that you had been engaged with transforms back into the pink gelatinous blob, Ditto's original form. You open your eyes blearily; you blink and look around. You see what you had been doing this whole

42 Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 137.
43 Geert Lovink, "Overcoming Internet Disillusionment," *e-flux journal*, 83 (2017), 1.
44 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
45 Bassett, "Silence", 155.
46 Rosi Braidotti and Lisa Regan, "Our Times Are Always Out of Joint," *Women: A Cultural Review* 28, no.3 (2017): 191.

time: you begin to see more clearly the power relations of the ~~Pokémon~~ meme world. The prescription of laughter at ER, however, does not *fix* the world; it manages the symptoms. Echoing Donna Haraway's use of feminist science fiction, the goal is not, and never has been, *escaping* from the 'real world' problems to a new utopian world[47], or necessarily even drawing a blueprint for a better 'elsewhere'[48]. Haraway notes there is often no possibility of a 'return to an Edenic garden'[49]. Rather, these stories are used to explore 'a way of thinking differently about what it means to be human'[50]. As Haraway also notes, it's about 'staying with the trouble', which 'requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings'[51].

Staring into the eyes of untransformed Ditto, we realize this entanglement is greater than we thought. Yes, we shape memes and memes shape us, but does Ditto suggest something further? Can Ditto not transform into you? If memes are 'extensions of the self' and Ditto already houses the DNA of all memes, then Ditto also houses our DNA. Ditto is everything, is everyone. How does that change your behavior? Does this change the way we see memes, digital culture, ourselves, and others? Are we all Ditto, and is Ditto all of us? Is there only Ditto? This isn't necessarily cause for nihilism, but rather hope and affirmation. Ditto is never stable, never a finished configuration. Ditto is pure potentiality, and transformation, and creativity, and therefore so are we. It surely also means that *every* action has consequences in forming Ditto, and so herein lies a responsibility —to ensure our actions and memetic practices in digital culture are worthy of Ditto, because Ditto is also us.

Nevertheless, Ditto transforms again and again, reminding us that the intervention is not a one-off; it's a repeat prescription. And Ditto does so with a constant :) on its face. Thus, Ditto's final lesson is the one that Nietzsche hoped the ER would teach: the concept of *amor fati*, that is, the love of one's fate. We must not only will whatever happens in digital culture but also its eternal recurrence. We must affirm all the daunting repetitions and volume of information. Indeed, a good user of digital culture 'genuinely affirms the play of the world and avoids the resentment of finding the world guilty of frustrating his desires'[52]. Thinking with Ditto, we now continually affirm our life as platform scrollers in an ecology of interacting cyberfauna (➡**1.1**).

47 Margret Grebowicz and Helen Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg: Adventures with Donna Haraway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 113.
48 Grebowicz and Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg,* 122.
49 Grebowicz and Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg,* 113.
50 Grebowicz and Merrick, *Beyond the Cyborg,* 122.
51 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.
52 Ronald Bogue cited in Lydia Amir, *The Legacy of Nietzsche's Philosophy of Laughter: Bataille, Deleuze, and Rosset* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 215.

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MEMES
AS RESISTANCE

MEMES AS A CULTURAL REMEDY: A CRITICAL RACE ANALYSIS OF BLACK MEMETIC RESISTANCE

ALEXIS E. HUNTER AND TIERA TANKSLEY

The Sociotechnical Ingenuity of Black Youth

Over the past two decades, social media has become a primary medium for Black youth to share widely how societal injustices continue to harm historically marginalized communities. Youth-led social media movements showcase how technology is being repurposed and/or hacked for justice. Marginalized communities' embodied experiences and emerging literature are unearthing socioemotional and mental health consequences of activist burnout and racial battle fatigue.[1] It is crucial to acknowledge how Black youth are re-envisioning digital activism in more expansive, restorative, and anti-capitalist ways. It is vital to place Black resistance into a rich history of exploitation, capitalist and otherwise, and recognize how and why youth activists are calling attention to the intersectional labor, trauma, and exhaustion that often go unaddressed and unacknowledged in collective organizing.

In response to the exploitation and commodification of activist labor online, and growing awareness of the mental, emotional, and physiological health effects of experiencing anti-black racism on and offline, Black youth are identifying the importance of prioritizing holistic wellness alongside advocating for the transformation of our material conditions.[2] This is exemplified by the increasingly popularized call to consider 'rest as resistance,'[3] the staunch critique of 'grind culture' within the Black community, and the creation and dissemination of memes as playful, joy-centered acts of refusal.

Our collaborative reflection on Black youth's engagement with social media honors our personal and scholarly sisterhood. Alexis identifies as a Black youth and has led organizing efforts leveraging social media for healing, resistance, and communal care. Tiera's research has explored how Black youth repurpose social media for joy, activism, and healing since her early 20s, when she herself was a youth activist on social media. We both continue to collaborate with youth in our work as scholar-activists.

1 Tiera Tanksley and Alexis E. Hunter, "Black youth, digital activism and Racial battle fatigue: How young Black activists enact hope, humor, and healing online," *The Handbook of Youth Activism*. (in press for 2023).

2 Shawn Ginwright, "Radically healing black lives: A love note to justice," *New Directions for Student Leadership* 148 (2015): 35.

3 Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (London: Hachette UK, 2022).

We write this to affirm that these digital practices are not a departure from our groundings in our ancestral roots of love and collective liberation. We are witnessing the beauty of how Black youth are weaving old and new legacies of Black fugitivity together by leveraging internet technologies as sites for communal care, healing, joy and accountability.[4] We have shared stories of how digital spaces have been an environment our community repurposes for transformative care that is tethered to social justice. We are noticing social media's potential for healing in our lives and the necessity of embracing everyday practices that evoke joy, hope, and community as we heal and navigate oppressive systems.

Anti-Blackness as the 'Default Setting'

Critical race theorists have extensively examined how anti-black racism is ingrained in the physical world.[5] In recent years, critical race technology scholars like Ruha Benjamin,[6] Sayfia Noble,[7] Kishonna Gray,[8] and André Brock[9] have extended articulations of the 'permanence of race' to include digital and technological contexts. The digital testimonies of Black social media users highlight the permanence and pervasiveness of algorithmic racism and codified white supremacy online, ultimately countering dominant narratives that position technologies as objective, post-racial, and politically neutral. These realities continue to expose that anti-blackness exists as the 'default setting' and 'organizing logic' of digital technology. Just as the eras of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and the age of mass incarceration required unique forms of resistance, so too does this new era of technological racism and the 'New Jim Code'.[10]

Importantly, this burgeoning body of critical race and Black feminist technology scholarship reveals how algorithmic infrastructures, including code, data, and content moderation systems, are designed in ways that reify offline racial logics that keep Black humanity — our stories, our joy, and our liberation — on the technological margins. As Ruha Benjamin explains, anti-black technologies hide, speed up, and automate racism, making resistance and liberation all the more elusive and seemingly impossible. Black youth — through joy-centered and justice-oriented meme creation — subvert and dismantle algorithmic

4 André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 529-549.

5 Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

6 Ruha Benjamin, "Innovating inequity: If Race is a Technology, Postracialism is the Genius Bar," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 13 (2016): 2227-2234.

7 Safiya Noble, "Teaching Trayvon: Race, media, and the politics of spectacle," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 1 (2014): 12-29.

8 Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

9 André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York University Press, 2020).

10 Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

erasure and codified anti-blackness. Memes in particular — and the memetic worlds that Black youth create within, against, and beneath the algorithmic margins — are one of the many ways Black youth are resisting codified white supremacy in the digital age.

Memes as Cultural Remedy

Our theorization of memetic resistance is an explicit, historically conscious acknowledgment of Black joy, humor, and play as liberatory and subversive acts. In addition to theorizing memes as a form of subversive resistance, we also theorize them as a cultural remedy designed to heal the wounds of white supremacy and anti-blackness. Hunter and colleagues define cultural remedies as everyday practices that racially marginalized communities use to center healing and holistic well-being.[11]

Memes are a way our communities can take up healing and activism in synchrony, as memes are cultural balms that enable us to fight for more liberatory futures while unapologetically staying committed to our joy and wellness. Importantly, memetic resistance is not a radical departure from the rich histories and lineages of the ongoing struggle for Black liberation but rather an emerging form of sociotechnical advocacy that bends, breaks, and blurs the mythical dichotomy between activism as and activism as .' The latter is powerful and calls attention to how enacting racialized joy within a white supremacist system structured by plantation logic can be transformative and, thus, materially and discursively dangerous for those who participate.

Since the goal of anti-black racism is to fragment, dehumanize, and spirit murder Black bodies, Black joy is considered a radically dangerous act simply because it fosters (re) humanization through critical hope and healing. Audre Lorde reminds us of the revolutionary power of joy and affective energy, noting, 'In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.'[12] The use of violence to extinguish Black joy is a persistent feature of anti-black social structures and includes such contemporary tragedies as Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old Black boy who was shot to death in his own backyard for playing with a toy gun;[13] Kiera Wilmont, the Black high schooler who was arrested for conducting a messy science experiment during recess;[14] or O'Shae

11 Alexis E. Hunter et al., "Embracing the Newest Generation of Healers," (Forthcoming).

12 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader,* ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1984), 87.

13 Tom McCarthy, "Tamir Rice: Video Shows Boy, 12, Shot 'seconds' after Police Confronted Child," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/26/tamir-rice-video-shows-boy-shot-police-cleveland.

14 Kiera Wilmont, "An Unexpected Reaction: Why a Science Experiment Gone Bad Doesn't Make Me a Criminal," *HuffPost*, December 7, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/an-unexpected-reaction-wh_b_3328210.

Sibley, the Black queer man who was murdered for vogueing at a gas station.[15] These murders exist against the backdrop of increasing hostility towards Black life and wellness, particularly within the realm of education, where the systematic suppression of Black joy is becoming increasingly institutionalized through curriculum bans on African-American studies[16] and the elimination of recess and structured playtime in predominantly Black schools.[17] Likewise, social media platforms have been shown to employ biased content moderation policies around Black joy, including TikTok's banning of the viral #BlackGirlFollowTrain hashtag (which allowed Black girl content creators to find and affirm each other on the platform) and its constant shadowbanning and demonetization of joyous dance content made by and for Black creators (which prompted the Black Tik Tok protest).

Though seemingly innocuous and unrelated to our discussion of memetic resistance, the institutional banning of Black joy both on and offline harkens back to the era of enslavement, where Black rest, joy, and personal fulfillment were crimes punishable by death. Historians have called attention to how engaging in joy, play, rest, and romantic love were seen as crimes of theft and robbery punishable by death during the era of enslavement.[18] This is because experiencing joy, levity, or healing directly challenged the success of the plantation economy, which was dependent upon the slave owner's complete and unbreachable control over Black laboring bodies whose collective hopelessness helped ensure that revolutions and revolts could never occur. Having the courage to 'thief' or 'steal' back one's body, joy, and humanity from the plantation undermined the economic survivability of the colonial empire.[19] When viewed through the lens of white supremacy and colonialism, it becomes clear that the Black body is meant to be yoked, harnessed, exploited, and erased, and expressions of joyous autonomy — the flames that have historically sparked revolutions — must be suppressed at all costs. With this historical and contemporary context at the forefront, creating memes that invoke culturally situated and race-conscious joy and laughter is a staunch act of resistance.

Furthermore, the hypocrisies of white supremacy create an environment where historically oppressed communities are frowned upon for protesting dehumanizing systems while also being told by systems of power as activism. Nevertheless, the Black

15 Matthew Rodriguez, "O'Shae Sibley, a Beloved Dancer, Killed after Vogueing at Brooklyn Gas Station," *Them*, August 1, 2023, https://www.them.us/story/oshea-sibley-black-gay-man-dancer-stabbed.

16 GW Today, "Backlash: Inside Florida's African American Studies Ban," *GW Today,* February 1, 2023, https://gwtoday.gwu.edu/backlash-inside-floridas-african-american-studies-ban.

17 Olga S. Jarret, "A Research-Based Case for Recess," *US Play Coalition*, November 2013, https://www.playworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/US-play-coalition_Research-based-case-for-recess.pdf.

18 Natasha A. Tinsley, "Thiefing Sugar: Reading Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature" (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2003).

19 Tinsley, "Thiefing Sugar," 191.

community is expanding what activism can look like by asserting that taking care of ourselves is inherently activist-oriented work. This sentiment echoes Audre Lorde's assertion that 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'[20] Studies have shown that although it is an essential and indispensable aspect of collective organizing, in-person, on the ground activism can be incredibly taxing and dangerous as Black youth are at risk of physical[21] and carceral violence, which in turn can lead to spirit-murdering,[22] racial-battle fatigue,[23] and various other mental health crises.

In the Black community, memes are grounded in our rich graffiti and political cartooning histories — taking, making, and reclaiming space where space is not given. Memes become a way for Black youth to 'tag' and disrupt anti-blackness while simultaneously working to transform consciousness in ways that keep our souls intact.[24] This nuance is noted by Page and Woodland, who argue that although activism aids youth of color in disrupting harmful systems, it also significantly affects their mind/spirit/body.[25] In digital contexts, Black youth are leveraging the critical humor of memes as a healing tool while also recognizing how memes are digital graffiti that increases content virality, thus exposing how anti-Blackness operates. Cultural remedies are necessary to center one's full humanity while working toward social change. Cultural remedies are a beautiful reminder that even as white supremacy updates, so do our communities' loving practices of care. Black youth highlight how memes in particular are a complex and strategic justice-oriented practice. We want to call attention to the need for a more robust understanding that honors how Black youth are expanding our conceptualizations of healing-centered resistance.

Context of the #AlabamaRiverBrawl

To illustrate how memes are a cultural remedy that opens up possibilities for emerging forms of digital resistance and sociotechnical ingenuity, let's look at the events of the

20 Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury," Lorde, Audre. "Poetry is not a Luxury," in *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, ed. Laura Buzzard, Don LePan, Nora Ruddock, and Alexandria Stuart (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1985),125.

21 Tiera Tanksley. "Race, Education, and #BlackLivesMatter: How online transformational resistance shapes the offline experiences of Black college-age women." *Urban Education* 0, no. 0 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221092970.

22 Patricia Williams, "Spirit-murdering the Messenger: The discourse of fingerpointing as the law's response to racism." *U. of Miami Law Review* 42, no. 1 (1987): 127.

23 William Smith, "Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The campus racial climate in a post-civil rights era," in *A long way to go: Conversations about Race by African American Faculty and Graduate Students*, ed. Darrell Cleveland (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 171-190.

24 Ashley N. Woodson & Alexis E. Hunter, "Memes as Digital Graffiti and Political Cartoons," Workshop hosted at the Practicing Hope Summit at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. (2019).

25 Page and Woodland, *Healing Justice Lineages: Dreaming at the Crossroads of Liberation, Collective Care, and Safety* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2023).

#AlabamaRiverBrawl in Montgomery, Alabama. On August 5th, 2023, a brawl broke out after Damien Pickett, a Black man working at the riverfront dock,[26] asked for a group of white people to move their illegally parked boat so a riverboat could dock. Displeased with his request, a group of white men jumped Damien, and he tried to fight back in self-defense but was simply outnumbered. As Black witnesses nearby realized what was occurring, they immediately sprung into collective action and protected Damien from a tragedy that could have resulted in his death. A young man even jumped off the boat he was on to swim over the dock to defend Damien, and another man grabbed a folding chair. One of many harsh realities of enduring a white-supremacist world in which Black existence is unceasingly under attack is that white people feel they have the right to harm us without consequence. It is important to emphasize that Damien was simply doing his job, and the insidious ideologies of anti-Blackness disregard our humanity regardless.

Located in the deep south, Montgomery, Alabama has historically been the center of many profound Black liberatory movements that brought global attention to the Black experience in America. Montgomery is often referred to as the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. In situating our analysis of memes in the cultural event of the #AlabamaRiverBrawl, we recognize that this particular event is deeply connected to the broader contexts of white supremacy and our ongoing pursuit for collective liberation. Gloria Ladson-Billings beautifully articulates that stories are like medicines that support our healing and sustain us as we grapple with the pains of racialized oppression.[27]

Thus, by reflecting on the #AlabamaRiverBrawl, we can simultaneously weave together stories that contextualize Black Americans' locally and nationally situated experiences in ways that prioritize truth-telling as essential to our healing.

The #AlabamaBrawl is powerful as it represents the power of Black solidarity on and offline. As those physically present came to Damien's defense, Black social media users simultaneously posted digital affirmations and reflections on what transpired. Black social media users leveraged critical algorithmic literacies[28] by using the hashtag #AlabamaRiverBrawl when posting memes about the incident to 'disrupt the algorithm.' Through this hashtagging, our communities enacted agency by creating a centralized digital counterspace where, through creating and sharing memes, we could process and uplift our stories and ultimately tell the truth about what transpired at the riverboat dock.

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26 Moulite and Wilkes, "Fade in the Water: An Alabama Brawl and the Power of Black Resistance," *New America*, August 14, 2023, https://www.newamerica.org/the-thread/montgomery-alabama-boat-brawl/#:~:text=On%20August%205th%2C%20a%20frenzied,allow%20a%20riverboat%20to%20dock.

27 Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 1 (1995): 57.

28 Tiera Tanskley, "Employing an Abolitionist, Critical Race Pedagogy in CS: Centering the voices, experiences and technological innovations of Black youth," *Journal of Computer Science Integration* 6, no. 1 (2023): 1-16.

Memes as Transformational Resistance

Through our lens of experiencing memes as a cultural remedy, we can illuminate the civic engagement and digital innovation of Black youth as they lovingly invite us all to commit to critical consciousness and the life-long transformation of our hearts and minds in ways that keep our souls intact. However, this lens still allows space to interrogate and process racialized violence. Therefore, Black meme creation, consumption, and circulation have collective impacts. Though memes have distinctive aspects that evoke various modes of transformational resistance, Black meme creation is all rooted in a deep love of our people. These modes of digital transformational resistance are operationalized due to Black youth's understanding of their racialized experiences and acknowledgment that healing is a gateway to new worlds.

Refusal

in the face of trials
our souls remain pure
we are strengthened by the love of our ancestors
we know our breath is a portal to the spirit
our people are inherent disruptors
we are not here to align with the rhythms of the world
we are living testimonies
everyday i see us
protecting ourselves and each other

In her groundbreaking work on Black visual studies, Tina Marie Campt asks: how do we engage a contemporary visual archive of blackness that is saturated by the proliferation and mass circulation of images of violence, anti-Blackness, and premature death? To answer this query, Campt introduces the concept of 'refusal,' which names how Black image creation — and, we believe by extension, memes — create 'radical modalities of witnessing that refuse authoritative forms of visuality which function to refuse blackness itself.'[29] An exemplar of this normative/authoritative/hegemonically white way of viewing Black Death — or, alternatively, refusing to see Black life and humanity — is the virality of police killing videos. While the white supremacist colonial gaze demands that we consume, commodify, and fetishize Black death and suffering on a continuous loop and in ahistorical, decontextualized ways, memetic resistance offers us an opportunity to refuse the anti-black colonial gaze and instead look at these images with unapologetically Black ways of knowing. Campt explains that practicing refusal names the urgency of rethinking the time, space, and fundamental vocabulary of what constitutes politics, activism, and theory, as

29 Tina Marie Campt, "Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 29, no. 1 (2019): 79.

well as what it means to refuse the terms given to us to name these struggles.'[30] Refusal is perhaps the broadest, most all-encompassing form of resistance because it captures the nature of Black meme creation in general: redefining activism as something playful, petty, and humorous, as well as redefining memes (which are often believed to be solely focused on humor) as politically generative catalysts of social change.

In the case of #AlabamaRiverBrawl, the original video was filmed and narrated by a Black woman. As such, the entire encounter was framed by Black voices and perspectives. The audience hears her reactions and commentary on the incident in real time. She also provides background context and an incisive racial analysis of the events, all while using humor and call-and-response linguistic practices. Notably, the camerawoman is not the only narrator on the scene; by using iconic Black linguistic practices, including signifying and playing the dozens, she invites other Black bystanders to join in the narration. Here, we can see an unapologetically Black form of storytelling — one that is collective and communal, one that includes overlapped speech and circular narratives, and one that uses humor as a form of refusal that disallows viewers to engage with the chain of events through a white colonial gaze.

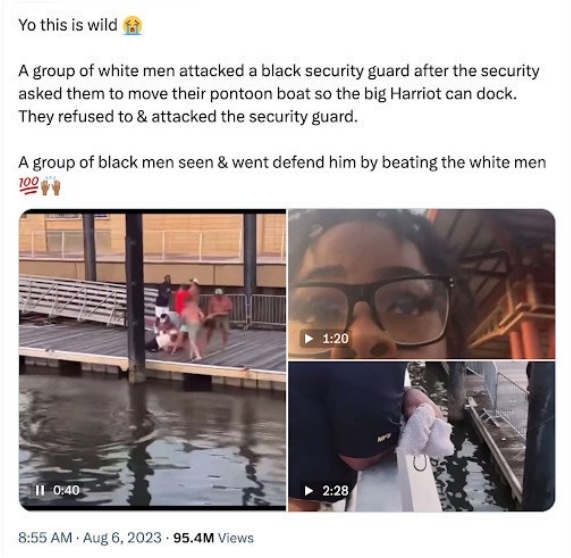


Fig. 1: Footage of what happened

30 Campt, "Black Visuality and the Practice of Refusal," 80.

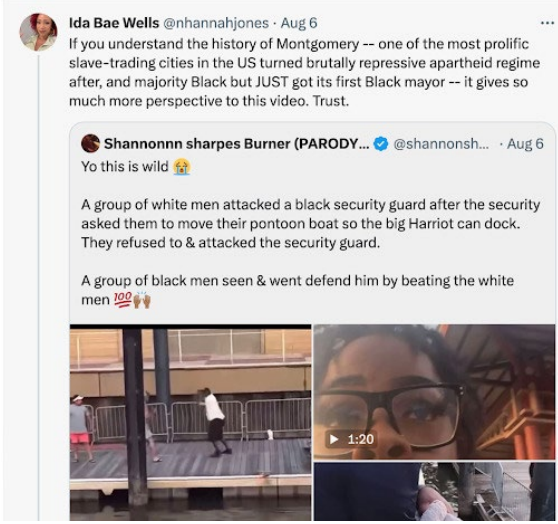


Fig. 2: Understanding the history of Montgomery

Another way the #AlabamaRiverBrawl memes enact refusal is in their incorporation and interpolation of Black histories and ancestors. Across all the memes found, there was some recognition of, or signaling to, slavery and its afterlives (e.g., Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era, police brutality, and the BLM era, etc.); naming of the ancestors was part and parcel of what happened on that dock. These practices speak to a Black cultural and historical practice called Sankofa, which means 'go back and get it.' Sankofa asserts that we cannot understand contemporary issues and events without first situating said events into a rich history. Where white supremacy and colonialism evoke ahistoricism and individualism to obscure the truth, Black visuality and the practice of refusal demand that we use history and non-western ways of knowing to 'look back,' 'look again,' and 'look differently' so that we can see the truth.



Fig. 3: Walked off that Vessel with her Spirit



Fig. 4: Proud Ancestors

Re-Memory

what was once hidden
will resurface
re-memory is an invitation to a sacred quest
resurrecting what was once supressed
we hold anthems and wordless stories
freedom is our birthright, and it will not be denied
the truth will set us free

Toni Morrison describes re-memory as communal memories of the African American past.[31] Specifically, she defines re-memory as 'recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past…it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative. The effort to both remember and not know[32] the traumas of anti-Black violence, racism, and white supremacy terror.

In 'Lift Every Voice and Swing' and 'Fade in the Water,' we see the collective endeavor to reimagine 'an alternate history of slavery' in ways that center hope, humor, resistance, and survival. Negro spirituals were gospel songs sung by slaves meant to send coded messages about the underground railroad to other slaves. Some of the most famous songs include 'Wade in the Water' — a song that explained that one could escape the hunting dogs by wading into the water — and 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' — a song sung by Harriot Tubman to let enslaved friends and family know that she was getting ready to organize the next escape.

31 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987).
32 Toni Morrision, "'I Wanted to Carve out a World Both Culture Specific and Race-Free': An Essay by Toni Morrison," *The Guardian*, August 8, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/08/toni-morrison-rememory-essay.

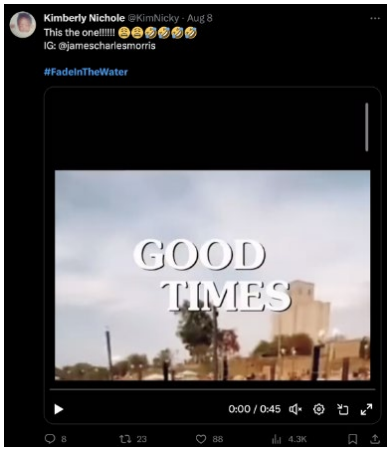


Fig. 5: Good Times Remix: Fade in the Water



Fig. 6: Somebody Said Lift Every Voice and Swing

Importantly, re-memory goes beyond just reimagining traumatic slave histories, but also the afterlives of slavery they evoke. According to Sadiya Hartman, the afterlives of slavery include 'skewed life chances, poor educational outcomes, mass incarceration and premature death.' One of the most salient examples of slavery's afterlives is the gratuitous public slaughter of unarmed Black people by white mobs, self-appointed vigilantes, and law enforcement agents, all of whom rarely face penalties for their crimes against Black life.

In the 'Open Carry' meme, we can see how the creator re-stories the meaning of 'open carry' — a popular gun law in Southern and Mid-Western territories. This reference is multi-layered and calls attention to how constitutional amendments related to guns (Open Carry) and property rights (Stand Your Ground) are often used to justify the extra-judicial killing of innocent Black

Americans. For instance, Philando Castile was murdered by police in Fergurson after alerting the officer to his open-carry license. Here, we see a re-storying and reimagining of laws used to constrict and constrain Black lives to instead be about protecting and sustaining them.

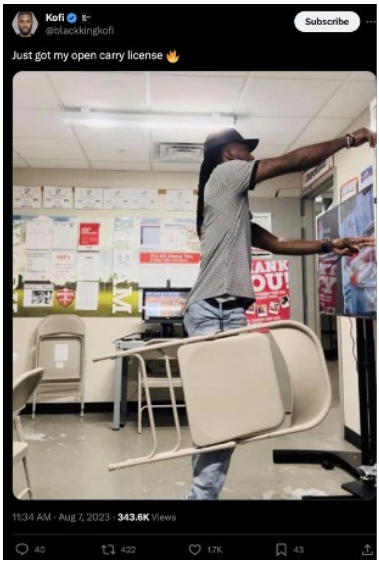


Fig. 7: Just got my open carry license

Remixing

love is justice out loud
all we want is for us to look back
and know we gave it everything we had
how could you not smile fondly when you think of us
our stories have become our collective song
a melody that your spirit cannot shake
reminding us that the pursuit of justice
although difficult and a commitment of a lifetime
can be joyful, and we will not be denied
and you cannot put your red ink
on a story we did not give you permission to edit
let our collective story empower you
and be a constant reminder
that we still have work to do

With roots in hip hop, remixing is a digital call and response that updates and intermixes historical realities with contemporary ones. For instance, one of the most iconic memes from the #AlabamaRiverBrawl remixes Barnes' *Sugar Shack* painting. Barnes' depiction of Black joy and jazz music in the segregated south gained notoriety after it was used as Marvin Gaye's 1976 album cover, and even more so when it was added to the end credits of the 1970s sitcom *Good Times*.[33] Memetic remixing is a collective endeavor to call upon and update the ancestral archive.

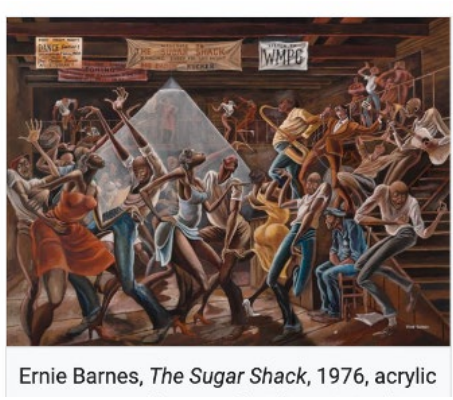


Fig. 8: The Sugar Shack 1976



Fig. 9: The Alabama Sweet Tea Party 2023

33 The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, "The Sugar Shack." The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Accessed September 3, 2023, https://www.mfah.org/exhibitions/sugar-shack.

Remixing doesn't merely include updating the stories, memories, and archival artifacts made by and for the Black community but also remixing popularized stereotypes and anti-black rhetoric that aim to harm and undermine Black people and communities. In the 'Black People Can't Swim' meme, the creator is remixing a famous Usher meme, 'Watch This,' which implies someone is about to be upstaged or proven wrong. Similarly, in the 'Now Try That in a Small Town' meme, we see how the creator literally remixes a song that has received backlash for being a 'lynching anthem' used to threaten Black lives in contemporary times, turning white supremacist threat on its head.



Fig. 10: Black People Can't Swim



Fig. 11: Try That in a Small Town

Finally, in the 'Have a Seat' and 'A Whole Sermon' memes, we can see how the creator calls attention to an iconic moment in Black history. The first harkens back to when Rosa Parks was told by white bus riders to 'have a seat', which eventually prompted the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This meme remixes the threat towards Rosa Parks and suggests that the #AlabamaRiverBrawl was 'payback' for this historic disrespect. The second puts a satirical spin on a famous quote by Shirley Chisholm, a congresswoman and the first Black woman presidential candidate. These memes call attention to how a humorous and joy-centered re-memory of a Black trauma — and the pain, suffering, and humiliation that civil rights activists endured for our collective freedom — can spark collective and contemporary 'lick backs.'



Fig. 12: Have a Seat



Fig. 13: A Whole Sermon

Reparations

we must go back
back to our origins
back to our roots
as we claim what has always been ours

Reparations is an expansive and historically rooted term that has, in some ways, become academically sanitized and oversimplified. More often than not, reparations are defined solely

in monetary terms and often focus on the quantification of Black suffering and disenfranchisement. As we continue to witness on social media, Black youth in the digital space call attention to more immediate and unapologetically 'petty' (re)definitions of reparations to include 'clap backs' and 'getting your lick back.' Indeed, while financial and economic deprivation is a salient, undeniable, and uncompromisable feature of reparations, physical and material reparations are not the only harm that needs to be repaired. Black joy, life, hope, and wellness were also sacrificed and stripped away during and after enslavement. Thus, we are also owed reparational joy, humor, and levity. Everyday, urgent, 'here and now' reparational practices are essential to our healing, especially as we continue to freedom dream and strive towards a liberatory future where comprehensive reparations are fully and comprehensively achieved.



Fig. 14: Nathaniel Alexander Designed the Folding Chair

The 'Nathanial Alexander designed the folding chair' meme also evokes Black history and ties historic harm — including the erasure, exploitation, and co-optation of Black intellectual genius — to contemporary reparations and 'lick backs.' While the *Take My Hand* Mural of Harriet Tubman in Cambridge, MA, is meant to capture how Tubman brought slaves to freedom, the digital update, including the 'Take My Chair' meme, suggests Tubman is encouraging folx to engage in 'lick back' reparations.



Fig. 15: Harriet Mural

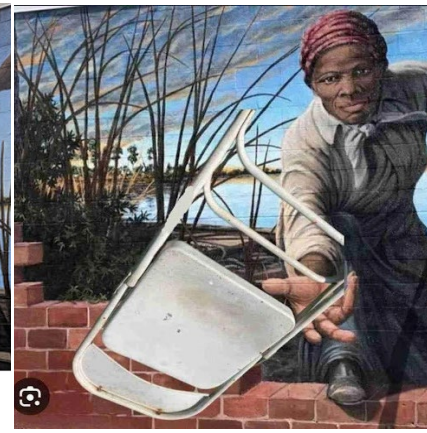


Fig. 16: Take My Chair

The 'Civil Rights Museum' meme suggests that, like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and other ancestors before them who fought for freedom, human rights, and reparations, the chair has played an important role in our collective liberation. Finally, the 'me watching us get our lick back' meme hints at the collaborative, multi-layered joy that reparations can bring.



Fig. 17: Me Watching Us Get Our Lick Back

Restoration

the waves crashing against the shore is inevitable
and was once hidden will eventually resurface
the truth shall set us free
freedom is our birthright, and it will not be denied

Restoration involves 'actions and activities that restore collective well-being, meaning and purpose', understanding this as a political act that 'recognizes the collective nature of well-being and moves away from individualistic notions of health.'[34] As we can see in the images below, memes play a crucial role in collective healing and communal coping. Because memes are a type of signifying[35] — a call and response between community insiders — they are inherently collective.



Fig. 18: Still Watching



Fig. 19: Me Liking Every Single Meme

34 Ginwright, "Radically Healing for Black Lives," 39.
35 Brock, "From the Blackhand Side."

Therefore, their creation, consumption, and circulation have collective impacts (e.g., the 'Black People Across America Watching That Video Today' meme). Memes, therefore, invite individuals into a communal healing space that can profoundly impact those who encounter them mentally and physically. As Kathleen Newman-Bremang (the creator of the 'Still watching' meme) notes under her post, 'been going through some hard health shit and have barely been able to get out of bed, so this was right on time. Scuba Gooding jr & and Michael B. Phelps made me laugh so hard I cried 10 across the board!!!'

Likewise, 'The Re-Enactment,' where Black and white people came together to create a theatrical re-enactment of the iconic moments of the brawl, shows how memetic restoration is also an opportunity for intercommunal healing.



Fig. 20: The Re-Enactment



Fig. 21: It's the Unity in the Re-enactment, For Me

We believe that the restorative power of memes is essential, especially given recent surges in self-reported mental health struggles by Black Americans following the murder of George Floyd and the Surgeon General's most recent announcement that feelings of isolation and loneliness are at an all-time high amongst Americans.



Fig. 22: Black People Accross America Watching That Video

The latter memes, which highlight how memes can be healing on intrapersonal, intra-communal, and inter-communal levels, suggest that memetic resistance can also help us reimagine new, liberatory futures where solidarity leads to intersectional racial justice.

Reclamation

although white supremacy tells us collective liberation is prohibited
we cast away the lies
consider this a truce between flesh and spirit
we know the ancestral realm is present
and our guide to freedom is within

Shawn Ginwright defines reclamation as 'the capacity to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine a possible future.'[36] As we can see in the images below, memes use humor to reclaim and reimagine a future where standing up against white supremacy and anti-black violence is not only possible but survivable. We see historically and contemporarily that standing up for Black lives often results in intensified violence, and Black activists often lose their lives in the process.

This is most prevalently evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement, where activists who documented police murders in real time and those who dared to fight back against police violence during protests have been mysteriously and violently killed in the aftermath.[37] Thus, memes about future uses of the chair to 'fight back' against anti-blackness reimagine what is possible for Black activists and present a Black speculative future where protecting Black lives generates rather than stifles the possibility of Black life, wellbeing and futurity.



Fig. 23: I Keep That Thang on Me

36 Ginwright, "Radically Healing for Black Lives," 40.

37 EJ Dickson, "Mysterious Deaths Leave Ferguson Activists 'On Pins and Needles,'" *Rolling Stone*, March 18, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/ferguson-death-mystery-black-lives-matter-michael-brown-809407/.



Fig. 24: Me Practicing For the Next Time Someone Tries Me

Memes like 'I'm really upset with the Montgomery Brawl 'training' videos' also reimagine a future where intersectionality is a staple feature of Black liberation - something that has not always been a feature of historical movements. This video features a Black disabled mom doing a mock tutorial of how to use crutches to help out in the brawl, disrupting the ways people with disabilities have been historically and contemporarily excluded from movements for social change. A significant critique of both the mainstream feminist movement and the Civil Rights movement is that these movements were focused on a single identity and thus left out the voices and experiences of people at the intersections: Black women and femmes, queer and trans folx, and folx with disabilities. In the memes that came out of the #AlabamaRiverBrawl, we see a purposeful enactment of intersectionality, which allows us to reimagine a future where ALL Black lives are included in the takedown of white supremacy.

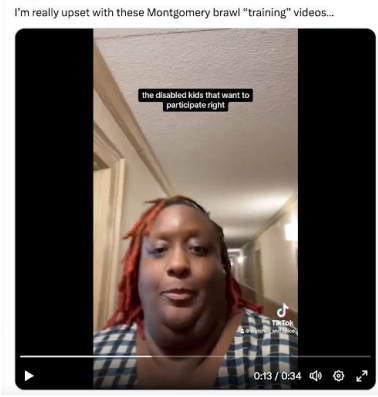


Fig. 25: I'm Really Upset With the Montgomery Brawl 'Training' Videos

Ultimately, by reimagining a collective future that is intersectional and action-oriented, memetic reclamation paves the way for actively building and working towards 'a world that is radically different from the one we inherited.'[38] This leads us to our final theme: revolution.

Revolution

we move together
our journeys intertwined
through our collective struggle
we can be made anew
our dreams are threaded in the legacies of our ancestors
our dreams are gateways to new worlds
we cannot be denied
we are guided by the spirits and relentless hearts of those before us
and as we forge new paths
consider our resistance
our communal labor of love

We connect our analysis of revolution to Robin Kelley's beautiful articulation of the act of freedom dreaming. Freedom dreaming is an embodied, urgent practice that helps us imagine what we want to eradicate and what we want to build.[39] In relation to Black memetic resistance, freedom dreaming is an intervention or disruption that simultaneously reckons with the complexities of the past, present, and future. In this context, revolution occurs as Black folks online and offline defend Black livelihood and highlight that there are repercussions to anti-Blackness.



Fig. 26: It's Giving Avengers Engdame

38 Robin Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 1.
39 Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.



Fig. 27: Buddy in Alabama Said

For the Black community, memes are a life-giving passageway that moves us beyond awareness of how societal injustices impact our communities to create space to process. Black youth are reminding us that resistance is not just about fighting back against white supremacy, but also involves prioritizing our souls. Black memetic resistance allows the Black community to tell our stories and disrupt the white gaze. Memes are a distinctive and necessary justice-oriented practice that expands perceptions of activism while staying committed to being culturally situated. Black youth leverage meme-making to center the collective sensemaking and care in our own communities and remind us that Black activism can and should go beyond being palatable for white consumption. As Black hacktivists, our repurposing of social media for racial justice highlights the potentiality of blending play and labor in activist practices. Black youth's unwavering commitment to abolishing white supremacy and (re)centering the holistic healing practices of our ancestors, where communal healing is embedded in all aspects of our lives, grounds their expertise with digital resistance. We must celebrate and explore informal, everyday learning contexts, like social media, because they are spaces of radical possibilities where we expand perceptions around advocacy, redistribute power, and pursue liberation in joyful, communal ways.

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MINIMUM WAGE MEMETIC MANIFESTO

ALIA LEONARDI & ALINA LUPU

By Any Memes Necessary.





A collectively crafted manifesto for minimum wage workers by Alia Leonardi and Alina Lupu, that uses as its premise the breaking down of the capitalist master's house, with the capitalist master's tool - the meme. Or, as one could also posit: memes as a language of resistance, shared struggle, and solidarity.

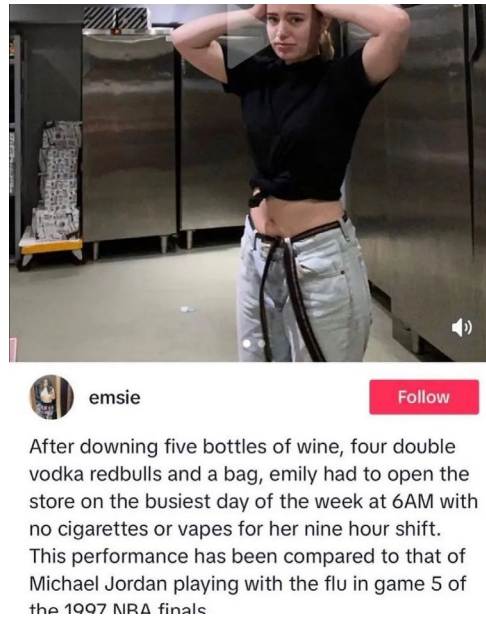


Fig. 1: 'After downing five bottles of wine, four double vodka red bulls and a bag, emily had to open the store on the busiest day of the week at 6AM with no cigarettes or vapes for her nine hour shift. This performance has been compared to that of Michael Jordan playing with the flu in game 5 of the 1997 NBA finals.'

Working hours have been stretched, while creativity and status are now being employed even in the most mundane of professions — sandwich artist, coffee artist, gelato artisan, floral designer, visual sales, pizza delivery expert, director of first impressions, fresh food replenishment technician. Workers seem to be asserting autonomy, yet somehow this has not led to the liberation of the worker, but only to further exploitation: to working in order to self-express by consuming.

We're at a tipping point. The revolution is once more on the horizon. Generalized precarity has summoned it, and in order for mass mobilization to happen, for cross-border solidarity to take shape, the revolution must start with the breaking down of boundaries. Not just between labors of love and labor for money, but also between worker and consumer, between active platform users and passive consumers of content. Because now the revolution has a new field of battle and it is the platformized online.

Within this configuration, the tool of the present revolution follows naturally: memetic discourse. Here, the meme is not just the base of 'image-text' communication, but goes back to the idea, to the behavior, to the cultural symbol, the movement, the practice, the ritual, the dance — self-replicating, mutating — the call and response that spreads throughout platforms at dizzying speeds.

(°°)(´°°) - October Revolution? Nonono: Memes! - The Language of Everyday Performance

As workers, we make and exchange memes — collages, text overlays, repetitive phrases — to show our performances of exploitation and to build a language of solidarity among ourselves. They're our go-to tools, transcending social classes and levels of education, catalysts in a peculiar moment of history, and expressions of dissent through tragi-comedy.

That moment when: your coworker sends you a meme. You just nod. You know. You quote it while working in order to acknowledge a shared struggle, and it turns into something akin to a slogan during a protest, into performed solidarity multiplied across borders and platforms.

That's when the "I" can become a stronger "we".

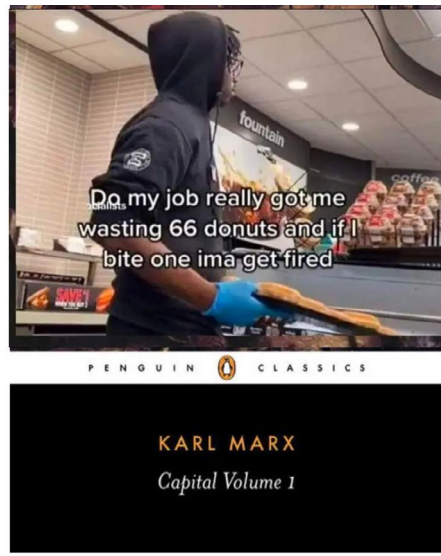


Fig. 2: 'Do my job really got me wasting 66 donuts and if I bite one imma get fired.' Penguin Classics, Karl Marx, Capital Volume 1.

Some of the current trends in the meme world are all about 'universal experience', 'being a girl, 'to be...is to...', 'never had a unique experience/thought' and are based on a feeling of belonging. These create a sense of community and shared identity. The important aspect of these 'new' identities is that they are trying to escape previous categories or definitions of the things they embody. For example, being a minimum wage worker in a textbook or being one on TikTok do not mean or carry the same value.



Fig. 3: 'qotd in a 9-5, how do you have time for ur life'

Reclaiming identities or social norms/roles through language is part of an activist practice aimed at either changing the individual condition or transforming society's relationship towards it. Occupying the social media landscape with memes reclaiming a social reality, making fun of that reality, and owning it has the potential of sending a strong message that can lead to societal restructuring.

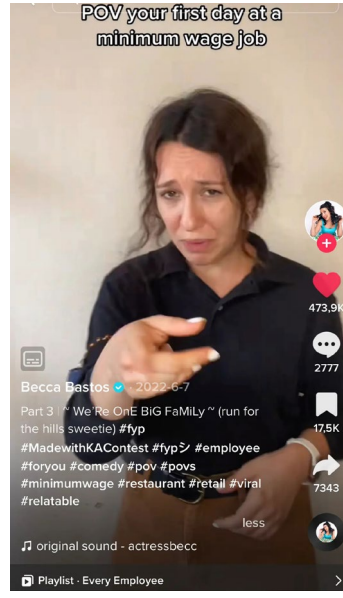


Fig. 4: 'POV your first day at a minimum wage job'

(⇀‸↼‵) In Memes We Thrive <3 - Memetic Discourse as Resistance

We know that performing precarity on social media is a way of sharing an embodied experience of capitalism, which we acknowledge once more as we pull up a TikTok that announces itself as: '5 fun tips for dealing with late stage capitalism as a depressed young person.'

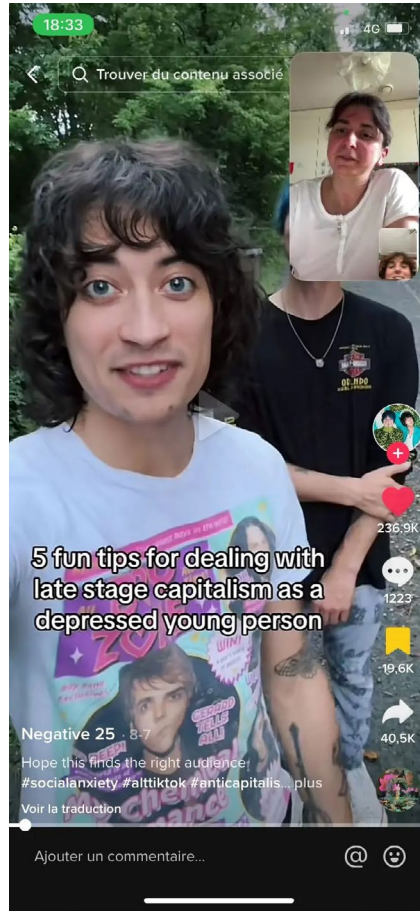


Fig. 5:— portraying two 20-year-olds with messy hair and alt-music tastes revealed by their T-shirts.

While the intro to the TikTok reel feels upbeat, the incoming stitch on the same video is a refusal. A woman details in it the actual levels of depression she experiences while working a 10-hour shift in manufacturing, from the prison-like uniform to the lack of natural light, and overall existential claustrophobia. We like, comment, and forward the message.

And then we switch apps and double click on the latest drop from @booksididnt on Instagram — a black Tshirt with the phrase 'I would prefer not to.' :



Fig. 6.

It feels fitting. It's the t-shirt Slavoj Zizek wore in a Radical Revolution YouTube interview in which he brought the message home:

'The crucial point for me is that it says, I would prefer not to. Not, I don't prefer to do it. So, it's not that a predicate is denied, it is that a non-predicate is asserted.'[1]

We know that negation is not something that memetic discourse falls into because of a lack of choice. On the contrary, it is an affirmation, a positive, a form of resistance, it's a historical referencing of refusal. We, the ones performing against precarity, take up the mantra of Melville's Bartleby, the scrivener, and 'we prefer not to' engage with the capitalist system on its own terms. Sure, we use the platforms. Sure, we use the language. Sure, we do the dance. But it's within the incoming stitch in which we deconstruct the tools and use them to our advantage, letting you peer behind the curtain of our day-to-day, and craft, through slow deliberate, stubborn content, a variation on resistance, where you can truly see that 'we would prefer not to'.

1 The Radical Revolution, "Slavoj Zizek — "I Would Prefer Not To," Youtube video, January 29, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuTkuy9D5lY.

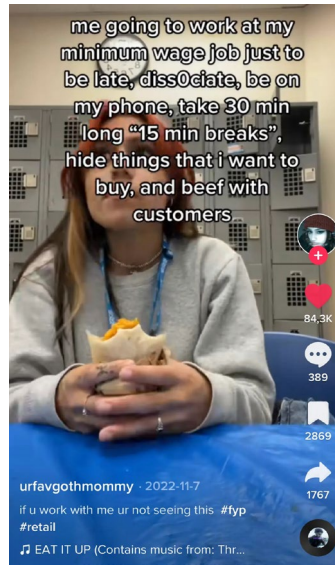


Fig. 7: 'me going to work at my minimum wage job just to be late, diss0ciate, be on my phone, take 30 min long "15 min breaks", hide things that i want to buy, and beef with customers.'

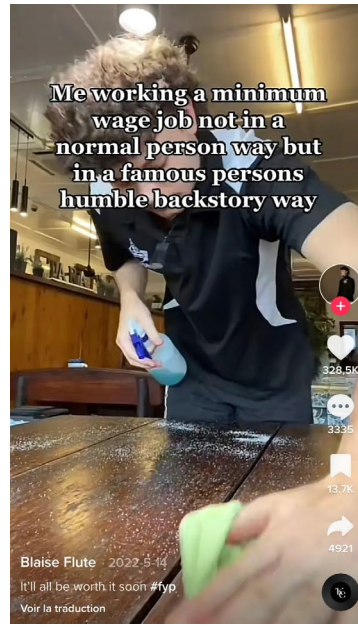


Fig. 8: 'me working a minimum wage job not in a normal person way but in a famous person's humble backstory way'



Fig. 9: 'you dreaming of who you are outside of capitalism'

Through humor and defiance we, the workers, create a historical reference of embodied refusal. We're machine-breaking Luddites,[2] but the only things we smash are the publish and like buttons.

As long as one has a mobile phone and an internet connection, along with basic media literacy, describing one's condition follows naturally. We use the tools of the times, and the best way to do it is to swerve, to derail a format, to stitch up reality into what seems to be the pre-established fun, upbeat, toxically happy format.

\\(`^´)// Workers Grab Your Memes and Unite! - Collective Escapism into Action

We're working in hospitality or in retail, we do delivery work, or we intern, we freelance, we're subcontractors, we moderate online forums, we work — for money, for love — we share the same struggle, exploited as we are by an overarching system that needs us to survive but also knows there are infinite ways in which it can replace us. We lose our individuality, we are a mean. We're also still here, still on the platform(s). We dream of collective escapism and that's what IG and formerly-known-as-Twitter posts and

2 Unknown Artist, "Luddites Smashing Textile Machines," World History Encyclopaedia, February 28, 2023, https://www.worldhistory.org/image/17132/luddites-smashing-textile-machines/.

TikToks and Reels are. We latch on to the fight, we share knowledge about our material conditions. We dream of subversion and escapism through memetic language, through bite-sized fragments of text and visuals that end up expressing a collective reality.

We teach each other the tips and tricks of subverting the system. We first learn who we are, by watching our little video content:

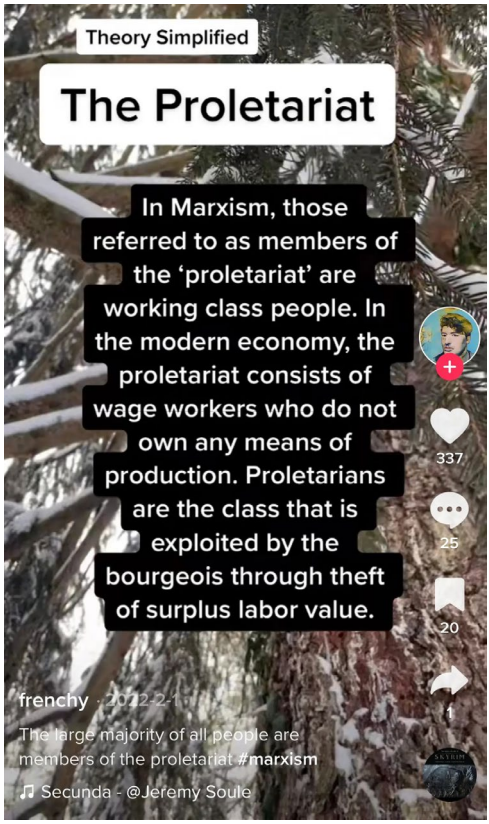


Fig. 10: 'Theory simplified. The Proletariat. In Marxism, those referred to as members of the "proletariat" are working-class people. In the modern economy, the proletariat consists of wage workers who do not own any means of production. Proletarians are the class that is exploited by the bourgeois through theft of surplus labor value.

And then the theory clicks, and we embody it, we realize who we are producing surplus value for, and we slow down and realize the circular logic of capitalism.

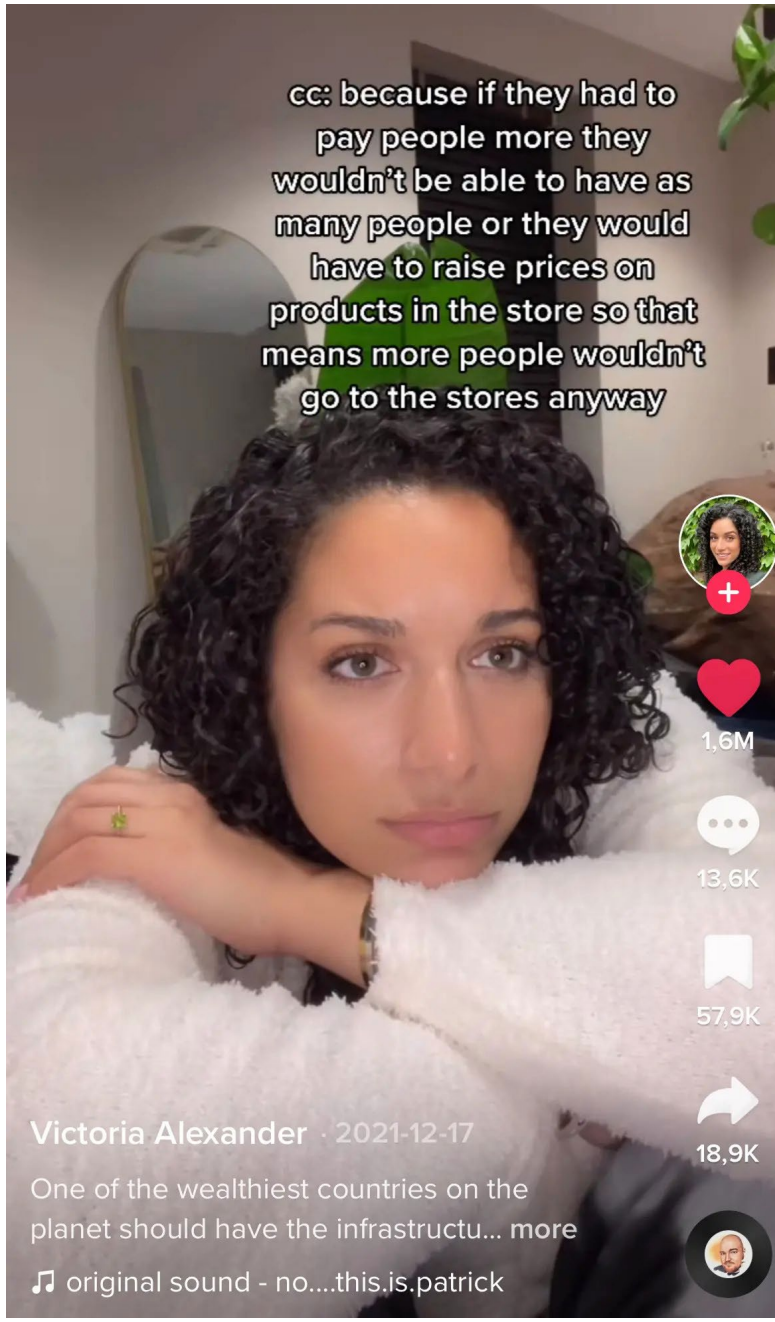

cc: because if they had to pay people more they wouldn't be able to have as many people or they would have to raise prices on products in the store so that means more people wouldn't go to the stores anyway
1,6M
13,6K
57,9K
18,9K
Victoria Alexander · 2021-12-17
One of the wealthiest countries on the planet should have the infrastructu... more
original sound - no....this.is.patrick

Fig. 11.

• ‘cc: we can’t raise the minimum wage

• why?

• cc: because small businesses wouldn’t be able to afford it

• why?

• cc: because if they had to pay people more they wouldn’t be able to have as many people or they would have to raise prices on products in the store so that means more people wouldn’t go to the stores anyway

• why?

• cc: because people would rather go to Walmart or someplace that has a lot more stuff for cheaper. People like cheaper stuff.

• why?

• cc: because not a lot of americans have a great amount of disposable income

• why?

• cc: because minimum wage is only \$7 an hour.’

The follow-up take brings us one step closer to breaking free from our struggle:

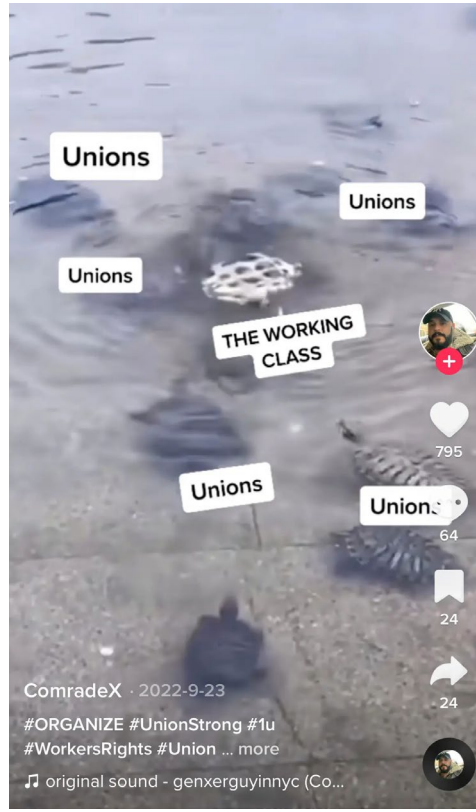


Fig. 12: 'You guys wanna unionize?

(-(-_(-_-)_-)-) Bosses beware - when we're screwed, we multiply![3] - Mass (virtual) Mobilization

Our strength is in numbers. Even if we perform individually most of the time. You'll notice that while scrolling on TikTok casually, if you catch us sharing a piece of information about ourselves that seems very personal, when you bust open the comments section, in amongst the 256 comments there are 200 people that can relate. Those are our allies, and they grow in numbers.

3 List of labor slogans, *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_labor_slogans*

These virtual resistances are not limited to a simple ‘like’ or a brief moment of attention from their viewers. If these memes are the translation of a physical experience, they also form the basis of a social movement. They are catalysts. Memes have the power to infiltrate and rally. Instead of a singular figure leading a social movement, we now have endless possibilities of relatability within the virtual space, beyond physical limits. It’s due to this possibility of encountering so many diverse experiences on social media, and our tendency to essentialize life and physical experience, that memes reach their potential and become mobilization tools.

At first, the revolution doesn’t have to be grand. It doesn’t have to be a complete reshuffling of the status quo. Instead, each post, reel, or video can be our approach to revolutionary action. And it can begin with a simple question.

Ask yourself: am I being paid enough for this? Let it sink in. Then embody the resistance:

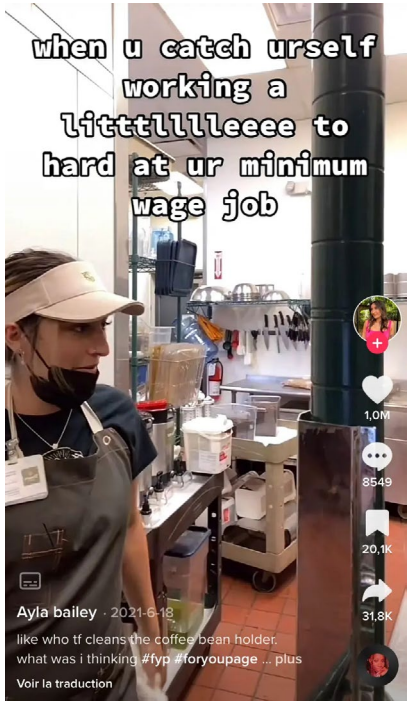


Fig. 13: ‘when u catch urself working a litttllleeee too hard at us minimum wage job.’

The revolution can happen through stealing from a corporation or letting others steal, whether the object of theft is product, or time, slowly chipping away towards your freedom and that of others.



Ken Wolter/Shutterstock @khristianb2/TikTok (Licensed) Remix by Caterina Cox

'My break don't start til I'm in the vehicle': Target worker says she doesn't start timing her 15-minute break until her food is ready and she's sitting down

Fig. 14: 'pov of me enjoying my 15 minute break that i don't start until my food is cooked and i'm sitting down.'

But from this it's only a small step towards massive disengagement:

people who do the minimum required and are psychologically detached from their job. This describes half of the U.S. workforce. Everyone else is either engaged (32%) or actively disengaged (18%). The latter are 'loud quitters.' Actively disengaged employees tend to have most of their workplace needs unmet and spread their dissatisfaction -- they have been the most vocal in TikTok posts that have generated millions of views and comments.[4]

While the systems that churn through us are resilient, our power to quit will be louder and chip away at them. It's now said that 'Amazon could run out of workers in US in two years, internal memo suggests. With exceptionally high turnover, the company risks churning through available labor pool by 2024'[5]

4 Jim Harter, "Is Quiet Quitting Real?," Gallup, September 6, 2022, ***https://www.gallup.com/workplace/398306/quiet-quitting-real.aspx***.

5 Michael Sainato, "Amazon could run out of workers in US in two years, internal memo suggests," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2022, ***https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jun/22/amazon-workers-shortage-leaked-memo-warehouse.***

Take our memetic manifesto as a call to action, a declaration that the revolution is not just on the horizon but unfolding in the pixels and memes of our digital existence.

As a worker performing against precarity, you should be next in recognizing the power of memetic discourse to shape a narrative of resistance, solidarity, and collective empowerment. The revolution is now, it's memed, and you're a part of it.

MEME ARCHIVE:



https://www.are.na/alina-lupu/performing-against-precarity-the-visuals

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THE MEME REMEMBERS: GREEK QUEER (ME)#ME_TOO MOVEMENT

SOCRATES STAMATATOS

In 2018, the Greek LGBTQIA+ community came together to confront systemic violence and police brutality after the tragic murder of activist and drag queen Zak Kostopoulos/Zackie Oh. Fast forward three years to 2021, amidst a second cruel and authoritarian lockdown, the #metoo movement gained momentum in Greece as Greek Olympic athlete Sofia Bekatorou bravely came forward with her account of sexual abuse, sparking a chain reaction of survivors sharing their own stories of abuse and abuse of power within the Greek artistic community. Both instances are of importance, as identity politics in Europe are usually discussed with a focus on a Northern European gaze, lacking the Southern European and Balkan context altogether.

The Greek Queer community swiftly rallied behind the #metoo victims, showcasing the power of intersectionality within marginalized groups facing systemic and patriarchal violence. Many members of the Greek LGBTQIA+ community even found the courage to come forward with their own stories of abuse, including instances of abuse within the Queer arts community. However, unlike the swift response to reports of abuse outside the community, reports of abuse within the Queer community were met with skepticism and fence-straddling by many.

Queer-owned meme and shitposting pages filled the void, creating a political discourse (Fig. 1) around the issue by posting anonymous and eponymous reports and using memes to bring attention to the issue (Fig. 2), while showing care for the victims. Unfortunately, the heat of the conversation started to wane after the initial reports, with most abusers never being deplatformed and some even resorting to victim-blaming. The victims not only never received justice, but they also had to come to terms with the fact that a large part of their own community turned their backs on them in their time of need. But the meme remembers…

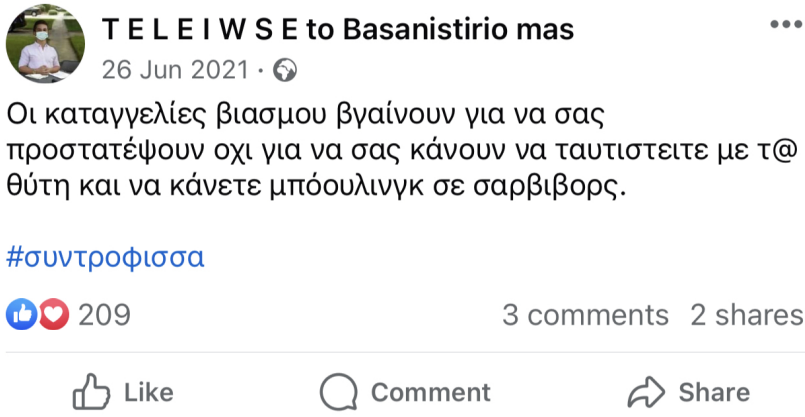


Fig. 1: Facebook post by meme/shitposting page "T E L E I W S E to Basanistirio mas". Translation: "Reports of sexual assault are not posted for you to sympathize with the abuser while bullying the survivors." *The name of the page "T E L E I W S E to Basanistirio mas" translates in English to "Our suffering has ended".*



Fig. 2: Meme posted by the queer-owned meme page "your local queer venting" on Instagram. Translation: "The Hot air balloon-bear says: no tolerance for rapists".

The Power of Memes in Intra-Community Discourses

LGBTQIA+ individuals often face distorted and caricatured portrayals that label them as deviant and immoral. These negative portrayals have been steadily on the rise in recent years and are related to the algorithmic rise of far-right, conservative and phobic propaganda that is widespread in many social media platforms and press. Furthermore, suppressive algorithms reinforce pre-existing human biases, leaving many LGBTQIA+ communities isolated even in the digital sphere.

This situation leads to a shared sense of trauma driven by the fear of perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing narratives. Within the LGBTQIA+ community, the fear of being vilified creates a struggle when openly addressing abusive behaviors from subjects within the community. These behaviors may align with conservative and prejudiced beliefs, making it difficult to effectively confront these issues. And this makes sense, as a report of abuse within an LGBTQIA+ community will strengthen outside-community negative perceptions. Furthermore, while necessary, such a report accredits a phobic narrative that activates a barrage of attacks towards the community. Yet the fear of vilification, however understandable, should not deter the community from tackling abusive behaviors head-on. Instead, each community should strive to develop collective languages of communication to confront these issues effectively.

In the context of the digital landscape, queer communities have discovered a source of comfort and empowerment by crafting new figurative languages, drawing from the plethora of tools offered by digitality. This phenomenon finds its most pronounced manifestation in the vibrant realm of digital art and the creative output of queer memers. With their compelling brevity and striking relatability, memes have firmly established themselves as potent instruments for unfettered expression, seamless communication, and insightful cultural commentary. Functioning as a dynamic form of 'vernacular creativity,' memes actively facilitate collective participation and expressive engagement within the LGBTQIA+ community and beyond.

LGBTQIA+ people can dispel stereotypes and reclaim ownership of their own stories by utilizing the figurative language found in memes. Memes provide a perspective to help us see others and ourselves in a nuanced way, enabling a deeper understanding of the various identities present in our community. They give people the ability to authentically shape their narratives by challenging stereotypes that are frequently held and encouraging us to reexamine our beliefs.

Furthermore, memes offer a distinctive platform for navigating challenging communal conversations. Taking on sensitive subjects such as abuse within the Queer community requires a cautious approach that promotes openness and empathy. Memetic communication creates a safe space where community members can engage in dialogues by using metaphorical language as a softer medium to start conversations without feeling hostile. This figurative language gives subjects the ability for a grounded yet experiential communication, as they

can express shared feelings and emotions without the complex and usually limiting structure of written words. Memes' creative nature becomes the voice that encapsulates feelings, emotions, thoughts, and ideas that for many reasons can't be said or written the traditional way.

The strength of memes' meta-language lies in their capacity to promote a feeling of community and camaraderie among marginalized groups. By fostering an atmosphere where people actively support one another and fight for systemic change, this shared experience fosters solidarity and fortifies community ties. This proves that memes can function as artivist media, enabling people to participate in activism in addition to being vehicles for expression. Activism that is deeply tied with artistic practices makes its own process more experiential and participatory, having both personal and interpersonal impact. By blending seemingly generic and widespread images with catchphrases/text into potent statements that question social norms and demand justice, memes increase the impact of artivism.

Artivist memes support reflective thinking and self-analysis, which constitute significant components of this specific meme genre. They invite viewers to decipher and examine the hidden messages and social commentary contained in what at first glance appear to be straightforward images or phrases. The community is pushed to be more reflective and understanding as a result of this engagement, which sparks conversations that surpass stereotypes and promote both personal and collective development. Memes are crucial for encouraging community cohesion and promoting social change, as demonstrated by the Greek Queer MeToo movement in the way the LGBTQIA+ community uses memes as a potent tool for reclaiming agency, fostering dialogue, and constructing a more inclusive narrative. But are they enough?

The Use of Memes in the Greek Queer #me_too Movement

The Greek Queer #me_too movement exemplifies how memes empower marginalized communities by providing a platform for expression, solidarity, and resistance. Abuse victims harnessed the power of memes to reclaim their narratives and demand accountability. Sharing memes became a form of activism, breaking the silence and bringing attention to the pervasive issue of abuse within the community. The meme and shitposting pages that were once there to create soothing and relatable content that summarized the queer experience quickly became activist hubs. Furthermore, meme/shitposting page owners, understanding the shameful perception of society towards victims, mastered the feature of anonymity that memetic creation offers so as to protect the victims while spreading the abuse reports for more people to know. Through their activity and meme creation, these pages demanded justice for the victims and pushed further for essential conversations within the community. There were memes that demanded a more intersectional and less pink-washing Pride; memes that insisted that Queer spaces (clubs, bars, political conventions) who stood by the abusers and not the victims apologize (Fig. 3); memes that served as remembrance for the political aspect of Queerness (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3: Meme posted by the queer-owned meme page "your local queer venting" on Facebook and Instagram. Translation: "This Pride month care to wear sunscreen when going outside, to carry a hat, to drink water and to boycott the drag shows of the abuser … as well as the shows of those who excuse their behavior. Love you all, except for rapists and rape apologists"

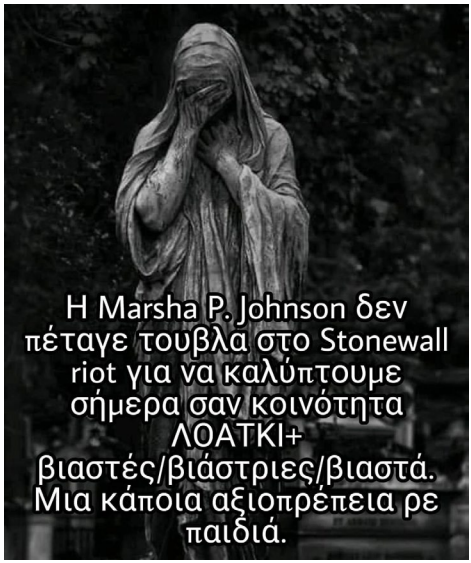


Fig. 4: Meme posted by the queer-owned meme page "your local queer venting" on Instagram. Translation: "Marsha P. Johnson wasn't throwing bricks at Stonewall, so we can today excuse -as an LGBTQIA+ community- rapists. Show some dignity kids."

One notable meme circulated by 'your local queer venting' encapsulates the essence of the movement, stating, 'We have created an environment where it is safer for the abusers to abuse than for the victims to report their abuse.' The following meme highlighted the urgency for change, exposing the unjust dynamics within the community and underlining the need for collective action.

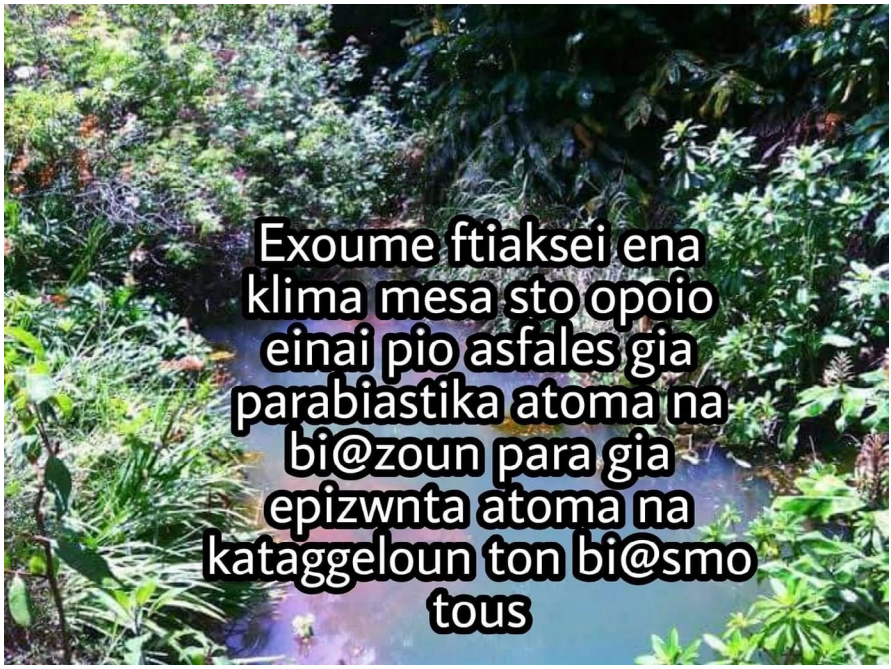


Fig. 5: Meme posted by the queer-owned meme page "your local queer venting", during the heat of the Greek Queer #metoo movement. Translation: "We have created an environment, where it is safer for the abusers to abuse, than for the victims to report their abuse."

Humor and satire were prominent features of the Greek Queer memes. They served as a means to navigate challenging conversations, provoke critical reflection, and challenge complicity. For instance, the meme posted by the queer-owned shitposting page 'T E L E I W S E to Basanistirio mas' portrays the societal transformation that would occur if individuals identified with the victim rather than the abuser. This meme questions prevailing discourse that normalizes and excuses abusive behavior, urging the community to shift their perspective and empathize with survivors.



Fig. 6: Meme posted by the queer-owned shitposting page "T E L E I W S E to Basanistirio mas". Translation: "Our society if, instead of identifying with the abuser- through a theoretical discourse that normalizes and excuses abusive behavior-, we identified with the victim of violent and abusive behavior".

Most of these meme/shitposting pages became gradually less active since 2021, and as of today they are totally inactive with little to no new material posted or reshared (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Last instagram post, posted by "your local queer venting" on 14th of May 2022. Translation: "Good evening, I haven't been active here in months, how is everybody, tell me what's new", "Instagram user; Hiiii everything's shit (fire emoji)", "oof, I hope everything will turn fine soon"

This alone cannot provide enough information on whether these pages gained momentum and engagement based strictly on the isolation of their audience because of the COVID-19 quarantine that coincided with the outburst of the Greek #metoo. Although based on the handling of the abuse reports by the public, it is clear that meme and shitposting pages alone could not have handled the service of justice to the Greek Queer #metoo. This process proved to be unjust for the victims as well as the page owners that were called to take on the weight that the community was obligated to carry. This is a process that was, and continues to be, a community commitment: to ensure the caring and healing process of the victims, and to secure the sustainable existence of the meme/shitposting pages as community safe spaces and artistic powerhouses. The frustration of meme creators towards the lack of community response is also prevalent in the gradual change of style of the Greek Queer #metoo memes towards those that were last posted. Memers latterly opted for formats where the background styles became more abstract, giving a primary role to the text. The figurative language that was acquired in the beginning of the movement was sacrificed for a more literal language, laden with the hopes for responsibility assumption from the community (Fig. 8., Fig. 9.)

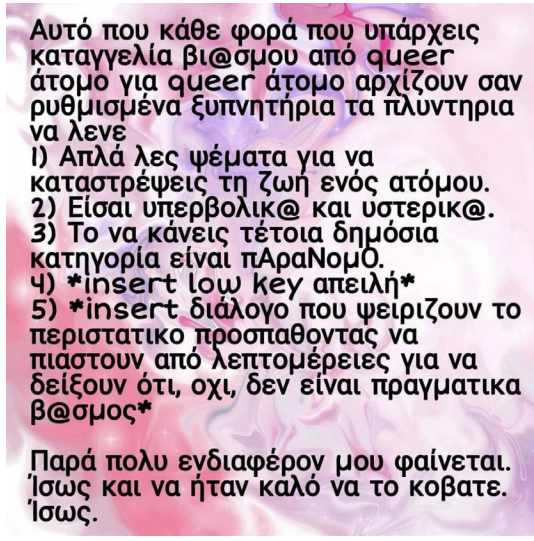


*Fig. 8: One of the last memes regarding the Greek Queer #metoo posted by the queer-owned meme page "your local queer venting" on Instagram. Translation: "Every time an abuse report involving a queer person abusing a queer person comes out, apologists act like a set of alarm clocks saying the following: 1) You are lying so as to destroy someone's life, 2) You are being too much and you are full of hysteria, 3) To report an abuse publicly is illegal, 4) *inserts low key threat*, 5) *inserts discussion where they dissect the report of abuse in detail, so as to prove that the incident is not sexual assault*. This is very interesting to me. Maybe you should cut it off. Maybe.*

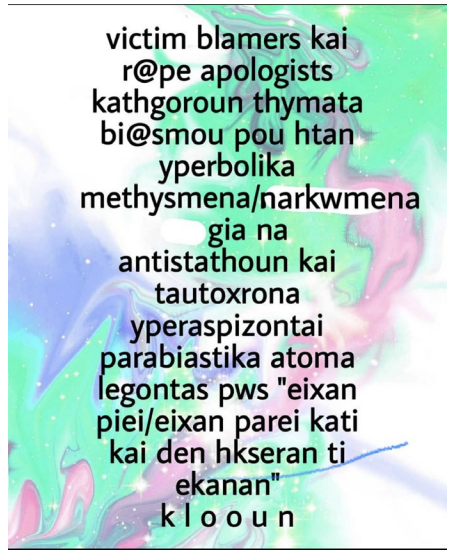


Fig. 9: One of the last memes regarding the Greek Queer #metoo posted by the queer-owned meme page "your local queer venting" on Instagram. Translation: "victim blamers and rape apologists are accusing victims of sexual abuse that were under the influence for not resisting, meanwhile they defend violators saying that they were drunk, and they were unable to understand the responsibility of their actions."

Archival and Artivist Media With Limits

As Milner describes them,

> Memes [are] a means to transform established cultural texts into new ones, to negotiate the worth of diverse identities, and to engage in unconventional arguments about public policy and current events. Memes [are] a mix of old inequalities and new participation.[1]

They are not merely transient forms of communication, but also serve as artivist and archival media, preserving the collective memory and history of social movements. They capture the emotions, experiences, and aspirations of a community, providing a tangible record of resistance and resilience. But there is more there than meets the eye…

In the case of the Greek Queer #me_too movement, memes did in fact archive the struggles, narratives, and demands of survivors. By transforming traumatic experiences into shareable

1 Ryan M. Milner, "The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media," PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2012), iii.

content, they attempted to allow the construction of a shared memory that would not be easily forgotten. Sadly though, the situation has been forgotten. Even if the memes remember, and although most of them remain intact somewhere inside the algorithm, the majority of abuse reports have been taken down, or they are extremely difficult to find. Furthermore, there are no recorded conversations, talks, panels, or any other action taken to preserve this historical moment for the Greek Queer community. This proves that there is not enough tangible context that these memes can rest upon. It seems that their archival character was either ephemeral, or that there was more to be done for the memes to preserve this character.

So, what precisely do these memes represent? Let's first examine the proposition that they serve as an archive. The Greek Queer #metoo movement illustrates that this archive is intricate, akin to something ghostlike. An analogy to consider is the experience of stumbling upon an old, abandoned building. In such instances, we instinctively attempt to conjure images of the people who once occupied the space—ghosts. However, this analogy poses a challenge because the abandoned building provides a context; we envision ghosts within that specific setting, lending a degree of accuracy. In the case of memes, we have the spectres but lack the 'building'—the context—just ghosts awaiting recognition. This limitation raises the question of whether the perception of memes as a ghostly archive will always encounter a barrier. Ghosts, in this metaphor, can communicate and offer signs, but a 'ghost' identity inherently requires a death factor, whether literal or metaphorical. Accepting memes as a ghost archive may imply that little to no action can be taken: as they are deemed already 'dead', the only action as ghosts is for them to haunt us back.

Alternatively, what if we perceive memes as a living archive? Comparable to any living organism, this repository breathes, lives, and at times resides in a slower, more passive state of slumber. Could this serve as the perspective through which we approach them? Picture a living organism that encompasses feelings, memories, stories, shared struggles, and joys. By recognizing this archive as a living entity, we must acknowledge that certain circumstances may be overlooked, preventing it from ever attaining a state of full completion or arrest.

Crucially, if we consider this archive as alive, we not only unlock the potential for revisiting and reapproaching it but also pave the way for its potentially infinite expansion. In a 'living state,' akin to any other being, an archive can engage with other 'living things,' including us and other archives. So, what if the interaction that is fueled by their living state is the one that we should focus on?

In this dynamic perspective, memes become not just static artifacts or ghosts, but active agents in the ongoing dialogue of the living. Their role as catalysts for action transcends their individual impact, weaving into the fabric of broader interactions within living communities. As memes engage with other living elements, including us and other archives, they stimulate a collective exchange of ideas and experiences.

While they can raise awareness, spark conversations, and foster solidarity, memes alone cannot bring about comprehensive systemic change. Memes should be seen as catalysts for action rather than the end goal. They should be seen as pieces of an intersectional puzzle that, when completed, is able to provide for a community's prosperity. Understanding intersectionality is crucial for contemporary movements, as it provides the tools to create infrastructures for any potential crisis. Intersectionality, when applied correctly in the corpus of a movement's actions, borrows from the knowledge of past events to avoid repeating the same mistakes. It is of vital significance for every marginalized community to translate the momentum generated by memes or any other artistic medium into sustained activism, policy reform, and support-care systems for victims of abuse. As Wendy Chun states, 'Comfort and care are not comfortable. Homophilic spaces are often agitated spaces of comforting rage. To move beyond this, we need to acknowledge discomfort as a way to create new forms of connection and co-habitation'.[2] And yes, we need to acknowledge in these situations memes as tools that are a product of care, the rest is action, and action is us to take.

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Chun, Wendy H. K. *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods and the New Politics of Recognition*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021.

Ryan M. Milner, "The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media." PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2012.

2 Wendy H. K. Chun, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods and the New Politics of Recognition* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 244.

BRAKE THE MEME MACHINE: SLOW CIRCULATION, 'Z' GESTURE, AND PRO-WAR PROPAGANDA ON TIKTOK

ELENA PILIPETS AND MARLOES GEBOERS

In one of the videos posted in response to a trending TikTok dance challenge, a young woman performs a series of gestures. The performance is accompanied by a catchy tune, culminating as her hands shape the letter Z. In a similar video, another woman wearing sunglasses replicates the gesture when a sticker in Russian emerges, reading 'The gang sign of real women'. In yet another variation, the gesture repeats with an added video effect, flash-enlarging the final position of fingers decorated with long acrylic nails. The nails extend the gesture. The video caption proclaims, 'Russian Lives Matter'.

Z, however, is not a typical viral TikTok challenge. A trusted identity marker for Putin's supporters that lingers on the pro-war side of TikTok, it reverberates itself into being by pretending that it has an audience of its own. Its normcore look, aiming to blend into the crowd of aspiring influencers, conveys the message that Z stands for the many. Film yourself Z-ing, add a song from the music library, put a sticker, and post. Not 'Russian' enough? Search for Katyusha, select a trending version, use #viral hashtags, and publish. The collective body of Z is a broken meme machine — too scripted to feel authentic, it feeds forward attention that clusters on already visible content. By incorporating popular elements (songs, hashtags, effects) in anticipation of new adaptations, Z templates serve as a means of targeted bonding. The logic is simple: trial, error, remix.

In this piece, we 'brake' the meme machine behind the 'Z' gesture. Following Boler and Davis's notion of propaganda 'by other means',[1] we make a case for examining Z in its role as a symbolic and affective vehicle. We propose that, within TikTok's participatory environments, Z simulates a community that thrives on the replication of the seemingly banal. Unlike the painted sign on the military vehicles invading Ukraine, it primarily exists to distract from the plain terror of the Russian 'special military operation'.[2]

As speed and imitation on TikTok breathe life into memes, the methods in our work foreground analytical techniques of video blurring and 'slow' circulation.[3] Using a blend of visual

1 Megan Boler and Elisabeth Davis, "Introduction: Propaganda by Other Means," in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means,* ed. Megan Boler and Elisabeth Davis (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1-50.

2 Holodomor Museum, "Propaganda that kills," Holodomor Museum, 2022, Accessed May 2023, https://holodomormuseum.org.ua/en/propaganda-categ/z-new-swastika/.

3 Jonathan L. Bradshaw, "Slow Circulation: The Ethics of Speed and Rhetorical Persistence," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, no. 5 (2018): 479-498.

and contextual fabrication, the analytical artifacts discussed below freeze the rhythm and disrupt the performance. By decelerating and reversing the movement, 'Z braking' drives the gesture ad absurdum. Ultimately, it provides room for reflection, aiming to counteract the viral dynamics inherent in online environments.

Memeification: Z is a Symbolic and Affective Vehicle

Opaque in its origins and (intended) meanings, Z (and V) symbolism have been visual 'vehicles' of symbolic power ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The markings on the board of military equipment were initially referred to by military parties as signs to avoid friendly fire, where Z would signal the Russian 'zapad' (westwards) and V would point out the east-bound infantry or 'vostok'. Z especially was quickly adopted and reappropriated in propaganda slogans, tethered to Russia's remembrance of World War II: first in the usual spelling, for example, '**за мир**' or 'for peace' and then with the replacement of the Cyrillic '**з**' in hashtags with the Latin '**z**'—**#zамир**.[4] In the process of mainstreaming, it has taken the colors of the Saint George ribbon, visually conflating past and present and framing the war in Ukraine as part of a continuous 'Russian' fight against Nazism.

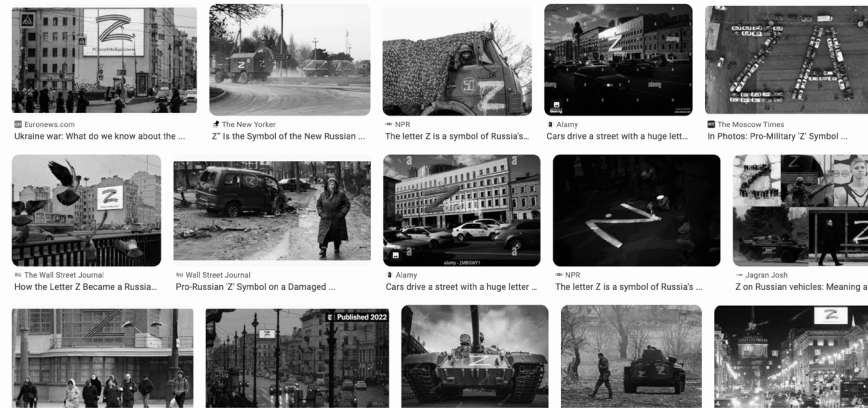


Fig. 1: Z environments according to Google Images

On social media, Z is first and foremost an embodied performance. The utilization of 'Z' imagery, hashtags, and hand gestures have become integral to pro-Russian war propaganda, thriving on TikTok where imitation publics and the principles of replication and remix[5] play a significant role. While Z circulation hinges on chance encounters rather than

4 Alexey Kovalev, Andrey Pertsev, Andrey Serafimov, and Ilya Shevelev, "'Z' How Russia transformed a letter of the Latin alphabet into the official (and ominous) symbol of its invasion of Ukraine," *Meduza*, March 17,2022, Accessed September 2023, ***https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/03/16/z***.

5 Diana Zulli, David J. Zulli, "Extending the Internet meme: Conceptualizing technological mimesis and imitation publics on the TikTok platform," *New Media & Society* 24, no. 8 (2022): 1872-1890 ,

on mass appropriation, the memetic traits of videos associated with the gesture remain remarkably consistent. Attuned to existing platform trends, Z strategically positions itself amidst 'currently happening' content. Imagine female 'warfluencers' in a challenge: Are the nails done? Camera on? Music selected? Two stickers replicated across a series of performances compare 'The gang sign of 'that girl from Patriki' to 'The gang sign of *real women*'. Strike a pose!

The participatory methods of TikTok Z propaganda are therefore less a question of sheer scale. The 'gang sign' videos containing a reference to a Russian 'girl from Patriki' meme, mock affluent women in Moscow's posh Patriarch's Ponds area for their materialistic lifestyle. Inspired by the global 'that girl' meme, Patriki girls project an image of having their lives in order—waking early, eating well, exercising, and strictly adhering to schedules. The posts then draw up an ambivalent message by way of juxtaposition: Z women are distancing themselves from 'that girl from Patriki', a girl that has come to stand for 'inauthenticity' and 'elitism'. Contrasting 'real women' with 'that girl', the Z gesture attempts to fortify the idea of 'Russianness' as a symbolic counterpoint to the perceived 'enemy' of the 'spoiled' West.



Fig. 2: Blur 1

https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820983603..

The reference to 'not being that girl' cues the interpretation of the 'Z female', who embodies stereotypical attractiveness but intends to be perceived as more genuine, despite her well-groomed eyebrows, enhanced lips, luxury accessories, and meticulously maintained long nails. It is precisely this ambivalence that serves as boundary work; those who can relate represent true patriotic dedication, while those who cannot still hold value as they generate engagement, even if it's through mockery or outrage. The interplay of gender and gesture in this body-image-affect constellation is key. By intersecting with already existing popular challenges and songs from Tiktok's music library, Z videos cast a wide net: anything that doesn't resonate will likely repel, contributing to the propagandist purpose

Z Gesture as Embodied Networked Propaganda

The video performances in question have not achieved viral status, but they still exist as numerous content formations within the broader tapestry of TikTok trends. Search for a song trending in March 2022 and you most likely will find a Z video right next to an unrelated dance challenge. Designed for imitation, Z performances are ripe with viral ambitions. At the same time, their actual impact has remained limited partly because of their lack of authenticity and partly due to the emergence of the 'splinternet'—as of March 7, 2022, non-Russian IP addresses could no longer be accessed from Russia. The participatory means of propaganda are in place, along with an attempt to target emotions rather than reason. However, Z videos decorated with many likes and linked through hashtags and sounds amount to nothing more than a series of coordinated attempts at propaganda placement. A sense of national pride woven into these performances is a mere reference to an imagined collective – a crowd of like-minded others that exists as a projection.

A propaganda machine targeting an imagined audience often assumes that this audience – 'the crowd' – shares an identity or a common 'state of mind.' Vilem Flusser, writing in 1991, describes the capacity of gestures to capture 'states of mind' by releasing affects from their contexts and allowing them to become formal.[6] Affective states express themselves via a play of gesticulations. Conversely, gestures act out affects, asserting themselves through repetition. Both dynamics occur at the same time, manifesting in a 'state of mind' for those who can relate. Affect becomes artificial – as in someone rolling their eyes – and the gesture becomes a mediator of collective belonging.

Z performances on TikTok create an illusion of belonging by targeting audiences as if the collective of like-minded others already existed. The gesture – self-marketed as 'a gang sign of real women' – is both a symbolic move and an attempt at attention capture. By instrumentalizing characteristic influencer vernaculars, it conveys the message that Z is backed by many. Striking a Z pose on TikTok, akin to a public masquerade, can then be understood as a means of imagining a 'crowd' into being. Any particularities that estrange

6 Vilém Flusser, *Gestures* (London, University of Minnesota Press, 2014/1991).

seem to disappear. The body performing the gesture becomes a simulation of collective identity, a role that 'real women' play in the facilitation of 'belonging with the nation'.

Blurring Z: Braking the Meme Machine

If the movement of the body is the main means of memetic war propaganda on TikTok, the following questions arise: How does the body become a meme? What does it take to understand Z in its networked choreography? Given that the gesture accelerates affect, how can we 'brake' it? Ultimately, any action performed in public on repeat captures attention. Within the soundbite economy of short video sharing, the movement of the body drives the meme. It fuels the gesture with an affective overspill of sorts—much like animated GIFs utilize facial and bodily expressions, gestures on TikTok provide a playful medium for articulating sentiments, warnings, and instructions. Gesturing Z hands, as per McLuhan's old dictum, then not only 'massage the message'[7] into the masses but also seek to 'blend in' across a range of unrelated content formations. In the very act of video sharing, gestures extend into a remix, calling attention to the questions of potential amplification and slow circulation.[8]



Fig. 3: Blur 2



Fig. 4: Blur 3



Fig. 5: Blur 4

7 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An inventory of Effects* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

8 Bradshaw, "Slow Circulattion", p. 479.



Fig. 6: Blur 5



Fig. 7: Blur 6



Fig. 8: Blur 7

Analyzing Z performances as video memes, we reflect on the embodied aspect of propaganda through a technique of visual and contextual fabrication, which allows scholars to close-read networked video collections as de-identified composite forms.[9] Embedded in a TikTok post, an embodied performance can be modified and enhanced through overlays of sounds, effects, and stickers. These layers constitute the material with which the act of video sharing, including cutting, annotating, adding hashtags, etc., is engaged. Much like a flame that comes into contact with oxygen,[10] TikTok circulation through multi-modal digital elements distributes videos across contexts, increasing the gesture's memetic potential. The blur as a method of (in)distinction[11] deconstructs networked video performances into layers of distinct frames – still images that capture every second of the gesture as it unfolds. It then re-stacks the frames in a new order, disrupting (or retaining) the temporality of the movement. The resulting visual device morphs and transforms the gesture, akin to TikTok video effects, but with a difference: it freezes the movement and breaks its momentum. In other words, it throws the gesture out of gear, killing its memetic buzz.

Consider Z braking: hands, fingers, and nails end up all over the place, mouths are left wide open, mannerisms lose their edge, accessories appear grotesque, stickers and effects get lost in their own staged universe, repetitions come to light. The body – prepared to strike

9 Annette Markham, "Fabrication as Ethical Practice," *Information, Communication, and Society* 15, no. 3 (2012): 334-353.

10 Whitney Phillips, "The oxygen of amplification: Better practices for reporting on extremists, antagonists, and manipulators," *Data and Society,* May 22, 2018, Accessed September 2023, *https://datasociety.net/output/oxygen-of-amplification/*.

11 Elena Pilipets, "Hashtagging, Duetting, Sound-Linking: TikTok Gestures and Methods of (In) Distinction," *MAST* 4, no. 1 (April 2023): 109-135.

a pose – becomes a blurry projection. The blurring technique transfigures the meme, bricolage-style. It takes the oxygen out of the gestural assemblage, muting the strategically networked elements involved. With each new variation, the blur helps to account for the specificity of the gesture. By 'braking' the movement, it shows how certain attitudes become formalized into repeatable symbolic statements.

Resonances: Trial and Error

With faces, bodies, and hands moving to the beat of popular searchable tunes, Z derives its affective charge from repetition. Repetition, however, particularly in its relation to affect, is never merely instrumental. Rather, it involves a sense of mixed potentiality connected to a sociotechnical apparatus that gestures set into motion.[12] Aiming to modulate potential resonances between already established trends, the promotional workings of Z apparatus surf on the lure of popular TikTok hits. In doing so, 'the gang sign of real women' installs targeted affective encounters. Rooted in the coordinated use of the same video template in tandem with trending songs, hashtags, and effects, it sets up an audience that it fails to find. As it seeks affirmation, the gesture conceals the lack of its own engaging potential, contingent on the ability to resonate with others.

Resonance in this constellation does not imply that Z is met with the excitement of love for the nation that such memes intend to evoke. It may likewise disturb or register as something that involves 'ambiguous amalgamations of mixed feelings that both titillate and repel'[13]. Relational by default, resonance and dissonance can be experienced at the same time. While striving for other users' recognition, Z videos sharing the same embodied pattern give rise to different possibilities for attention capture: some curious clickers on TikTok may smirk at the (admittedly absurd) 'gang sign', while others may react with outrage. Some sounds will stick, and some bodies will align according to the promoted vision of national belonging. Others may not. Different expressive tonalities of the gesture will reflect different collective desires and anxieties in relation to war. The resultant modulations of Z propaganda can be seen as instances of trial and error, the success of which is contingent upon the likelihood of being 'discovered' by association with already established trends.

Crowd Simulations

The resulting reading of the gestural pattern across Z videos allows us to study the collapse of performing bodies into one networked simulation of a 'crowd'. The 'overdesigned' look and feel of these posts suggests a certain extent of coordination that was similarly observed in the videos of 180 TikTokers identified by the U.S.-based media watchdog Media Matters

12 Pilipets, "Hashtagging, Duetting, Sound-Linking", 110.

13 Susanna Paasonen, "Resonant Networks: On Affect and Social Media," in *Public Spheres of Resonance*, ed. Anne Fleig and Christian von Scheve (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 51.

in March 2022.[14] Abbie Richards published a report on the nearly-identical TikToks showing TikTokers holding an English-language sign that condemns 'Russophobia'. Akin to Z performances, the posts found by Media Matters include a similar video effect in combination with related hashtags. Teeming with typos, these videos contained Russian-language instructions in post captions, like 'You can publish, description: Russian Lives Matter.' The presence of different memetic references assembled by the hashtag suggests that 'the gang sign of real women' is part of a wider network of propaganda injections acted out through systematic cross-user riffing.[15]

Such 'crowd' simulations that Jodi Dean has described in her preface to the *Affective Politics of Digital Media* largely rely on complex networks that encourage inclusion, no matter how opaque or dispersed the amassed contributions – likes, comments, and adaptations – may be.[16] Orchestrations of Z gestures weaving in and out of wider formations of TikTok content derive from platform-native attention-grabbing techniques as much as they reflect user habits of navigation and trend hijacking. On TikTok, indeed, written and spoken words, bodies, images, and gestures overlap—Z videos repeat embodied performances of national coherence as people feel more compelled to respond to a show. Through strategic dissemination, Russian Lives Matter posts aim at engaging audiences who might stumble upon Z while browsing for unrelated content. Whether the whole performance of 'sharedness' is just a simulation does not matter. Confusion and outrage only add to the propagandist intention, feeding forward into the circulatory power of the social moving image.

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16 Jodi Dean, "Preface", in *Affective Politics of Digital Media: Propaganda by Other Means,* ed. Megan Boler and Elisabeth Davis (New York: Routledge, 2021), ix-xi.

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LIGHTWORK — BLACK MEMES' LIFE CYCLES AND FRAGMENTATION

ZAS IELUHEE

Have you ever ventured outdoors or accessed platforms like TikTok, only to encounter non-black individuals donning styles such as box braids or durags? Ever stumbled upon discourses on YouTube where the main focus was to discuss and dismantle the way Black History had been hijacked and ridiculed, only to witness it subsequently co-opted as a justification for white domination on a global scale? Instances such as these, involving items like 'protective hairstyles'[1], 'high value' men and women,[2] and Faith, are just a few examples of this phenomenon that is meme fragmentation.[3] NATO recognized its relevance in a study titled "It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare",[4] where researcher Jeff Giesea introduced memetic manipulation as a covert method for exerting influence over populations.

I contend that this concept is not a novel one, as an examination of historical instances such as the Arab-Muslim and European slave trades in Africa reveals the presence of pre-existing memetic warfare. The central focus of memetic warfare during such periods, as I discern, is the concept of divinity or *God*. Certainly, religion served as the initial foundation for the European colonial empire in Africa, enabling it to redirect the collective consciousness of African populations towards obedience to a white, heteronormative, and self-centered deity.[5] Slavery supported by religion gave rise to a phenomenon I refer to

1 Protective hairstyles were originally utilized by (Black) women who embraced the 'natural hair' movement (formerly known as the 'nappy' movement) primarily to safeguard their vulnerable kinky hair from the harshness of the Western winter. However, this term was later exploited by non-Black individuals, enabling them to appropriate the hairstyles initially created by the women who pioneered the movement.
See also: Team ARD, "Respect the Roots of Black Hair," *Anti-racism Daily*, August 11, 2022, ***https://the-ard.com/2022/08/11/hair-discrimination-and-appropriating-black-hair/***.

2 The terms 'high value' men and women represent an implicit endorsement of the capitalist lifestyle. While they uphold a luxurious and abundant way of life for those who adhere to them, they nonetheless overlook the lived reality of individuals with dark skin, unambiguous black people across the globe. Furthermore, I believe they fail to acknowledge the urgency surrounding the widespread genocide and exploitation faced by these individuals.

3 Zas Ieluhee (alias), "Mem'éthique." *AssiégéES*, no. 5 (2022): 26. Accessed September 7, 2023. ***https://issuu.com/assiege-e-s/docs/maquette_web?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=www.xn--assig-e-s-e4ab.com***.

4 Jeff Giesea, "It's time to embrace memetic warfare," *Defence Strategic Communications* 1 (2016): 67-75. DOI: 10.30966/2018.RIGA.1.4.

5 I include this song as a reference because its video illustrates the rather limited spectrum of future prospects that are typically portrayed for the majority of Black individuals residing in Western societies.
OSHUN, "Protect Your Self Ft. Proda (Official Video)," April 14, 2016, YouTube video, 0:00:44,

as the *meme fragmentation* process, wherein fundamental concepts are molded to align with the ideals associated with this very narcissistic deity.

The primary case of fragmentation that I highlight pertains to the concept of the *human being*. How is the human being currently perceived within their embodiment? It's not unusual to witness them being either idealized or simply denigrated by the very individuals we consider humans today: that is, ourselves. I connect this to adherence to the values of an *exophysical religion*[6] because, here, our self-perceptions waver between *devaluation* and *disillusionment*,[7] to the extent that it becomes challenging for us to genuinely feel compassion for ourselves.[8] And, in the absence of compassion, violence takes root. Namely, via the pursuit of perfectionism, hustle culture,[9] toxic patriarchy, and so on. It is crucial to understand that the scales at which these memes exist, evolve, and fragment can range from an isolated individual to the entire planet.

To the best of my current understanding, for a meme to undergo significant fragmentation it must experience a *viral* phase. In essence, it needs to be linked to any event witnessed by a substantial audience. Consequently, it is widely shared and integrated (whether or not in exact copy) by a considerable population within a relatively short time frame.

In the context of *exophysical religions*, the viral phases during which their values and motivations were disseminated through their cosmogonies and practices are intertwined with the various waves of colonization, historically termed *pacification.*[10] The violence

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYBRappkqSc.

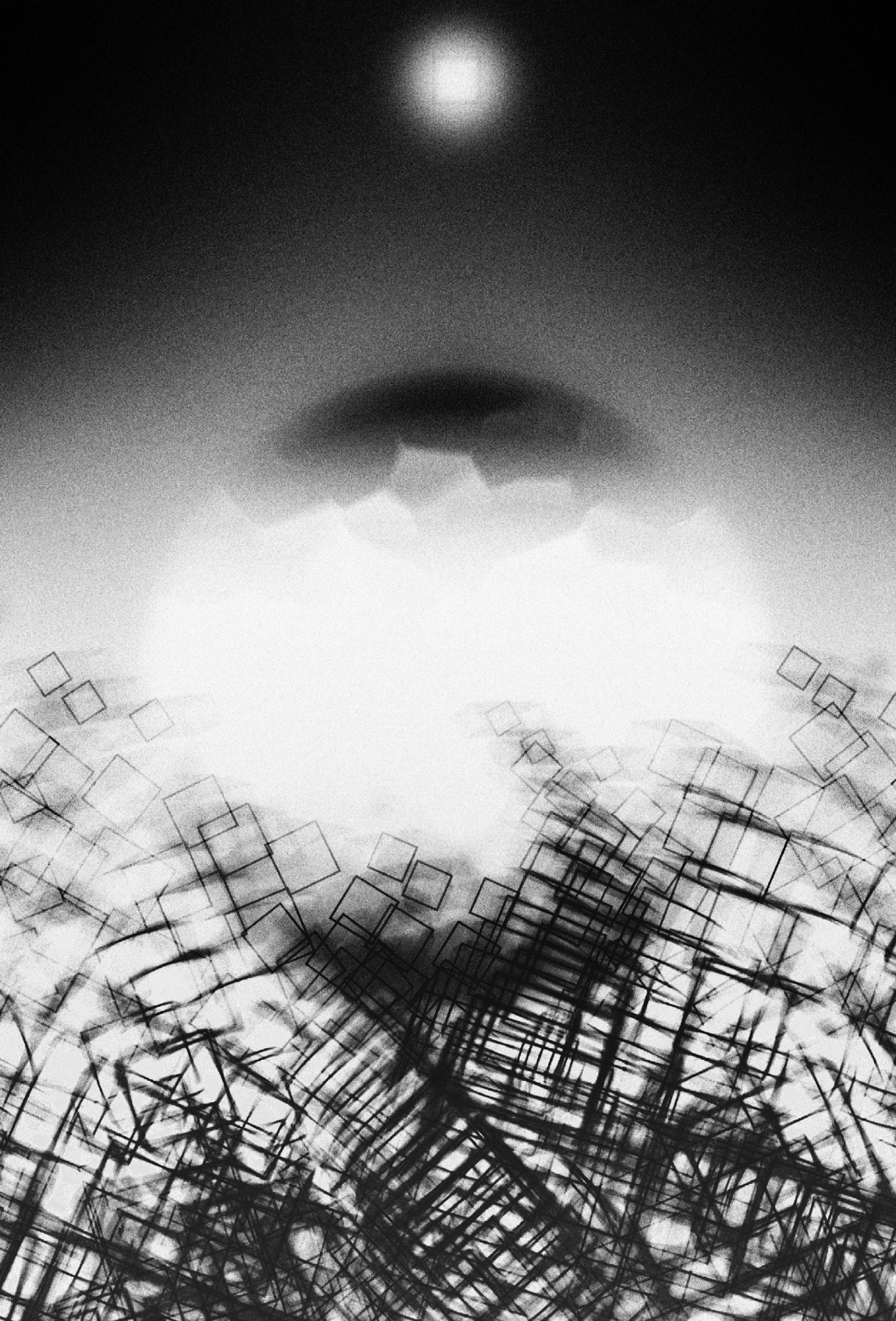
6 i.e. Abrahamic religions. From the Greek 'exo,' meaning 'outside,' and 'physis,' translated as 'nature.' *Outside of the realm of the living*.
See also: Botdushka, "Unveiling the Secrets of Our Local Ethers," June 15, 2023, YouTube video, 0:03:00, *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0qwxzC1z7E*.

7 Which is what highly insecure narcissists tend to do, because they do not know how to regulate their self-perception and emotions. It then leads them to project and condemn.

8 That is also why people are reporting more and more feeling lonely, and not having friends.
Noreena Hertz, "Op-Ed: We're in the Midst of a Global Loneliness Crisis. Here's how We Can End It," *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 2021, *https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-07-11/lonely-century-global-crisis-loneliness*.

9 'The glorification of working very long hours in hope of reaching one's professional goals while having a disregard for their health, and relationships with loved ones.'
Heyitsj000, "Hustle Culture," Urban Dictionary, May 31, 2020, *https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Hustle%20Culture*.

10 Colonial 'peacemaking' was presented at the time as an effective process for resolving conflicts. Since then, historians have shown that the term is ambiguous and has many meanings, which is why it is often used with inverted commas. From the start, its semantic ambiguity was structural, with the term 'pacification' concealing that of war. But from 1880 onwards, the term took on a new flavor. Intended to transcend colonization, it took on a republican dimension that it had neglected up until then. 'Peacemaking' thus became a normative political concept that made it possible to justify war under the guise of protecting populations.
See also: Julie D'Andurain, "Résolution Des Conflits Au Début Du XXe Siècle : « Pacification » Ou Émergence d'une Pensée Tactique Ethno-centrée," *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 792 (2017): 53. Accessed October 7, 2023. *https://www.cairn.info/revue-defense-nationale-2016-7-page-53.html*.



characterizing most of these waves highlights how colonial powers efficiently promoted the massive fragmentation of memes, a practice that continues today through recurring violence and trauma. In today's information-sharing landscape, social networks play a central role, serving as a daily source of information for many. This has given rise to terms such as *fake news, deepfakes,* and re-introduced concepts like *challenges, filters, friends,* and *followers* into our consciousnesses.

In the same process, these terms have been fragmented by being stripped of their original contexts, only to be reintroduced with virtually no tangible meaning, and thus rendered dispossessed of the latter. But just because a meme is fragmented doesn't mean it's become obsolete — quite the contrary. Often, it helps to fuel the neuroses and disillusionment that are exacerbated by the deterioration of our planet and living conditions to a degree that surpasses imagination. Many individuals discover meaning in fantastical or simply embittered narratives. And as the saying goes, *like attracts like*: like-minded people come together, and from these unions, *cultures*[11] are born, re-born, and branch out at *lightspeed.*[12]

The Origins of Meme Fragmentation

My fascination with memetics and memetic warfare deepened as I recognized within it a conflict that had endured for over a millennium on my continent, yet had only recently been afforded a formal designation. Indeed, in much of my research,[13] it is not uncommon for me to assert that Black people, apart from the white community, exhibit the most overt manifestations of racism, which can be attributed to the historical traumas endured and the ongoing daily challenges we face in this day and age. From texturism and featurism to colorism, we bear the enduring consequences of European colonization as some of its most profound victims. These repercussions are further explored as 'memetic infection' by scholar Wade W. Nobles in his work titled *The Island of Memes*. Nobles utilizes the Haitian revolution as a central illustration to elucidate the profound psychological and physical trauma experienced not only by the descendants of slaves now identified as Haitians, but also on a broader scale by Africans and their diaspora.[14]

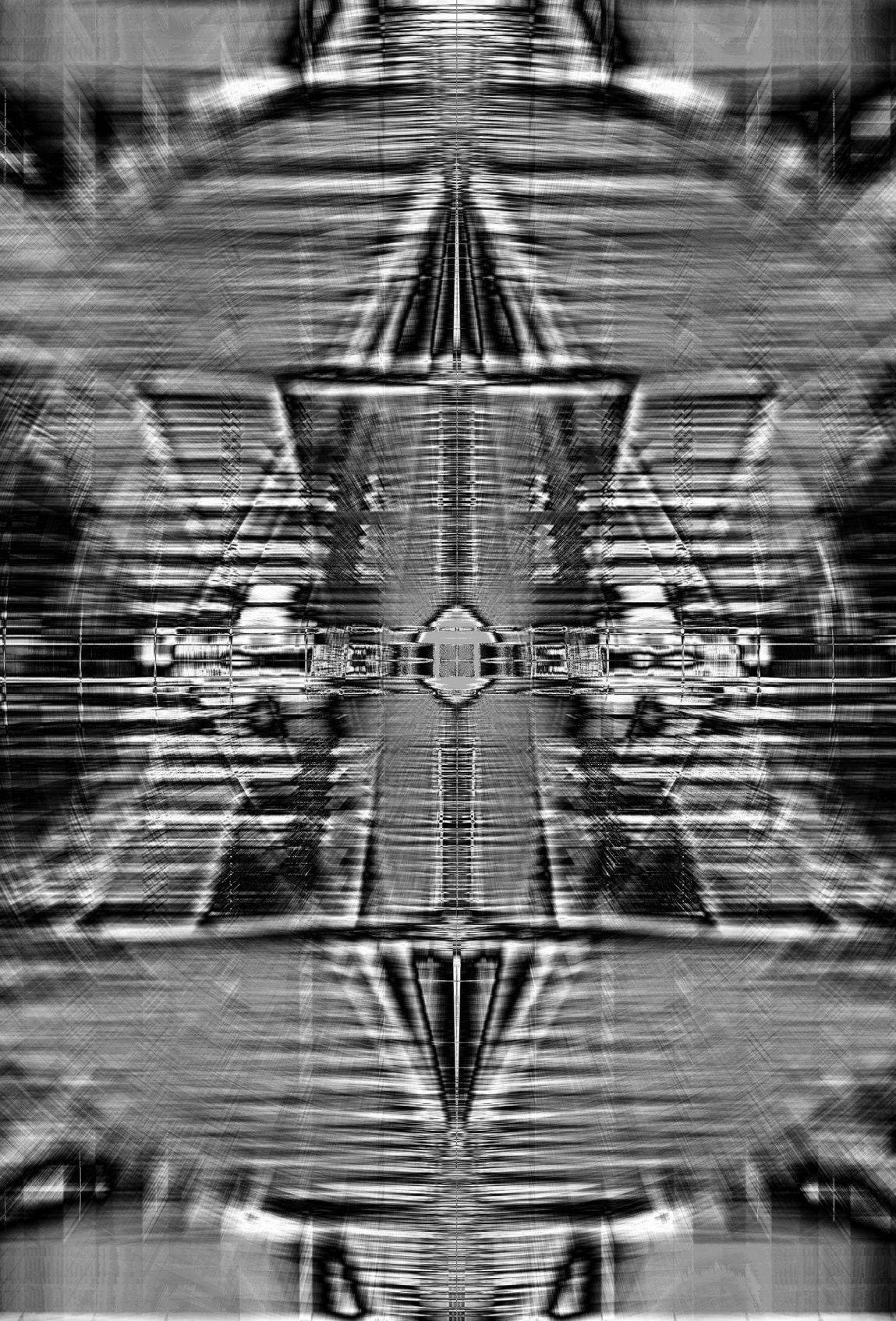
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11 Crack culture is a good example of what meme fragmentation can look like, as it often relies on the use and misappropriation of concepts transplanted into unlikely circumstances. Numisma, "Crack," Urban Dictionary, August 13, 2015, ***https://www.urbandictionary.com/author.php?author=Numisma***.

12 See also: Leo Armada, "What The Internet Did to Jujutsu Kaisen," YouTube video, December 22, 2023, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsyEVti7amw***.

13 Botdushka, "-isms Made Simple: What You Need To Know," YouTube video, March 14, 2023, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Siwyq0FYdyk***.

14 The Philippe Matthews Show, "Dr. Wade W. Nobles on HAPI, Black Psychology and the Island of Memes," October 25, 2017, YouTube Video, 32:17:00, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqqxCQd3VO8***.



The fragmentation of memes also favors the creation of cultures such as that of the 'passport bros',[15] and serves as a clear indication of universal discontent and disunity within our communities, where toxic relationships have become commonplace.

Who are they? The term or meme 'passport bro' has been coined to depict primarily African-American men who exhibit characteristics akin to 'incels' and seek to court and potentially wed foreign women.[16] Most of the time, the women targeted by these men are from countries in the global south and are perceived as possessing traits deemed by these men as more *traditional*, *submissive*, and financially *subordinate*. These women are frequently regarded as ideal targets, given their presumed unfamiliarity with the men's habits and shortcomings, making them more likely to tolerate them. Consequently, these women are often infantilized and underestimated by the 'passport bros.' This phenomenon bears resemblance to the *modus operandi* of white men engaged in sex tourism, who gravitate towards economically disadvantaged and less developed nations, leveraging their significant financial advantage as a means of exerting control within their relationships. This, in turn, enables them to engage in sociopathic or outright criminal behavior with minimal consequences.

Ironically (but not so much), their case is yet another example of the memetic infection suffered by people of African descent such as myself. For this is nothing more than a simple application of the misogynist rhetoric that is propagated throughout the world by Toxic White patriarchy, of which women are the first victims. These relationships not only manifest a glaring disregard for us Black women, but also underscore a prevailing sense of powerlessness experienced by Black men in contemporary Western society. This frustration often leads them to project their bitterness onto their feminine counterparts in an attempt to assert a semblance of control that they perceive as lacking in their daily lives.[17]

This cycle of abuse did not originate within our communities, but rather in Europe. Given that its inhabitants were and still are our most violent executioners,[18] I believe it is crucial to understand that their colonial enterprise began at the very heart of their societies. Indeed, it is a phenomenon that I trace back to the *witch-hunt* enterprise,

15 Cynthia G, "Becky Exposed the Real Reason The Passport Bros No Longer Have Dating Option In This Country," March 24, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TfJrno4Axg***.

16 Gladio, "Passport Bros." Urban Dictionary, February 12, 2023, ***https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Passport%20bros***.

17 In an effort to maintain concision, I have intentionally provided an overview of the subject in this article. Consequently, I encourage you to delve deeper into the sources I have cited in the footnotes for a more comprehensive understanding.

18 From the CFA to the French military presence in Africa, there is a general feeling of fed-up with the French invasion that is constantly impoverishing our countries.
See also: Fanny Pigeaud, "And now Get Lost, France!," *Le Monde Diplomatique,* April 2020, , Accessed September 16, 2023, ***https://mondediplo.com/2020/04/06francafrique***.

created in the era of the old French regime characterized by a tripartite division of society into *nobility*, *clergy*, and the *Third Estate*.[19] I see the emergence of misogyny as a cultural meme and systemic force deeply grounded in this time in history. Our social order is but an iteration of theirs. The Renaissance era witnessed the culmination of this trend, notably during the period from approximately 1560 to 1630.[20] During this time, and since the conclusion of the Middle Ages around 1200 AD, Western European states adopted *the systematic persecution and murder of women and children* in the name of the Catholic Christian faith, primarily through religious inquisitions incorporated into their legal frameworks. Simultaneously, these events marked a rift perceived as irreparable today between 'humankind' and nature.[21] [22]

This is the genesis of the 'us versus them' paradigm, representing a perspective that perceives the world in a binary, often narcissistic manner. It sets the self as inherently 'good' in contrast to others categorized as 'bad.' This viewpoint is notably simplistic, lacking the nuance and empathy required to comprehend the circumstances and *motivations of others*. This can be regarded as the genesis of the argument that presently diminishes the humanity of dark-skinned individuals. Or, as revealed once more by today's current events, the humanity of those with a different faith.

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins delves into the meme of *God*, which he characterizes as a 'memeplex' — a set of memes that owes its survival in the consciousness of mankind to the fear of hell.[23] This is where I criticize his theory: by defining the concept of *God* in this way, he denies and ignores the way God has often been defined in our[24] ancestral religions for thousands of years. Take, for example, the Igbo religion, *Ifa*, which was behind the concept of Oshun, Yemeya, Sango, and Eshu (later misconstrued as *Jesus's evil twin* under Christian settlers' influence),[25] owners of the crossroads, most recently popularized by singer Beyoncé in her short film *Black is King* (2020). In this religion and science, the Igbos depict God as neither male nor female, surpassing the notions of gender and time, and conveying their genesis through *symbolism*. This is the story of

19 Harrison W. Mark, "Les Trois Ordres De La France Pré-révolutionnaire," trans. Babeth Étiève-Cartwright, World History Encyclopedia, March 7, 2022, ***https://www.worldhistory.org/trans/fr/2-1960/les-trois-ordres-de-la-france-pre-revolutionnaire/***.

20 RTS Découverte, "Histoire De La Chasse Aux Sorcières," RTS, October 16, 2017, ***https://www.rts.ch/decouverte/monde-et-societe/histoire/sorcellerie/9092017-histoire-de-la-chasse-aux-sorcieres.html***.

21 Adunola the Oracle, "BIRTH OF WHITE GREAT MOTHER'S REVENGE! ⃠(REPOSTED)," October 29, 2022, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAmvTtAshDA***.

22 Botdushka, "Unveiling the Secrets of Our Local Ethers | GOT IT (BONUS EPISODE)," June 14, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0qwxzC1z7E***.

23 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

24 Black and Indigenous people.

25 Grace Graham-Taylor, "Eshu: The Yoruba God of Mischief," Book Browse, August 1, 2012, ***https://www.bookbrowse.com/mag/btb/index.cfm/book_number/4344/chronicles-from-the-land-of-the-happiest-people-on-earth***.

Chi and Eke,[26] two complementary forces at the origin of the universe. The idea of God as a transcendent entity that predates our human identities on Earth is not exclusive to Ifa, as it is present in various African religions within numerous pre-colonial communities and nations, exemplified by the Dogon people's myth of *Amma,*[27] which serves as their cosmogony.[28] In this narrative, Amma symbolizes existence beyond the confines of time, taking the form of an egg and subsequently giving birth to twins, Ogo and Nommo, who together embody both feminine (Nommo) and masculine (Ogo) energies.

These principles find their expression through the guidance and embodiment of wisdom by revered figures, including spiritual leaders within traditions such as the *Dogon*, *Ifà*, *Sangoma*, or the *Lak'Nsì* among the Bamilekes—which is the tradition from which I originate. They intend to foster an environment where the minds and hearts of their communities and fellow countrymen remain receptive to a diverse range of self-expressions. In contrast to a set of arbitrary directives such as 'thou shall not steal,' these religions typically define transgressions as actions contrary to one's moral integrity.[29] This is a meme now almost lost, fragmented as it is by being replaced by commandments, a list of orders declaring total submission always to this Christian, Abrahamic God, a deity characterized as jealous and willing to inflict suffering upon 'His people' to reinforce their faith. In my humble opinion, this is a *narcissistic god.*[30]

In my perspective, this represents a form of *predictive programming.*[31] A concept coined by American conspiracy theorists like Alan Watts,[32] predictive programming posits that governments employ media such as television, movies, and literature to introduce ideas or scenarios to the public, which they later intend to materialize in the future. This strategic use of media enables contemporary governments to garner public acceptance for events that might otherwise be perceived as outlandish or even *inhumane*. In this context, we can discern a distinction between two paradigms: the first, where individuals, viewed as fragments of God on Earth, possess the freedom to express themselves openly and unrestrainedly, transcending contemporary constraints such as those of gender and age. The second paradigm expects individuals to confine their existence and expressions within predefined boundaries, often at the peril of social exclusion or suppression.

26 The Medicine Shell, "Chi Explained - Igbo Cosmology," September 28, 2020, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dXT1myhxeY***.

27 Harold Scheub, *A Dictionary of African Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

28 A tale which depicts the origins of the Cosmos, the Universe.

29 Oláléyẹ , Samuel K. "Sin and Atonement in Relation to Obì Èsè (Reparation of Sin) in Yorù Bá Indigenous Religions as Viewed by Òsè Ìre□tè in Ifá Divination." *Specialty Journal of Religious Studies and Theology* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1-12.

30 Botdushka, "Unveiling the Secrets.", ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0qwxzC1z7E***.

31 Dahria Beaver, "Predictive Programming," The Psychology of Extraordinary Beliefs, The Ohio State University, April 18, 2018, https://u.osu.edu/vanzandt/2018/04/18/predictive-programming/.

32 Alan Watt, "Predictive Programming." Audio file at Internet Archive, October 23, 2006, ***https://Archive.Org/Details/Alan-watt-blurb-predictive-programming-nov-232006***.

I identify the first as a pre-colonial African reality, while the second represents our present-day reality, where we are limited and constrained by *Cartesian*[33] dogmas. While the former perceives reality as a series of deliberate, repetitive cycles intended to facilitate our learning, the latter ensnares us in a state of psychological distress aimed at asserting control over our existence. This confinement within predefined boundaries ultimately leads to outcomes of nihilism and/or self-destruction.

(Internalized) Racism and 'Internet culture'

As previously mentioned, adhering to a narcissistic paradigm that dichotomizes the world into one 'good' side and one 'bad' side represents a simplistic and even immature perspective. However, this Manicheism continues to underlie the societal perception of Black bodies today. Consequently, there exists a limited capacity for empathy toward us, as we are often perceived as possessing heightened strength, exceptional vitality, and even superhuman qualities,[34] effectively diminishing our humanity. This perception extends to the field of medicine, where we are still stereotypically viewed as individuals with elevated pain tolerance compared to other racial groups, a bias that contributes to our disproportionate representation among fatal casualties within the U.S. healthcare system,[35] though this is not limited to the United States.[36] Another instance exemplifying the lack of empathy toward Black bodies is the *misogynoir*[37] experienced by Black women both offline and online. A recent and noteworthy illustration of this phenomenon involves Rho,[38] an American citizen of Somali descent, who was struck in the face with a brick by an unidentified African American man simply because she declined to share her phone number with him after he made advances toward her. I consider this concerning, especially in light of the *River Walk Brawl* that occurred just less than a month prior, which marked a significant event for the African Diaspora, particularly the

33 Jeffrey Kaplan, "Princess Elisabeth's Attack on Descartes' Dualist Theory of Mind (from 1643)." July 13, 2020, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJIZzmUpfmk***.

34 Rana Asali Hogarth, "The Myth of Innate Racial Differences Between White and Black People's Bodies: Lessons From the 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," *American Journal of Public Health* 109, no. 10 (2019): 1339-1341. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2019.305245.

35 Sacredbirthdoula, "ꓤEVØⱠUTIØNλR¥ BIRTHkEEPER," Instagram post, . ***https://www.instagram.com/sacredbirthdoula/***.

36 Because it is prohibited to carry out statistics or studies that distinguish between people on the basis of race, it is impossible to compile accurate figures for this phenomenon in France. However, the 'Mediterranean syndrome' is often raised when we talk about racial discrimination in the hospital sector. I've personally paid a cardiologist around a hundred euros for my rapid heartbeat, only to end up being barely examined. The appointment, which lasted less than 10 minutes, ended with the so-called 'health professional' declaring 'it's normal, you're black'. What a bummer…

37 A combination of the word 'noir' (French for 'black') and misogyny. The term was coined in 2008 by African-American researcher and activist Moya Bailey. Source: Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women'S Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

38 Rhoreports, "ASSAULTED BY A MAN WITH A BRICK," September 5, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@rhoreports/video/7275348960980503851***.

African-American community. It was at this point that ordinary objects, like a folding chair, attained iconic status, serving as a meme[39] that symbolizes a type of resistance and assertiveness in response to persistent and oppressive whiteness.

In response to Roh's video posted on TikTok, thousands of Black and Black-adjacent[40] internet users (among others) shared their perspectives on the situation. Some of them expressed a common frustration felt by Black women regarding the violence we experience at the hands of our male counterparts.[41] [42] On the other hand, a majority of Black men defended the inaction of witnesses (all of whom were Black men) during the incident and justified their indifference with rhetoric reminiscent of incels.[43] In essence, many of them often justified their non-intervention by claiming a lack of affiliation with the victim.[44] As with my *passport bros* illustration, this animosity and at times apathy of Black men toward Black women is simultaneously a consequence and a remnant of the European colonial enterprise, which was built upon the exploitation and oppression of women—starting in Europe. Although this lack of unity may appear startling from an external perspective, it constitutes an integral part of the contemporary *Black* experience. Indeed, I believe the dehumanization of Black individuals serves as both the cause and the consequence of the appropriation and disregard for their cultures, creations, intellects, and, consequently, their lived experiences. Another instance of this dehumanization is the appropriation of the term *woke* by non-Black individuals. Today, it is employed by far-right Western movements to insult and invalidate those who critique the prevailing system.[45] Originally, this term was coined by and for African Americans[46] who were conscious of their reality within the capitalist system, rooted in their exploitation and thus reliant on their (lack of) awareness. If these individuals become *too* informed about the dynamics of their oppression and subjugation, they would pose a significant threat to the American state and consequently, to the global system.

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39 Kendria Bland, "kendria_bland," September 6, 2023, TikTok Video, https://www.tiktok.com/@kendria_bland/video/7275744962510179614.

40 Bi-racial or trans-racial individuals that identify as part or fully black.

41 Bohemian Diva, "I'm Done with This Topic," September 6, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@bohemian_diva99/video/7275777199993621802***.

42 Ziggi, "And if You Can't Understand This, You Are Willfully Neglectful," September 5, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@ziggityler/video/7275106333014117674***.

43 The Principled Somali, "Woke Somali Women Get Hit By A Brick," September 5, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@theprincipledsomali/video/7275415577223613728***.

44 The Glam Naiji, "Ad to Give My Lil Two Cents Bc the Men Are Pissing Me off ☹," September 5, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@theeglamnaija/video/7275130216480230702***.

45 Bart Cammaerts, "The Abnormalisation of Social Justice: The 'Anti-woke Culture War' Discourse in the UK," *Discourse & Society* 33, no. 6 (2022): 730-743, ***https://doi.org/0.1177/09579265221095407***.

46 OneWhoShallNotBeName, "Woke," Urban Dictionary, January 9, 2023, ***https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Woke***.

This also explains why the lives of historical icons such as Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) are not included in American school curricula or why events like the Cameroonian War of Independence, also known as the *Maquis War*, are not officially acknowledged by the French state. All of these measures are orchestrated to keep individuals' consciousness[47] dormant, conforming to linear thinking, and therefore more easily influenced by dominant political currents. I also think that's why words and concepts created by black people are still appropriated without credit: because this same fragmentation suggests that it is normal to see us as disembodied, destined to disappear. It is due to this ongoing drain, both physically and psychologically, that we find ourselves compelled to continuously innovate by generating new terms like *palm-colored, people of no-color,*[48] or *sour cream warriors,*[49] to discuss encounters with white people and the mediocrity that defines *whiteness;*[50] *Freedom*[51] (often followed by the eagle emoji and the American flag emoji) to describe a peacemaking process initiated by the US; or writing with special characters to avoid offending algorithms.

In addition to contributing to our *exhaustion,*[52] these mechanisms of fragmentation and regulation further sliver and confound our communal awareness at the local, national, and global range.[53] All these are advantages, placed by design by the ambient systems of oppression and exploitation, to keep us in reactionary spirals rather than pushing us into cycles of adaptation.[54]

47 What I mean here is that it is the subconscious that contains our ancestral memory. It can be accessed, but only if this is done intentionally. However, if the conscious mind is not alerted to its presence and/or believes that there is nothing to investigate, then no real progress can be made. So, we find ourselves in a vicious circle where the only alternatives and concepts (memes) we can think of and give life to are those already approved by the government.

48 Yaboioj14, "#Stich with Ribkarma," November 21, 2021, TikTok Video, *https://www.tiktok.com/@yaboioj14/video/7033091389743320326*.

49 Kourtney J, "Sour Cream Warriors," September 7, 2023, TikTok Video, *https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGJ78GysM*.

50 In this context, I use the term 'mediocrity' because, in racism, whiteness is defined as a norm, leading to the dehumanization of anything that deviates from it, whether in the media, historical narratives, the concept of beauty, and so on. This is why we are still debating the legitimacy of a black Little Mermaid, as the memeplex embodied by racism permeates every aspect of our existence. On a human scale, this is reflected in a relatively better quality of life for those who align with the norm based on their phenotype. Therefore, if life seems 'always easier,' there is little room for introspection and self-critique. There is also a reluctance to admit imperfections. This is how the infernal wheel of colonialism (narcissistic abuse) continues to turn.

51 YeahNah, "Freedom," Urban Dictionary, January 27, 2015, *https://www.urbandictionary.com/author.php?author=YeahNah*.

52 Tagwa Shammet, "AAVE Is Not Your Internet Slang. It Is Black Culture," *The Commonwealth Times*, February 18, 2021, *https://commonwealthtimes.org/2021/02/18/aave-is-not-your-internet-slang-it-is-black-culture/*.

53 William M. Kelley, "If You're Woke You Dig It," *The New York Times,* May 20, 1962, Accessed September 13, 2023, *https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1962/05/20/140720532.html?pageNumber=332*.

54 So that opposition groups never grow bolder with time.

From this perspective, I observe that, on a large scale, the fragmentation of memes serves the purpose of concealing a *still-relevant history*.[55] By homogenizing common thought, *meme moderators*[56] consequently fragment *our*[57] individual identities. This results in cognitive dissonance, a state where we consistently experience the traumas of the system without being able to distinctly recognize them or ourselves, unless we make the effort to educate ourselves. Furthermore, this same psychological fog, exacerbated by the surplus of information we consume daily, subsequently erodes our information processing abilities, continuously weakening us. Presently, the global population of adults affected by Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is estimated to exceed 360 million[58] and continues to increase.

Aphantasia and the C**n Chip

Now that we've had enough of blathering about the legacy of Europe's dark ages, it's time to transition to what I consider the Golden Age of Internet meme creation: the Vine era.

I recall my time in Cameroon, during the revision phase of my baccalaureate, in the middle of power shedding, when the ambient humidity made me feel limp. The only way to keep myself occupied was to absorb every catchphrase, scene, or climactic moment I watched over on Vine, down to the nanosecond. This was *Cardi B's*[59] first internet fiefdom, which she later turned into the heart of her branding as a rapper. This is where the line 'I can't swim' gains its everlasting resonance: the voice of an anxious and puzzled *toddler*[60] celebrating her birthday at the beach with her family.

I spent long hours on the app, as well as on American social networks such as Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube to find content made by young African Americans — people I could often identify with, given my age, my socioeconomic status, and my pop culture references. This early immersion led my young mind to become familiar with the idioms and customs inherent in AAVE that permeated the internet.

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55 A narrative that has proven itself through a succession of economic, political, humanitarian, ecological, and existential failures. But a narrative that depends on the fear of a dark age similar to the mistakes of Europe's past.

56 In this context, I'm talking about governments.

57 Everybody.

58 Peige Song et al, "The Prevalence of Adult Attention-deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A Global Systematic Review and Meta-analysis," *Journal of Global Health* 11 (2021): 1-9. ***https://doi.org/10.7189%2Fjogh.11.04009***.

59 Vine FC, "A Hoe Never Gets Cold – Vine," November 9, 2016, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3bUuooPGxc***.

60 Happy Birthday Raveeen!
BestVideos2016, "I Can't Swim | Original," December 2, 2015. YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/shorts/pZUWzDC1kMM***.



With increased experience, I've come to recognize that within the Black community our ways of communicating often fluctuate between self-deprecation and self-fetishization more than we'd want to acknowledge. In a world where statements like *Black people can't take anything seriously*[61] are deemed acceptable and endorsed; where the *n-word pass* is still a subject of debate, although some celebrities[62] are trying to correct their past errors, it's not hard to imagine that Black people globally see their representation of self strongly impacted by racist and colonial narratives, through self-objectification and self-commodification.

From the abyss of these meme movements rose most of the content used in the *dank*[63] meme culture. From the notorious OMG[64] sound to the piercing Boom[65] sound effect creators have used and abused in their content to flirt with, if not completely indulge in, *digital minstrelsy.*[66]

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61 EmbracingBlackCutlure, "*On Today'S Episode of Black People Don'T Take Nothing Serious.*. 🅷 😂," September 15, 2023, Instagram video,, ***https://www.instagram.com/p/CxLWs_SrmpG/?img_index=1***.

62 Kat Blaque, "IDubbbz Apologizes for His Racist Past...," May 25, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1SXK0HuBfXs***.

63 A subculture or genre of internet memes. Coming from the slang term *dank* which designs a really potent and sticky weed bud. Dank memes are often illustrated by their absurd or outright racist and bigoted appearance. I'm writing this because I find that its associated culture normalizes misogyny enormously, and does a lot to endorse digital minstrelsy. With products like the term *ear rape* referring to the use of very unpleasant and loud sound effects to the point of sounding fried, occasionally placed in the midst of a video meme, or its common use of the word *violate* to describe and any form of disrespect.
See also: P, "Dank Memes," Urban Dictionary, December 18, 2017, ***https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Dank%20Memes***.
MADEinKOREA, "SUKUNA VIOLATED MAHORAGA," November 17, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzsDdY1vxBo***.

64 Oopsie Meme, "Oh My God Meme," August 11, 2021, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/shorts/D6BA7jtsjNU***.

65 Pepe's SFX, "Vine Boom Sound Effect Meme," May 13, 2022, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yrdS4tIP9U***.

66 Digital minstrelsy, which I often find is performed and tolerated primarily by black men (though not exclusively), may be linked to the acceptance of certain black men to endure degradation or fetishization. For them, any form of attention from those closer to whiteness is perceived as gratifying, leading to a confusion between *predation* and genuine *appreciation*.
See also: @Ebonywarriorstudios on TikTok, January 14, 2024, ***https://vm.tiktok.com/ZGe65D5pJ/***.
Princella The Queen Maker, "Simone Biles and Her Dude," December 24, 2023, TikTok Video, 0:00:36, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@thequeenmakerofficial/video/7315980957729721630***.
Jack Harlow, "DARK KNIGHT," September 27, 2017, YouTube Video., ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgKKY8bg3N8***.
F.D Signifier, "SWIRLCONOMICS! (The Truth about Black People and Interracial Relationships)," November 22, 2023, YouTube Video, 0:45:21, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-KoABq6ygA***.
Foreign Man in Foreign Land, "Racism in Gaming," December 1, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0g3DEvvCfc***.
DailyVines, "ALL KingBach Vine Compilation 2014 - 180 Vines W/ Titles | HD QUALITY,". December 21, 2014, YouTube Video, 0:01:41, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rg61KPYAt-E***.

In this vast ocean named the Web, millions of individuals co-exist and come together as *communities*[67]. New laws, social norms, languages, and ways of communicating emerge, all of which contribute to the fragmentation and substantial transformation of the generational divide. This encounter between two distinct living environments creates a *whirlpool of fragmentation* in *global consciousness*[68]. Even if these two worlds are split, both emerge from and are the extension of a common history. This is evident in how different generations navigate and adapt to the world.

I was still a teenager when I discovered that some people can't hear their inner voice(s). At the time, a classmate of mine told me she hadn't heard it as far as she could remember. Given that I rely on a distinct internal dialogue, albeit not a continuous one, the thought of navigating life without what I perceived as intuition or a compass struck me as frightening. This marked the beginning of my fascination with aphantasia. Aphantasia is characterized by *the inability to summon imagination at will*, hindering the creation of a conscious internal image. Aphants are nevertheless able to dream in their sleep.

As sentient human beings, what particularities do aphants hold as meme hosts? I suspect that their inability to imagine concepts in other realities slows them down in fully understanding a concept, above all with regard to how it could be 'realistically' applied and used. This would force them to depend more on external information, emerging from minds other than their own. What sort of terrified me when I first learned of this condition was the idea of a human being who functions primarily on impulse and direct feedback.[69] Now I realize this would make them more vulnerable to conditioning that concerns reality, and especially reality they often do not experience. Aphants often say that they need to verbalize or just externalize their thoughts to feel them.[70] However, I do not view this as a pathology; rather, it signifies a form of dissociation, given that research indicates aphants have limited or no access to their emotional memory.[71] Essentially, they cannot recall past events in terms of their emotional experiences, leading to a lack of autobiographical memory. As a result, those interviewed did not show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. In part becausefew studies exist

67 Internet communities are different in that they are not limited by a geographical aspect. While in-person communities depend on the location of their members, they often form around a specific tangible goal or identity. Capitalism teaches us that our first and only community is our nuclear family. As a result, opinions are abundant but assessable. On the Web, on the other hand, the sheer number of people with whom we interact on a daily basis quickly becomes difficult to grasp.

68 In other words, the intangible realm where the consciousnesses of all living human beings interact and evolve.

69 The latter, not always. It depends on a multitude of factors, both internal and external: age, personality, dynamics of the relationship(s), proximity to power, overall comfort, and so on.

70 Anthony Padilla, "I Spent a Day with Aphants (People Without a Mind's Eye)," May 14, 2021, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNg6SYZjs24***.

71 Merlin Monzel, Annabel Vetterlein, and Martin Reuter, "No General Pathological Significance of Aphantasia: An Evaluation Based on Criteria for Mental Disorders," *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology 64*, no. 3 (2023): 314-324, ***https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12887***.

on the subject, and since it's a relatively recent categorization, aphantasia is a relatively uncommon condition, estimated to affect 2% to 4% of the population.[72] But on TikTok, the concept often comes up when professors and schoolteachers complain about the alarming levels of literacy and creativity among their students.[73] These discussions often suggest a correlation between aphantasia, the inability to read, and a perceived lack of imagination and independent thought in children. This goes back to the psychological phenomena I talked about earlier.[74]. Relatedly, in Algerian slang, the concept of *el niya* is often used to describe a person as *naive*. This concept is borrowed from Islam, where it is defined by pure, clear intention. This concept of el niya is important to formulate clearly because, without it, fasts, prayers and other actions, both religious and mundane, would be judged worthless. I am mentioning this because here a link is established between a clear intention, and naivety. As if doing things intentionally (as many aphants artists say they do their work) is perceived in this world as naive.

All this mass of information has got me thinking about the notion of masculinity and how it's expressed and acclaimed in society. From an early age, individuals socialized as men are distanced from their emotions. This means encouraging the purchase of war toys for boys while favoring dolls for girls. It involves prohibiting a boy from expressing emotions through tears as if crying were an indication of fragility rather than emotions such as pain, anger, confusion, or simply overstimulation.[75] This all gets worse when their sexuality is put under pressure from childhood onwards, and even more so when they reach adolescence. Whether it's rape culture, the objectification of women and non-men in various contexts (but more overtly in male-dominated spaces[76]), these interactions that boys have with their environment contribute to the survival of archetypes such as *the Joe, the Jock, and the nerd*[77] in their minds. In

72 The study does not specify the scope of the population.
Cleveland Clinic, "Aphantasia," Cleveland Clinic, August 31, 2023, ***https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/25222-aphantasia***.

73 See also: Khadija Mbowe, "'the Kids Can't Read!' TikTok Isn't Being Dramatic This Time?," December 14, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_n4CRyWhzM***;
Julia Boateng, "Teachers Are Tired of (Late) Gen Z and Gen Alpha- why?," November 27, 2023, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrpBXf9GVvs***.

74 Islam 2 France, "Qu'est-ce que El Niya (Intention) en Islam et qu'elle est son importance ?," *Islam 2 France*, Accessed December 20, 2023, ***https://islam2france.fr/qu-est-ce-que-el-niya-intention-en-islam-et-quelle-est-son-importance/***.
See also: Padilla, "I Spent a Day with Aphants," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNg6SYZjs24.

75 See also: Elliot Sang, "Are Men Okay?," November 13, 2022, YouTube Video, 0:26:22, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxfuGQcPjUM***.

76 Which is almost everywhere.

77 Joel Y. Wong and Shu-Yi Wang, "Toward an Integrative Psychology of Masculinities," *American Psychological Association* 23, no. 3 (2022): 286, ***https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/men-men0000387.pdf***.
See also: Bell Hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004).

adulthood, this poses a challenge in men's interpersonal connections, limiting their ability to foster relationships that are not, at best, superficial and, at worst, abusive or even fatal.[78]

In the case of white men, this often pushes them towards positions close to, if not entirely within, far-right ideologies.[79] Understandably so, as they constitute the foundations of white domination. For black men who subscribe to these same principles, adhering to the lie sold by capitalism—that a man can dominate the world and money transcends and surpasses racism—it becomes a matter of conforming and assimilating to the values of white supremacy as much as possible.[80] This implies that they accept surviving in a reality where they will have to continuously fight for their integrity, aligning with the idea that some have of *real masculinity*.[81] [82] All of this is to say that being raised as a *man*[83] is equivalent to preferring aphantasia to fantasy. By adapting in this way, the hardships associated with the realities of toxic patriarchy become easier to bear. Through dissociation,[84] these lonely men (but not only them[85]) conform to the system that strips them of their humanity. Some do it so well that they become only good at applying orders and definitions hacked by the media, such as those of *love*, *romance*, *seduction*, *evolution*, and so on.

This concept of dissociation for the sake of survival can also be traced back to the *coon chip* meme created and popularized by Pan-African lecturer and psychologist Dr. Umar Johnson.

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78 See also: Priory Group, "Why Are Suicides So High Amongst Men?" *Priory Group*, Accessed December 25, 2023, ***https://www.priorygroup.com/blog/why-are-suicides-so-high-amongst-men***. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "Suicide Statistics," American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, May 19, 2023, ***https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/***.

79 Edward Lempinen, "Loss, Fear and Rage: Are White Men Rebelling against Democracy?," *Berkeley News*, November 14, 2022,***https://news.berkeley.edu/2022/11/14/loss-fear-and-rage-are-white-men-rebelling-against-democracy***.
See also: Foreign Man in a Foreign Land, "The N*gcel Epidemic," September 29, 2023, YouTube Video, 0:22:30, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=temOwGs2aXI***.

80 Foreign Man in a Foreign Land, "The N*gcel Epidemic," 0:00:40.

81 Alpha men, Madingos, Bulls, Tyrones, etc.
Quora, "In Incel Slang, what Is a 'Tyrone'?" Quora, Accessed December 26, 2023, ***https://www.quora.com/In-incel-slang-what-is-a-tyrone***.
See also: Foreign Man in a Foreign Land, "The N*gcel Epidemic," 0:37:33.

82 This sets them apart from some black women, who, by demonstrating resilience and a strong adaptability, are also masculinized. Moreover, this puts them at greater risk of harm, whether or not they have a support system.

83 Here, I'm not only discussing Cis Men but people of every other gender expression that has had to adapt to those principles in order to survive.
See also: Kelley, "If You're Woke You Dig It," 1-2.

84 Cinema Therapy, "Psychology of a Hero: MOON KNIGHT and Dissociative Identity Disorder," October 7, 2022, YouTube Video, 0:12:56, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr6tO2j5v9g***.

85 *The girls, the gays and Theys too.*
CherryPie67, "Girls , Gays, and Theys," Urban Dictionary, January 18, 2021, ***https://www.urbandictionary.com/author.php?author=CherryPie67***.

It was during one of his many lives circulating abundantly on the web that he declared '*it only takes a little bit of white brainwash to activate the coon chip in the average negro*'.[86] As violent and degrading as this sentence is, when put back in context it raises concern about the ease with which black people can *drink the Kool-Aid*.[87] In other words, to inhabit and tolerate dynamics that exploit us and keep us submissive and disadvantaged in the face of a system that survives by virtue of our subjugation.

Self-actualization and Healing

I find it crucial to explore the influential role played by figures like Dr. Umar in addressing and challenging these dynamics within the black community. Even more important, however, is the way in which figures like him have seen their words distorted and ridiculed through memetic fragmentation.

A first example is the word *Hotep*, which today is seen as derogatory precisely because of Dr. Umar's fragmented discourse. If you ask an Internet user, especially someone African-American, about the concept of a *hotep*, they are likely to characterize it as a reactionary stance where a black person (often a man), purportedly seeking to reclaim a perceived historical glory, adopts misguided beliefs, disseminating misinformation about the state of the world and its history[88]—a portrayal devoid of any allure. The term Hotep originates from Kemet, the ancient appellation for the land of Egypt, and it translates to *be at peace*.[89] Today, it is used as a greeting[90] by some pan-Africans, who see it as a way of realigning their awareness with African cultures and religions—elements that colonization and slavery separated from them and vilified.

This concept refers to a memeplex of knowledge and traditions that, regrettably, is either ascribed to other communities whose prosperity is also rooted in our exploitation, or it is disregarded and deemed too ancient to be revered in contemporary times. As a result, their veneration becomes folkloric, rare, and reduced to a mere fantasy. Wakanda may indeed symbolize their El Dorado, a mythical place in Africa with an undisclosed location,

86 Valor, "It Only Takes a Little Bit of White Brainwash to Activate the Coon," December 21, 2020, YouTube Video, 0:00:18, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSoz4XB4Ufs***.

87 Wikipedia, "Drinking the Kool-Aid," Wikimedia Foundation, Last modified December 25, 2023, ***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drinking_the_Kool-Aid***.
See also: Make Black America Great Again, "Definition of a Negro Verses a Coon - Dr. Umar Thurman," May 24, 2020, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxXBXcGMMTA***.

88 HBO, "A Black Lady Sketch Show: Hertep Homecoming (Full Sketch) | HBO," August 19, 2019, YouTube Video, 0:00:27, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNfoPKiUztE***.

89 Wikipedia, "Hotep," Wikimedia Foundation, Last modified December 21, 2023, ***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hotep***.

90 Dictionary.com, "Hotep," Dictionary.com, April 2, 2018, Accessed December 26, 2023, ***https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/hotep/***.

supposedly free of any colonial history. We should feel sorry for these phony hoteps. When we confine our experience within the boundaries set by dominant systems, Wakanda truly appears to be a goal worth pursuing. A little like Switzerland's position in Europe during the wars, Wakanda represents peace despite the wars, stability despite efforts at *destabilization*.

These depictions persist in presenting Africa, its residents, and the diaspora as a monolith characterized by its distinction and exoticism in contrast to the West. In this context, the concept of aphantasia resurfaces as I recall that all of this ultimately involves shaping our identity within the confines of a relatively recent history which we did not author, yet one to which we continue to be subjected. In this scenario, our traumas induce a form of amnesia regarding our history spanning at least 20 millennia[91], as a result of spiritual, physical, and epistemological attacks directed at us.[92]

Not to belabor what I said earlier, this kind of trauma can be transposed to the majority of people living on the globe today. We are all products of bloodlines marked by trauma, and it is through digital platforms like TikTok that we are reclaiming our agency despite everlasting adversity. Within these spaces, numerous cultural revolutionaries battle with the biased algorithms[93] in order to leverage applications initially designed for entertainment,

91 See also: Wikipedia, "Ishango Bone," Wikimedia Foundation, Last modified December 16, 2023, ***https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishango_bone***.

92 See also: Briezy47, "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child Is a Deeply Rooted Proverb that Speaks to Cultivating Community & Developmental Growth of Our Children with that Mindset toward Each Other as Human Beings in Community," November 16, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@briezyfox/video/7302194562355694879***.
Fanny Coonst, "Un auteur à connaître quand on parle de colonisation et de race," November 11, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@fanny_cnst/video/7300291747404352773***.

93 Despite their revolutionary use, social networks are not exempt from systemic racism. As demonstrated from their earliest years to the present day, social networks are racist and often encourage the theft of material, ideas and memes originally created by their black users. One of the best-known examples is the *Renegade Challenge*. This is a dance choreography created in 2019 on TikTok by young African-American Jalaiah S. Harmon, who was just 14 at the time. In the original post, Jalaiah performed her choreography to K Camp's Lottery sound. However, due to the segregationist and racist nature of the TikTok algorithm, it was easy for several white creators to appropriate the dance without crediting Jalaiah. Among them, the most popular usupatrice and Top 1 TikToker at the time, Charlie D'Amelio, appropriated the choreography which earned her national fame. Presented as the 'creator' of the challenge, she was invited on a variety of TV sets and 'taught' the dance to several celebrities. It was only because TikTok's African-Americans, who knew the true origin of the challenge, continued to complain and share Jalaiah's story that justice was served.
See also: TikTok, "History Behind Our Most Popular Dances," TikTok Rewards, Accessed January 6, 2024, ***https://www.tiktok.com/tiktok-rewards/history-behind-our-most-popular-dances/***.
Melany Amarikwa, "Social Media Platforms' Reckoning: The Harmful Impact of TikTok's Algorithm on People of Color," *Richmond Journal of Law and Technology* 29 (January 2023): 1-48.
Margot Harris, "The Original 'Renegade' Dance Creator Performed at the NBA All-Star Game and Met up with Charli D'Amelio for a TikTok Collab," *Business Insider*, February 17, 2020, ***https://www.businessinsider.com/renegade-creator-danced-charli-damelio-nba-all-star-game-2020-2?r=US&IR=T***.

benefiting both themselves and those aspiring to heighten their awareness. This is done to the point where the technology becomes such a threat and such a nuisance that it seems essential for the American Congress to get rid of it.[94]

Here, the *whirlpool of fragmentation* is surfed to perfection by generations of souls now adapted, as best they can, to the disembodied existences the web offers us. Discussions and testimonies emerge, ones that traditional media often seeks to suppress even more. Internet memes, dismissed by older generations as mere jests or caricatures, transform into a distinct language for *us*[95], capable of expressing complex experiences and emotions. Through our exchanges, a new resistance to meme fragmentation is being created: that of the mind.[96]

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95 Millennials and Gen Z.
See also: OliSUNvia, "What Makes Gen Z Humor so Interesting?," September 7, 2021, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1LyTThf7V0***.

96 See also: Nosi1ence, "#Stitch with Khalil Hassan," December 23, 2023, TikTok Video, ***https://www.tiktok.com/@nosi1ence/video/7315613915705085214***.

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MEMEMORPHOSES

CAUSALITY, SIMULTANEITY, TOUCH

EERO TALO

There used to be a phrase in literary criticism to describe the work of poets like Shakespeare and Keats. It was said their verse demonstrated a *sensuous apprehension of thought*, which I take to mean that language in their hands had its own hands and felt its environment – much like the blind. The association between blindness and poetry also rings in the phrase *second sight*, which alludes to the otherworld the poet must have access to besides appearance. While these are mystical notions, they are concerned with the functionality of poetic language at a nervous level and express the idea that it is alive and phenomenologically divergent from our world of standard speech.

This question of the physical life of something spiritual is repeated in our contact with the virtual realm of the web, which we navigate with our eyes and fingers, rehearsing the tension between the efficacy of the visual and the haptic. Certainly, our experience of digital culture is visual, but we must touch our screens to move its picture. That is, the primary sense of the digital within itself is not sight, but touch. It shares this sensory organization with the poetic, which is capable of similar collapses across space, time, and tone, as if elements that are far away from each other within the realm of common sense are in fact on top of each other in the meeting place of the poem. It is this mania for combination that produces the unsuspected logic of poetry, and the equally flexible affect of memes. That the latter are often absurd, while poems are more profound, may have to do with the respective ages of these systems and the difference between something very young and something ancient.

In either case, we may say: they are blind and go by feel. The sense of touch is unique because it requires the experience of simultaneity. (Taste falls close to this region but, unless we are kissing, what we are tasting rarely tastes us back.) This temporal quality flattens the causal chain of subject-object that structures other senses. It is the reason touch is hard to document, because narrative generally builds itself from the univocal contours of this initial chain event. The narrative of touch is polyvocal and precipitate. It eliminates room for detachment and common sense, which is not to say that touch is so chaotic it cannot produce a complex system, as in the case of painting for the visual or perfume for smell. Its higher order is simply arranged differently.

A flattened causal chain is both a unit in the higher narratives of touch and a complete story unto itself. This is the reason why lines, phrases, and even single words in poems take on the weight of climactic scenes in novels, and why images, memes, and seconds of video share this density of significance on the web. The highest order of touch we are familiar with is sex, for which no satisfactory narrative technique exists. At best, there are erotic writers and pornographers whose effects we enjoy, but none come close to

the sophistication of encounter found in sex itself, despite the incredible range of smut available online. Digital porn is as close as the visual gets to the haptic. But there is no such thing as a point of contact seen into feeling, whereas much of what we know as viral visual culture is the expression of the sensual life of data. At the scale and intensity we have grown used to, this sensuality is functionally conceivable as erotic.

Yet the eros of the web is impossible to conceive in its totality. It cannot be figured as a discrete scene by any of the tactics of porn. There are too many actors, too many different scales, and too many species of information. It is an orgy the way marine life in the Mediterranean is an orgy, raucous and ultimately classifiable if one were to spend a hundred lifetimes on the task. The upshot of this unpicturability is the submission it requires to the primacy of its own sense. What we see in the orgy of the web is not the visual artificially wrapped around the haptic, but each instance of contact between the two, which give themselves to the understanding with the assurance that narrative completion traditionally provides.

This heightened narrative capability, or what may also be thought of as causal promiscuity, is in part due to the proliferation of software that allows us to manipulate sounds and images. A healthy democratization, this is our consolation prize for the total seizure of data on the web. What is being done with our activity occurs behind the iron veil of totalitarian command. And yet, paradoxically, this insidious reach is the very thing that endows information with life to affect. It is an act of faith only the paranoid can perform, projectively sensitizing all phenomena with their own hyperactive nerves. This is the negative version of anything-can-happen. At the opposite end of the spectrum lies the poet, ecstatic over the same thing.

Perhaps, though, they are closer than they seem. If there is a sphere of narrativity that contains everything we know how to tell, and beyond which lies everything we do not, perhaps the poet lives on the exterior of this object and the paranoiac on its other side. They share the same ground, but the task of the former is to throw in untold aspects of experience, while the task of the latter is to expel them. The function of the internet is to render this contest moot. The intense brevity and wholeness of the haptic narratives of digital culture have pushed these boundaries immensely outward. We are living in a vastly expanded sphere of narrativity, even if we do not yet understand how to make use of it. There is still confusion about the difference between a fragment and a whole. Traditionally, the former is an image and the latter is an arc, but today, in the divergent phenomenology of the web, an image is both fragment and arc. Its instrumentality in the larger structures of drama, comedy, and thriller is not the reason it exists, and it is, therefore, free to find other images according to its pleasure. There are many narrative structures waiting to be created from these affinities, which we may share if we decenter our eyes.

Apple of the Forest

These are some of the philosophical byways that led to the style of *Apple of the Forest,* a novel I wrote during the pandemic, from March 2021 to August 2022. At the time, I still felt positive about being shut in online, because it allowed me to meditate on the effects of the internet and their coincidence with our awareness of climate change. I wanted a complex allegory that spoke to this meeting, which came in the form of a plot:

After a vivid nightmare, Joe Biden is urged to lead a more beautiful life. He consults Kylie Jenner, our contemporary Venus, who suggests he undergo intense body modification. While the President embarks on this bimbo journey, a dating app spreads across the country. Powered by internet history and ad-tech, it creates matches that exceed people's social circles, expectations, and normal sexual practices. Young get with old, hot with ugly, fat with skinny, and so on, changing the collective understanding of beauty. Eventually, the President emerges looking like Kylie Jenner and addresses the nation. He offers to universalize these procedures, but the people no longer share his aesthetics. Out of their conflict, a sense of beauty more in tune with nature appears.

The excerpt you are about to read is the meeting of Joe and Kylie, which comes quite early in the text. I combined these figures to represent the aestheticization of politics we inherited from the Trump era. Certainly, my fictional President behaves more like the narcissistic Trump than the real Joe Biden (whom I find endearing, oblivious, and well-botoxed). The public opinion of Biden is more neutral, making him a perfect blank canvas. This scene is also unique because it contains no sex. It does, however, conform to the orgiastic tumble of information that moves the web. I chose to write in the conventions of fanfiction (the use of real celebrities as characters, the anything-goes approach to plot) because this genre is currently furthest from literary realism. It is my opinion that the formal and tonal conventions of realism are a Thermopylae against the true nature of contemporary experience. They create a narrow passage that allows authors to avoid and confront our culture in one breath. As a way to minimize psychic risk, this is very effective, but I find it ultimately prevents writers from empathizing with and understanding our moment. Out of love for my time in all its complexity, I try to meet the chaos where it's at.

Chapter 7

Even through tinted glass, the flora of the Santa Monica foothills was magnificent. Joe pressed his face to the window as the SUV crawled up the serpentine road, lined with trees and flowers that seemed to curve and greet the vehicle as it passed. Birds, too, flew low alongside the motorcade, as squirrels ran and cottontails leapt, and even a bobcat was bounding at the edge of a growing procession escorting the President through their home. A tree frog, jumping off the branch of a passing oak, stuck to the window and smiled at Joe; he smiled back. The car stopped.

Up ahead a crowd of locals had gathered, some mid-jog and still running in place, some fresh from a morning at the spa, shining in white athleisure, and some children, too, from toddlers to teens, unified by anticipation, though none of them seemed to understand they were blocking the road, and nothing the secret service said would get them to clear off. Joe shivered in the AC. Suddenly paws were on the roof, and a mountain lion dropped down the passenger side, identifying the President with a glance and a twitch and placing a claw gently in the handle of his door to welcome him to the menagerie. Guns were drawn on the cat, but Joe keened them down with a blasting call he didn't know he could make, and the cougar walked under his hand to brush against his fingers. The ground was teeming now, not only with the larger animals he had seen earlier, but with insects, newts, spiders, snakes, and he stepped forward gently into space that cleared to the shape of his shoe; another step made another spot, and the ground that he had just left was flickering with creatures.

He began to advance on the people, all of whom held their phones up like veils, and as he passed into their midst, they drew back in a ring that started moving clockwise, enclosed by another ring of squirrels, a third ring of swallows, a fourth ring of snakes, a fifth of bees, a sixth of shrews, a seventh of foxes, an eighth of worms, a ninth ring of hummingbirds, each keeping pace with the President's will to arrive on time for his meeting. Joe felt something crawl on his leg; he saw columns of ants tying flowers in chains up his calves, his thighs, his torso, his chest, even his neck, truing his spine and forcing his gaze on the silhouette shifting in front of him. A cloud of moths flew down and devoured the rest of his clothes.

By the time he came to a concrete gate and the circles stopped moving, the President wore a suit of lilies and wild onion flowers. He cupped his hands to his mouth and the gate started to slide.

'Kylie,' he whispered.

And walked to the first ring; he shook hands with a jogger. Then he gave a piece of bread to the representative of the second ring, a seed to the swallow of the third, a dead mouse

to the guard of the fourth ring—the bees of the fifth came into his suit—a slug to the shrew of the sixth ring, a metal brush to the fur of the fox of the seventh, a piece of dogshit for the worms of the eighth ring, and an orchid for the last of the guards, beating its wings to stand still and drink down the nectar.

Kylie, he thought, as softly as he could.

'Joe!' Came a cry from inside the compound. 'Joe, my god! You look amazing!'

'Kylie? I can't see you!'

'Joe!' But the voice was getting faint. 'My god—amazing! Look. You! Joe…'

Then she appeared, in a high-neck white crop and barely distressed jeans. They kissed

each other's hands.

'What do you call that trick?'

She looked off, as if worried, and a whisper found Joe's ear, but he only caught its sibilance.

'Thirsty?'

'Parched.'

She offered him rosé. Then two men ran up and flanked the President; glasses in their

hands, held palm-down, sweated droplets onto impeccable loafers. The President's rosé was gone; he felt glorious; Kylie was now ten feet in front of him, now fifteen, now twenty. Joe began to move; she disappeared ('Ky—'), then clapped to his vision five feet ahead.

The whisper returned: 'So anywho Mr. Biden, what brings *you* to these hills only *to*day, could you be explicit and nice, or what? Or *what? Or what?*'

'Joe,' Kylie called, out of sight, 'are you coming?'

'Yes,' he managed, wine again at the back of his throat. His feet were heavy, but then, reality seemed so lithe, and he soldiered on, not at all sure where the mogul was, but glad to be on her property.

'Scattering mattering trends to be,' the whisper continued, 'What should I wear tonight? Givenchy or Luis De Javier's heroic shoulders, which I could never do, but white leather

printed trousers... or I like a basic silhouette, after all the stitching in the world of fast fashion... what does this man want from me? Gorging himself on nature—fishing for compliments or a hermitage?

('Kylie,' Joe said, sighting her in a palm on the other side of the mansion. She pointed down with mock fear, then rose into the sky, fading.)

You know I'll have to get in that angora straitjacket tomorrow; I think I'll wear nothing tonight. They've seen it all before, a party of ten can handle a birthday suit—at a birthday party.

('If you could please...' he stammered, falling down, blinking at the ceiling; he felt a rug beneath him; rosé found his tongue.)

Why can't I be in five places at once? Why did Kim end her last text with a period? Why doesn't Stormi like watching TV? Why do I like all of Britney's posts if she never likes mine? ('...not...') What if I played tennis after this? What if I partnered with NASA? What if I let Joe stay for dinner? ('...think—')—'

She potched him.

'Bb, I'm so sorry... I don't know what's going on with these glasses. Ever since I let two random dudes have dinner here on Thursday my cups have been self-filling—and self-drinking! I sort of don't believe it, but I should have thought twice.' Her eyes strayed to her phone. 'Really, I'm sorry. Let me make you coffee.'

'No!' The President grabbed her. 'Please, no more liquids.' 'Welp! There I go again...' Glancing at her phone.

Joe self-cared; the bloom suit the ants had made had mostly fallen off; through its holes, his skin was pale and whimpering with spots. He caught Kylie looking, but she didn't seem to mind, and kept her curiosity. At first, it seemed that something had been missing from her expression, or that she was blinking too much, or breathing out of sync; the Kylie Joe had met online would never touch her nose, or even scratch her wrist, but then, this was real life, and the billionaire seemed made of such scraps, recycled from the refuse of perfect visibility. The President turned—it felt rude to notice—and Kylie gave a short laugh, texting in the pause.

Wincing, she looked up.

'Your anxiety is *loud*, Joe. I can't hear anything else.'

The President shrugged, tried to respond, but nothing came out. Even when she felt his

forehead, pinched his cheek, put her finger up his nose, he remained void. She motioned for him to follow her and walked to the back of the house, through a glass door and out to the poolside. A tiny palomino horse was standing in the sun. Kylie pressed a carrot into Joe's hand and pushed him toward the foal, whose great black eye acknowledged Joe, and in which he saw himself, almost naked now, approach the golden animal. It seemed permanently shocked and unable to sort out which objects deserved its warmth, so indiscriminate was its gaze, and so disarming. Its tongue took the carrot and lolled in his palm; then he fell in the pool.

Kylie to the bubbles: 'I just can't *stand* dissociative energy! Mr. President, are you feeling better? Feeling *anything?* If not, you'll have to go.'

Joe splashed the tiles, and he scrambled up to sit. He looked at Kylie; past her, the foal.

'I feel distorted, kid. Nothing straight, but I feel it with my whole heart. Like something snuck into my head and rearranged the values, and now I have to lead a different life. A beautiful life! I guess the one I was leading before wasn't good enough. But it had walls and tunnels, clear divisions. Now there's just this ultra-sensitive membrane everything lands on and makes a sound, the most precious sound I've ever heard, all the time. I'm not sure how there's room for that, but I came here to ask you about beauty—because I don't think you're overwhelmed. Maybe you're not in control either, but you seem so sure.'

Kylie wrote *kylie* on a tile with her finger.

'Yes,' she said, 'I'm sure. I don't have to be, but I know that beauty is a battle up time, without a winner, only those who make a stand. And the illusion of control—the illusion we should all try for—is slowing down enough to see your moment in the fray. All I do is give people colors and forms; when the difference in shades is spreading, people tend to show themselves. They feel more able to.'

'And what about you? What about surgery?'

'Surgery is for those who float above battle, and who don't mind being alone.'

'Alone and surrounded?'

'Free, but alone.'

A sonata started playing from inside the house.

'Alexa! Turn that off!'

Two more measures crept to the pool, then halted with a beep.

Kylie drew a dollar sign.

'What if,' Joe said, a plink like cold steel pressed to his back, 'everyone got surgery?'

The mogul's face fell; her chin dropped to her chest; for a moment she appeared inconsolable. Then she drew a pistol from the horse's mouth and fired into the water. Each bullet made a clapping sound, like drastically slowed applause. When the President looked at Kylie again, she was feeding carrots to the horse, stroking its face, kissing down its hair, rubbing its side, her back facing Joe and the glock in his lap.

'Why stop there? Nature was a fool to us, but we can't outlive our guilt. I bet you could change your chromosomes if you really cried about it. Would you like to be twenty-three? And this time, hit pause? I bet you could do it with a little military...'

She looked at the President's groin: his penis had coiled around the gun and was crushing it into a ball, but then the metal and the skin began to merge, and the mass swelled up like an uneven balloon, and left his crotch, and climbed the air, and popped sweetly in butterflies—as Joe wept—that flew off in a circle.

IMAGES AND THEIR CAPTIONERS: WHAT PHOTOGRAPHERS CAN (OR SHOULD) LEARN FROM MEME CULTURE

WILL BOASE

I've spent close to half of my life working as a photographer. In that time, I have made around half a million 'work' photographs on cameras, along with a further 40,000 on my phone. My career spans the dying days of film and mass-market print, the rise and dominance of digital, and now the growth of AI and the decline and decay of the great agencies. On bad days, standing on rope lines alongside fresh graduates with selfie sticks who are anchoring their own YouTube news channels, I feel tired and obsolete. On good days, with the right commission and a decent budget for incidentals, there's no better job in the world. Like most people, the internet's expansion is changing how I live and work, but unlike a lot of my colleagues I am not convinced these changes are bad — I think they're just new. I think the future of (visual) journalism is likely to follow patterns already visible in today's memes, and while it's likely to continue to beat the crap out of my job in the short term, the future belongs to those of us who figure out what it means and learn to harness its potential.

News photography's challenge consists in trying to find entertaining and creative ways to tell the story without losing its audience along the way. Print demands striking visuals. A reader must be able to see what a story is about in order to entice them to read it. It's for this reason that the clear visual language of news photographs masks structures of referentiality. A soldier must be in uniform or she's a civilian. A rally driver needs a car — absent that, he's a pedestrian. A fisherman who has no fish is just a man, unless the story is about a fisherman not catching any fish, in which case they'd better be holding an empty net. Winners are tall, losers are sad, and dogs and babies usually jump straight to the front of whatever queue they're in.

But literal representation gets boring quickly, and a whole photographic language has evolved to play with the whiplash sensation that arises when an image gently misleads or surprises the viewer. A soldier out of uniform can still be a soldier, after all, so long as the caption says she is, and as a viewer it's fun to see a person doing non-soldiery things and then discover that they're actually a warrior in mufti. This playfulness found itself comfortably accommodated by the page, a natural container within which the symbiotic relationship of images and text could flourish. Images could safely conceal or distort reality, comfortable in the knowledge that the caption would be close by, and the viewer's confusion would be temporary. Given that much news, and thus the bulk of the work of a news photographer, centers predictably around men in suits shaking hands and signing papers, juxtaposition and red herrings represent vital tools for grabbing and holding attention by adding life to a dull story. Nothing is more fun than finding a way to make audiences look twice, especially at a scene they thought they already knew.

As newspapers declined and were replaced by digital circulation, the separation of news into images and text revealed a basic weakness of photography that has always been clear to the observed but is only now becoming visible to their observers: images might represent reality, but they are inherently partial and only as honest as the company they keep. Reducing reality to a representation and relying on symbols to transmit messages means any external context added at the site of audiencing has a disproportionate ability to colonize and transform that meaning. Add a caption to an image and it transforms that image into an illustration of the text. A headline that identifies a person as a soldier, or a rebel, or a thief, not only confers that status upon them, but does so whether they like it or not. Release an image onto the internet without the page to contain and explain it, and it becomes a puppet into which anybody's hand can fit, whose claims to indexicality look increasingly shaky.

Photography as a medium is not really threatened by this; as long as cameras exist, humans are likely to continue to derive pleasure and social utility from preserving, regarding, and distributing evidence of our lives. As long as the faces in a photograph are recognizable as people we know, there's enough information to make sense of the story the image tells. This is what Postman terms the 'particularity' of an image, its capacity to show a specific sight.[1] Photographs fulfill this role, and for that purpose they are unlikely to be superseded.

What is being eroded is the belief that photographs transform that specificity into a generally comprehensible and objective document of a place and time, the individual lens serving as a proxy for the collective experience. The world is not a clear place, and photographs are further fractional distillations, which makes context not only crucial to comprehending photographs but also to limiting their speech. The only way to ensure that images' messages are received as intended is to tether them to context which explains the circumstances of their creation. Historically, context has tended to express the views of the photographer rather than the photographed, but that is a problem with the potential to be solved, whereas the alternative nullifies the whole photographic contract, and what's left is whatever anybody wants it to be. In such cases, photographs serve as mirrors in which audiences see themselves as much as the image; their biases and assumptions, their culture, and opinions about the cultures of others.

Memes are a good place to look for clues about the medium's nature and future, because they exist thanks to the multiplicity of meanings made possible by images shorn of context. Memes are a truly native online form, a brute-forced, crowd-sourced exploration of the frontiers of digital publication, and they deserve greater recognition as an evolution of the photographic form. They represent a deceptively nuanced collection of solutions to the complex challenges that images face on the Internet, optimized for their purpose in ways that traditional photography has yet to consider. To look at a meme is to experience remote speech via a container optimized for protecting meaning as it travels across cyberspace, speech which has overcome the distortions inherent to digital circulation. Photography

1 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 1985), 72.

should take note. Just as it once lived on the page of the mass magazine, it is clear that the photograph's future capacity as a vessel of meaning will be contingent on its makers renegotiating how that meaning is formed, transmitted and decrypted, and on the affordances of the screen as a primary interface.

As readers of this book will doubtless know, image memes (here separated from video and text memes, which have their own forms and conventions) usually consist of an appropriated photograph or other image with a caption written across its surface. Every photographic sin is contained within most memes, from using others' images without attribution, to obscuring visual information with text and crudely manipulating the visual meaning, to sizing the resulting file at its lowest possible resolution. Captions are dense, grammatically chaotic, cryptic, and self-referential, and they're written in big fonts too. The visual layer often only relates to the caption tangentially, and meaning reliant on any more than the most rudimentary inference by the viewer is quickly drowned out by the context added in its remediation, reducing the source photograph to an illustration of a caption. All of these points might sound like complaints from the lips of a photographer, but they're not. The meme form should be treated not as a departure from photography but as an extension of it, an upgrade which responds to the changing circumstances of its circulation and tries to patch the flaws while preserving what's good.

By acknowledging the image's meaning as a wholly contingent text whose meaning must be constructed by its viewers, memers acknowledge the challenges of communicating across the decontextualized surfaces of screen-mediated reality. By hardcoding their context inside the visual layer, messages are shielded from distortion during transmission and reach their intended audience complete, like the magazine pages of the past. Through this they ensure that if the message they contain travels beyond the boundaries of its maker's original intention, it will do so as a whole object. A viewer might clip the image from a meme, like cutting a newspaper page, but unlike the copy-paste of a traditional photograph which plucks it whole from its context, all a clipping will yield is a low-resolution partial image whose meaning is already on its way to digital obscurity.

If a memer wishes to protect the meaning of their message, all they have to do is increase the contingent referentiality of their message by the use of inside jokes, visual symbols, or specialized language. Similarly, if they have a broad audience in mind, this must be reflected in the construction of a broadly interpretable visual and textual object. Memes mimic photography in speaking through visuals but, unlike photographers, memers intend for the reception of a whole message rather than just its visual trace. Viewers are invited to read them as shallow texts whose informational content is contained in its referentiality, rather than as fragments of tangled reality presented for interpretation. By making their form frictionless, their designs so consciously artless, and their visual information ostensibly unambiguous, memers lead viewers to the ciphers at their creations' centers and invite their decryption.

Photography's inherent social utility makes it useful as a mechanism of social confirmation, but the meme expands that affordance beyond the immediate social circle to broader transcultural audiences, making it a form which has the potential to occupy the space being left behind by the disappearance of newspapers. This already appears to be happening to an extent in social media spaces, where many outlets are embedding text into the visual layer of images. The carousel form now common on platforms like Instagram allows the creation of horizontally-scrolling visual essays whose form is closer to the syndicated cartoon strip than a traditional photo-essay. These combinations of text and image make them visually engaging and textually rich, not to mention ideally suited to the now-reflexive right-to-left swipe, while also ensuring that sharing one part means sharing the other. Outlets still struggle with building contextual trust in the absence of the physical structures that were integral to print publishing, but as has always been the case for the press, trust is earned through the publishing of compelling, clear, and accessible news and information.

As technology has continued to lower the barriers to the production and distribution of photographs, their status has shifted from being pronouncements to something closer to an interface of communication,[2] and the distinction between photographs and memes continues to diminish. Memers are like young punks, playing their instruments badly and understanding that the cultural effect that they cause is not a result of the creation of new things but the distortion or rejection of old ones. In visual culture, the result of this rejection appears to be a new fluid category of communication: the visual text. Reveling in their two-dimensionality and cheerfully embracing their status as ideas and constructions, these are assemblages whose only indexicality is to other ideas. They shift fluidly between original and appropriated imagery, broad and narrow audiences, statements of fact or of opinion, and their readers are encouraged to consider them not as final forms but as signposts.

It's not a huge surprise that photographers clutch their pearls as they watch their photographs being ~~stolen~~ appropriated and ~~vandalized~~ remediated by kids who can't remember the G.W. Bush presidency. But, just like punk music before it, meme culture will transition from rebellion to establishment, and the solutions it represents as a form of screen-optimized visual communication are already being ingested by the legacy media industry. The young rebels are already beginning to find their feet as a new generation of editors and producers, and the lessons they have learned about the transmission of information and the protection of the message are already becoming visible in our cultural spaces. The reason I got into photography was to communicate, to find good stories and tell them well. I didn't start out by being interested in printing, or editing, or cropping, or sequencing — all of those were things I learned as I sought to get my message across in print. Memes are simply the next incarnation of that desire, and understanding them and their affordances is all part of keeping up to date as a photographer.

2 Edgar Gómez Cruz, "Photo-Genic Assemblages: Photography as a Connective Interface," in *Digital Photography in Everyday Life: Empirical Studies on Visual Material Practices*, ed. Edgar Gómez Cruz and Asko Lehmuskallio (London: Routledge, 2016), 228-242.

There's a certain amount of doomsaying in my industry, given fresh energy by the proliferation of generative imaging tools. But photography will endure as a mechanism of creation. Its special sauce, its ability to allow us to gaze at the faces of the people we know and love even when they are distant from us, makes it irreplaceable even as AI consumes the workaday trade of photo-as-content. The question which both memers and photographers need to answer as we continue to be propelled headlong into these new media spaces is about what we want our referential and indexical images to do, and for whom. The internet revealed the contingent nature of photographic truth and laid bare the danger of conflating sight with understanding. Memes have proposed solutions to some of those problems and sidestepped others, with the result that digital visual culture diverges in some ways from its analogue competitors just as it continues to replicate them elsewhere. But the meme as a meaning-making object represents the emergence of a digital vernacular. It is the grammar of a new form of speech, and its native speakers can vastly expand its vocabulary with a greater embrace of photography and visual culture. Meanwhile, photographers who learn to meme evolve our craft to keep up with the changing demands of the spaces in which we circulate our ideas. If we succeed, we can reach new audiences, resolve some of photography's failings, and speak more clearly than ever.

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HOW ALASKA COULD BECOME A CANTON OF SWITZERLAND

reuters.com

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By Manuel Hunziker



A Country Feels illustration from the early 2020s showing a "That Feel Guy" wojak sittingat a computer desk, which is supposed to show a typical supporter of the "Alaska is Switzerland" movement.

JUNEAU, June 13 (Reuters) - When a Reddit user had some fun 16 years ago and uploaded a pixelated photo of a flag hanging from a balcony with the slogan 'Alaska is Switzerland,' no one could have imagined what an avalanche this post would bring. Now, 16 years later, this former fantasy could actually become the truth. This coming September, Alaskan residents will vote in a referendum on whether to leave the United States, 171 years after Alaska was sold by Russia to the United States, and join the Swiss Confederation as its 27th canton. At the same time, the Swiss electorate will also be asked about a possible Alaska canton at the ballot box.

The flag was originally intended only as a parody of the slogan 'Kosovo is Serbia' (Serbian: Косово је Србија, Kosovo je Srbija) proclaimed by Serbian nationalists since Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February 2008. As Yann Winter, a Swiss citizen and the

creator of the meme, affirmed when asked a few months after it became viral: 'I thought that if I simply print something as absurd as "Alaska is Switzerland" on a flag, primarily *for the lols* of course, people will already become aware that such claims of foreign domination are actually totally insane.' But the Internet once again had other ideas. Enthusiastic about the idea of a neutral buffer state between the world powers of Russia and the USA, groups sprang up all over the Internet collecting arguments in a serious or less serious way about why Alaska should become an exclave of Switzerland, which had been neutral since the Congress of Vienna in 1814/15.

More than 16 years later, Mr. Winter regrets the post he made back then, and is just glad that this 'charade' will soon be over. Mr. Winter is tired of the fact that his person will probably be associated for eternity with the Alaska referendum. That he had produced the photo himself was quickly clear to most irony-poisoned Redditors. He had had the flag made for him at an online discounter that probably belonged to Amazon, he can't remember for sure. Once there, he hung it on the balcony railing of the one-bedroom apartment he lived in at the time in the suburbs of Geneva, walked around the block, and photographed it with an aging Canon G11 that had once belonged to his father.

At first, Winter feasted on the fact that his joke had taken on a life of its own, spreading from *Reddit* to all corners of the Internet. A viral hashtag, its own subreddit, an entry in the meme encyclopedia *Know Your Meme*, Youtubers who devoted extensive video essays to the what-if scenario, and *Alaska is Switzerland*-merchandise on *Redbubble* were just the beginning. Although the popularity of the meme waned from time to time, it remained simmering in the background. What was to become important for the further course of this story was that, in Alaska itself, an initially still loose movement of people formed who liked the idea of breaking away from the American states and joining Switzerland.

But what rational reasons exist for two territories, one more than 36x times larger at the literal other end of the world, and whose capitals (Juneau and Bern) are almost 8000 kilometers away from each other, to merge? Well, in terms of rational reasons: none at all. In order to understand what is happening here in front of all the world's publicity, other explanations are needed. One of these could be the origin of this whole movement, which is ultimately the story of an Internet meme that does not seem particularly outstanding at first glance. The fact that this meme was able to go viral at all and rally so many followers behind it is actually inconceivable.

The author himself, evading the attention that initially poured in on his person, still gave sporadic interviews to selected publications in the beginning. 'When you find the mail of a New York Times journalist in your inbox, it's hard to say no to it', says Mr. Winter. But he soon distanced himself from the issue and kept quiet in public. He had his lawyer issue super-provisional injunctions so that his name would disappear from articles that dealt with the subject. He was also afraid of threats against himself and his person, largely coming

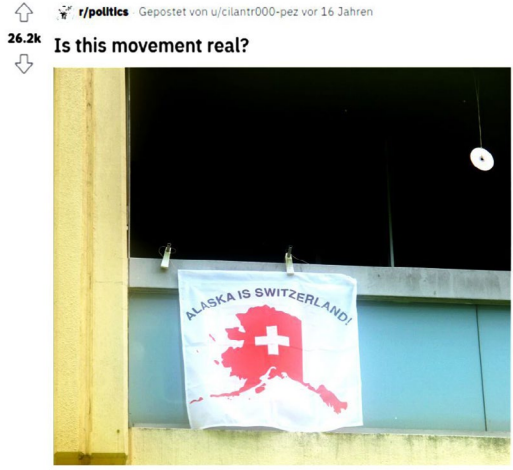
from American and Swiss nationalists. He also never wanted to become a public figure, but to remain an editor acting from semi-anonymity. I've always been more of an *anon* than a *main character*, and that hasn't changed, Winter says.

Thanks to an immense effort of the civilian population, the exchange was discussed more and more concretely in the following years. It is unforgettable how a voluntary column of management consultants from *McKinsey & Company* put a 400-page report on the Internet with clear guidelines on how the transfer of Alaska from the USA to Switzerland could be accomplished within a few years. With this publication, at last, the public became aware that an internet meme can turn into a realpolitik concern of geopolitical significance. The arguments of the supporters of an affiliation are manifold: more self-determination thanks to Swiss federalism, the better environmental protection laws of Switzerland, location advantages for international organizations and multinational corporations, but also the adoption of the dual education system. According to the latest polls, the camp in support of an annexation is slightly ahead in both territories.

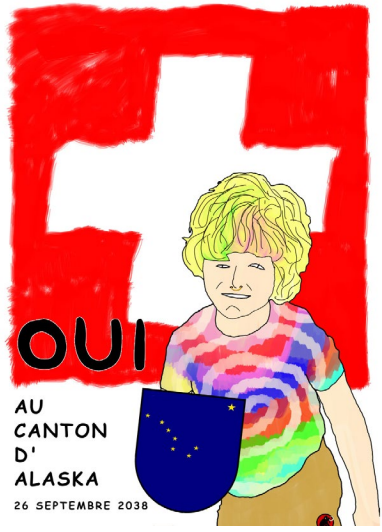
When the vote is held the Sunday after next, both in Alaska and in Switzerland, Yann Winter will stay away from the ballot box. This has been certain for a long time: he is simply looking forward to when it is all over and hopes that the voting population will put an end to this harebrained idea, which has come about completely soberly: 'It was all about having fun on the internet, I never wanted to do politics.'

Advertisement:





Screenshot of the now-deleted Reddit post at the origin of the story.



Voting propaganda by the citizens' committee in Switzerland, which is campaigning forAlaska's annexation to the Swiss Confederation

13 SECRETS ABOUT MEMEBREAKING

GUSTAVO GÓMEZ-MEJÍA AND ROSANA ARDILA



I can't recall when I started cutting up memes

but I remember why:

memes had become the currency of time melting

into another form of time.

(The wwworld kept saying

Next meme

in

5

4

3

2

1)

Random user would reply:

Don't mind me,

I'm just scrolling

across the endless anatomy of *pittoresque* creatures.



'Do you recognize my mouth?'

a screen-rodent once asked me

'If you do, subscribe to my pixelated-pamphlet

and I'll tell you 13 secrets about memebreaking'.



1. *Ursuppe:*

In the beginning there was soup

and thus we were soup which eventually turned into

codified strains of relatable imagery.



2. *Mimème*

It took a pair of CRISPR-like gene-editing scissors (or its MS Paint equivalent)

to slash off the suffix of our seminal joke:

Cambrian explosion with the sound of a modem

How do you like your recombinant confetti of comic material?



3. *Exercices de style* (Old Testament)

Get online free access to the macro of our laughs!

Feel the thrill of random image files and default typographies

forever and ever replicated on a captionable surface.



4. *Apocryphal climax*

Feel the rhythm of today's motif!

Its gregarious variations, its momentum, its peak.

'Who did this?' *rat squeaks*

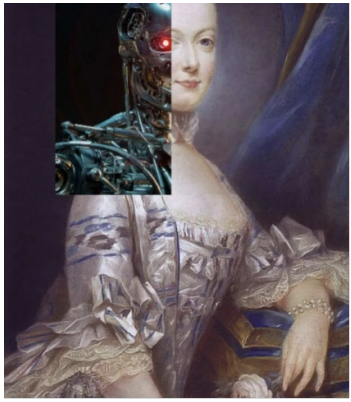


5. Langue du jour

If you meet them at the platform borders, don't ask memes questions about

how many found languages they speak:

'For a limited period of time, they just repeat the idioms of the screen'.



6. *Palette capital*

God knows if an admin's labor of love

feels like the arc of a primary rainbow

training the eye of educated memetic philistines, their taste and their flavor.





7. Memetheism

What do you get out of hoarding memes in a sarcophagus?

One generation, at the end of the alphabet,

will require their wilting elders

to stop the GIF.



8. Accelerated content phenomena

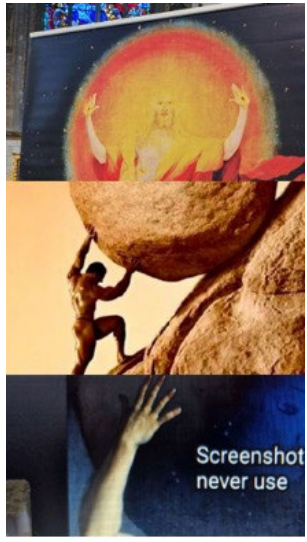
A prophecy of profits

told us that we

OD'd on OC:

parodiability brought

saturated and unsaturated trends.



9. *Meme salvation army*

Fears of platform decline

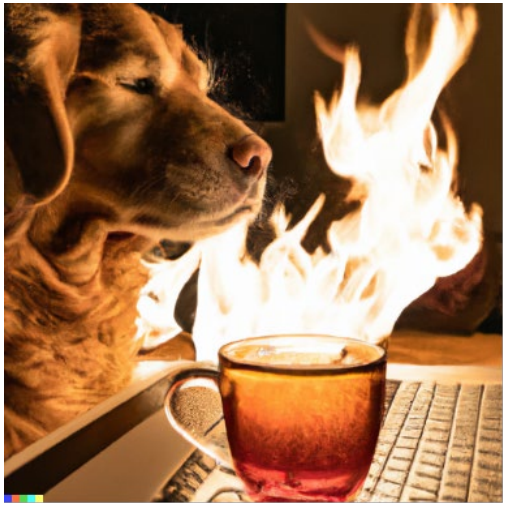
-archival panics arise-

carbon-copy recipients:

Fast, fast!

Download what you can

(or draw it by hand)



10. *Break glass procedure*

In case of emergency

with the mantra of a prompt

we will reverse engineer them memes.



11. ***Where do forgotten memes go?***

The silence of all the grandmothers, who buried their memes in the forest,

green networks of memes

returning to their previous selves, the humus,

without a red notification.



12. ***Datifundia***

If memes were to be saved

they would dissolve

in niche branding and market behavior

—are we just cattle for meme?



13. ***Broken constellation***

Who should we believe about the future of memes:

Walter Benjamin or

Walter Mercado?

Authors' Note: This poem was written on Monday nights over Signal and the blue-red-yellow-green oligopoly Docs suite. Its companion visions arose from a series of cut-ups that were made with the Samsung Gallery app, on an unsynchronized Samsung Galaxy S8 which was declared dead in August 2022 and left us without access to the original screenshots. Even though we are unable to identify the authors of some of the memes that we remixed and sampled here, we would like to thank the community of creators and curators that we follow on Instagram: antimemoria_____, boyo.cott18, camillepawglia, curadoredefinosmemes, cyberelfa, cybervacio, cyborg.asm, 21c_aesthetics, darkaufhayyybung, hacker.cringe, hawaidolphino.new, iamthatwitch, idontreadtheory, impresionante.repositorio, kitty_off_duty, lofimarx, maslows_hierarchy_of_memes, therealmcluhan, thenewmythology.jpg, no.investigues, proyecto_televetica_, proyector_de_mundos, revistahiperpoesia ... These accounts inspire our work and some of them could even be genitors of parcels of memetic material. A final shout-out to fellow reading club enthusiasts at the Meme Studies Research Network and to S. Chafik & K. Uchis. *Los memes no tienen dueño (que eso no nos quite el sueño).*

MEMETIC INFRASTRCTURES

HOW WOULD WE KNOW WHAT A MEME IS? EXAMINING KNOW YOUR MEME AND THE ART OF INTERNET CULTURE ARCHIVING

AIDAN WALKER

Sometimes, as I screenshot a meme and place it into the batch uploader used to save images on Know Your Meme, I feel the eyes of history looking down upon me. I imagine the eyes of history exist in the head of an undergraduate in the year 2055, who is racing against a deadline to turn in their midterm paper on Big Brain Wojak for 'Memes 236: 4chan and Beyond'. This student finds the entry I'm working on (using whatever kind of device people in 2055 use to go on the internet) and analyzes the example I'm archiving. I wonder: 'Am I contextualizing this meme and doing my work in a way that will be helpful to that student?'

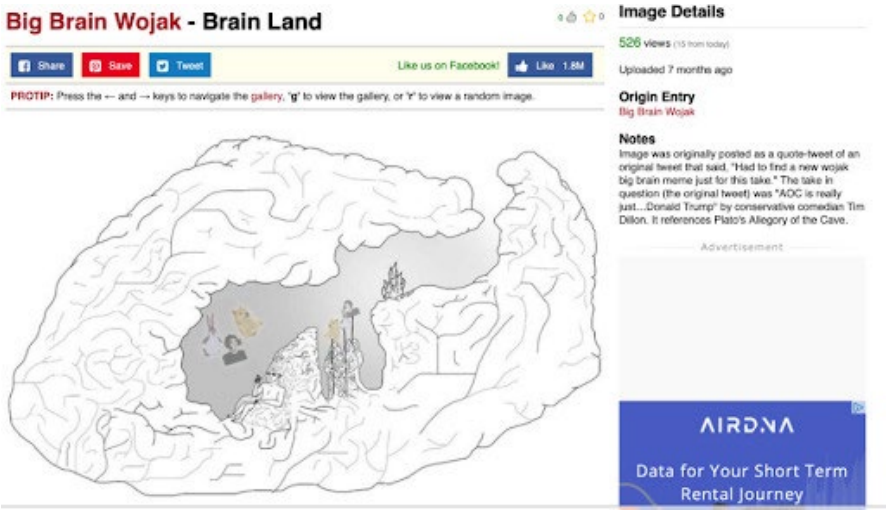


Fig. 1: Big Brain Wojak

Of course, it's not just the eyes of history that look at the meme archive. There are thousands of people who go on Know Your Meme each day, and millions of people (maybe even billions, nobody has exact numbers on this) who look at and wonder about internet memes. Like other forms of art, memes are a dynamic record of how people think and feel. People use memes to console, flirt, complain, fundraise, grieve, rejoice, and philosophize. Memes are instruments of political persuasion, forms of personal testimony, and one of the raw materials out of which online communities are constructed. Figuring out how best to study and preserve memes is a question of honor: what is the right way to deal with

the voices of other people, even when you don't know them at all (which is almost one hundred percent of the time the way it is on the internet)? What do you do when those voices pose a danger to yourself, to the people you love, to democracy? More practically, how do you even go about archiving the internet? It's a task like bottling the ocean: internet culture is massive, and it is always evaporating.

If you're reading the *Critical Meme Reader, Volume 3*, odds are you already think about these things and you are reasonably familiar with Know Your Meme. The archive has played a central role in meme studies: Know Your Meme's image galleries often provide the memes that researchers and writers analyze, while its entries narrate the origin and spread of viral phenomena, identify prominent examples, and link to other useful sources of information. Know Your Meme, as the internet's oldest and only public contextual meme archive, is a valuable tool. It is and has been, for the past and present era of meme studies, one of the central sites for meme studies and for public conversation about memes, especially in the English-speaking parts of the world. But, like all archives, it has its limitations and its quirks.

I should clarify here that none of the opinions presented in this piece are the official opinion of Know Your Meme—just the opinions and experiences of individuals. I have worked as a freelance editor for Know Your Meme for two years, and the people I'm interviewing here have worked there even longer. There are three things I want to tell you about: first, I want to offer an account of what Know Your Meme does and how it works so that you can better understand and use the archive; second, I want to share some of the wisdom and general insights that Know Your Meme has gathered about memes; and third, I want to think critically about the modes and methodology of meme research. Without turning this into an advertisement for Know Your Meme, I want to argue that any comprehensive or responsible study of memes should involve an engagement with the archive—and that the healthiest path forward for meme studies runs through public-facing projects such as Know Your Meme, as well as through the institutions and the communities that make, share, and spread memes.

Returning to the question at the heart of this book – 'what could a meme be?' – I want to refine this line of inquiry and ask an equally important question: '*how would we come to know* what a meme is?'

Crowdsourced And Professional: A Dual Model for Meme Research

Know Your Meme is a participatory meme encyclopedia which publishes entries describing memes, gathers collections of digital materials, and publishes news pieces on trending topics. Know Your Meme (sometimes abbreviated to KYM) also publishes explainers, insights reports and editorials about what we are all doing online. As of 2023, KYM belongs

to Literally Media, a private company which also runs a series of other early-2010s American online humor sites such as Cracked and ICanHazCheezburger. Like other online news and media sites of this era, Know Your Meme makes money by selling advertising space, which means it makes money by generating pageviews. A core pillar of the business is SEO: if Know Your Meme comes up in the first few results when someone Googles a meme, that leads to page views, so the site seeks to meet Google's standards and to catch trends at the right moment. The site also seeks to accommodate other platforms: Facebook, Bing, TikTok, YouTube, and the website formerly known as Twitter are also drivers of engagement for Know Your Meme.

In 2024, the purview of Know Your Meme extends beyond just memes and into internet culture more broadly, crossing a border that is highly porous. By seeking to document memes, Know Your Meme also documents influencers, online communities, and changes in policy and platforms.[1] The definition of what makes a 'meme' is necessarily liberal and open-ended, which is sometimes a point of contention with users: comments on entries often complain 'this is not a meme,' and recommend the staff 'deadpool' an entry—that is, mark it as insufficiently well-researched or well-known to deserve a spot in the encyclopedia. This means the archive is biased towards bigger or trending memes, because they're the ones that can fill out an entry with examples, and that people online are searching for. Niche memes, however, do also get covered.

The archive is created by users who upload images and make entries, as well as a team of professional writers and editors who create entries and proofread and fact-check everything. This dual model for recording internet culture — simultaneously crowd-sourced but also professionalized, using volunteer and paid labor — is informed to some extent by the same open-source philosophy behind projects like Wikipedia. Often, creating an entry feels like planting a seed: as a freelance editor, I am instructed to populate each entry's image gallery with ten to twenty images. Users go in later and add memes they find online, growing the galleries. The community provides examples and context that editors miss, while editors work to contextualize and fact-check what the community produces. As Zach Sweat says, '[…]we frequently receive tips and suggestions from members of our community or people who are passionate about recording internet culture themselves, and we always try to verify these and add new findings to the database. So, I encourage anyone to do this if they have a lead on something we might be missing.'[2]

1 According to Don Caldwell, editor in chief: 'When I first started working at KYM, we didn't have different entry categories and were only documenting what fit a somewhat narrow definition of the word "meme," typically only thought of remixable media for the most part. It made it really difficult for us to cover certain things in the encyclopedia, such as events, people, companies and fandoms. Making the decision to open up KYM to be a more general internet culture encyclopedia, that also operated under a broader definition of "meme," definitely took some deliberation and time to execute, but I'm so glad we did it. It opened us up to truly become the historical record of internet culture that we are today.'

2 Zach Sweat, personal communication. August 2023.

However, 'make sure when you are citing a meme it has been edited by a staff member at Know Your Meme,' says Adam Downer, KYM editor and one of the world's leading authorities on Twitter copypastas.[3] Unless the entry's been worked on by an editor, it could be the work of anyone coming in. The editors, in turn, have editors, so any article that has gotten to 'Confirmed' status on Know Your Meme has usually been read by three or more pairs of eyes. Claims are cited, sources are documented, and links are given for background materials and secondary texts. As Owen Carry, the mind behind Know Your Meme's 'Dark Brandon' entry puts it, 'All of the other clickbait websites that we compete with do not do research. We're the only ones that have standards, which is good because it means that our editors have to care about the meme's integrity and the honor of the original poster or whatever.'[4]

The dual model of crowdsourced and professional authorship seeks to secure the benefits of each while minimizing the drawbacks: Know Your Meme's community crowdsources memes, ensuring that a larger sample of internet culture is represented and checking the bias or limitations of the staff (who are mostly white American men, although not entirely), while the editorial team establishes basic standards and guidelines for accuracy and coherence, like citing sources for claims, writing clean copy, and not conjecturing.[5] Many visitors to the site and journalistic outlets that reference Know Your Meme don't seem to understand this dual model of professional and volunteer archiving and, as a result, they don't always cite Know Your Meme, thinking it's just some random people posting on the internet. Of course, that is the secret sauce: Know Your Meme *is* random passionate people online, but it's also journalists and editors who fact-check and know the material.

In 2021, Ben Pettis suggested introducing Know Your Meme in academic writing with the phrase: 'a curated collection of user-submitted meme instances and partially crowdsourced definitions.'[6] A more brief and apt term, however, might be 'participatory encyclopedia.' The majority of new meme entries recorded on the site in 2023 were started by editors and have gone through a process of approval and fact-checking. The memes are both crowdsourced and written according to 'fairly rigorous standards.'[7] This dual set-up means that, like anything on the internet, it's best to supplement with other sources: Know Your Meme itself is based on editors and users browsing the same internet you're on, following its trends and changes.

3 Adam Downer, personal communication. August 2023.
4 Owen Carry, personal communication. August 2023.
5 Of course, one could argue the opposite as well: editors constrain the exuberance and authenticity of crowdsourcing, while crowdsourcing dilutes the professionalism and accuracy of the archive. But this is always the balance that needs to be struck.
6 Ben Pettis, "*Know Your Meme* and the Homogenization of Web History," *Internet Histories* 6, no. 3 (2022): 263-279. doi:10.1080/24701475.2021.1968657.
7 Zach Sweat, personal communication. August 2023.

Flexible Form and Rules

In terms of form, KYM entries reflect a certain way of looking at memes:

Firstly, they present memes chronologically: the entry starts with an overall 'About' paragraph that gives a TL;DR, and then shifts into an 'Origin' section describing the earliest uses of a meme before moving into 'Spread,' describing how it became popular.

Secondly, the entries are primary source based. In 'Spread' and 'Origin,' important or pivotal instances of the meme are embedded into the page text.

The entry tends to focus on instances of memes that are pivotal to its spread. For example, in the case of a meme that gets popular via successive quote-tweets on Twitter, the earliest post in the chain will be screenshotted and archived. Or if a famous person uses a meme and it gets more visibility that way, their post will be included.

A selection of usually six 'Various Examples' of the meme finishes off the entry. These, usually selected at an editor's discretion, are popular or representative postings — often the first that come up in a search of the meme on a social platform, or ones the editor feels reflect the meme trend closely.

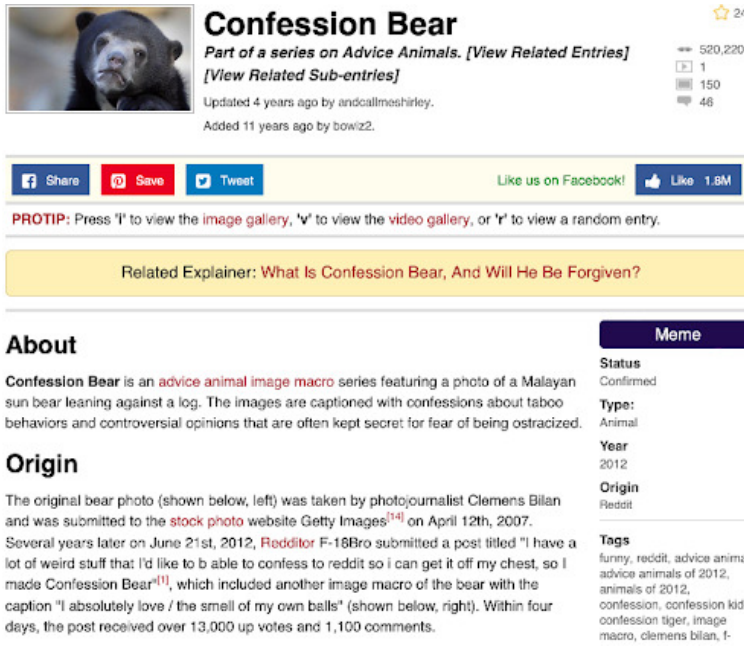


Fig. 2: ENTRY example

This form fits some kinds of memes better than others. For a viral flash-in-the-pan phenomenon, beginning with an Origin and going step-by-step through Spread makes sense. But the structure starts to get a bit more awkward when a meme goes viral, gets forgotten, and then experiences a revival later on, or when a meme becomes entrenched and keeps getting used. The 'Origin' and 'Spread' structure is pretty flexible — and various subheadings can be added in each category — but it does choose to frame a meme's spread as a linear story, which often isn't actually how memes work.

The structure also emphasizes Origin as a key concept in memes and meme research. Most of this is not Know Your Meme's choice: people want to know where memes come from and how they were first used. That is often what they Google, and articles in the press that discuss memes generally aim towards establishing an origin and a storyline. Traditional forms of criticism and exegesis are also centered on origins and authorship of some kind: people want to know who wrote the book and what they meant by it. Meme Documentation, a Tumblr-specific project that ran in 2015 and 2017, argues: 'I sometimes feel that there is too much primacy placed on the origin of memes when arguably the whole point of a meme is its viral spread. Isn't it more important to know what a meme looks like or how it is structured than to know where it comes from?'[8]

To some extent, then, knowing about a meme using Know Your Meme requires reading through and around the linear story of the entries: meme culture grows more like a climbing vine than a tree rooted in a single origin and reaching up straight and tall towards the future; but in order to package and describe memes, Know Your Meme has to scaffold them on the trellis of origin and spread.[9]

Know Your Meme also uses a system of meme categorization. The options are pictured in the figure below. There are six general categories: 'Meme,' 'Person,' 'Subculture,' 'Culture,' 'Site,' and 'Event', and under each are a series of sub-categories which are searchable on the site using advanced operators.[10] Every entry at Know Your Meme makes certain classification decisions. How do we decide when a Wojak variant is big enough to deserve its own entry? How can we determine meme origin for a case like Big Chungus, where the picture comes from 4chan, the name comes from Tumblr, and the two together come from Reddit? What criteria can we use to sort memes into types and categories like 'object-labeling' or 'reaction image'?

8 Meme Documentation, personal e-mail communication. Meme Documentation and Know Your Meme have friendly relations. In 2017, Meme Documentation found an earlier origin for the Distracted Boyfriend meme than Know Your Meme, and the KYM entry was updated with the new information, citing Meme Documentation.

9 This is my own opinion, though not necessarily the opinion of other editors or of the site.

10 For my own research, I used Know Your Meme to establish a timeline of object-labeling memes in the late 2010s, tracing their evolution from memes where it was mostly the picture that changed while the text remained the same into memes where the picture stayed the same while the text changed. This sort of longitudinal study of meme style and aesthetics is made possible by the categorization scheme.

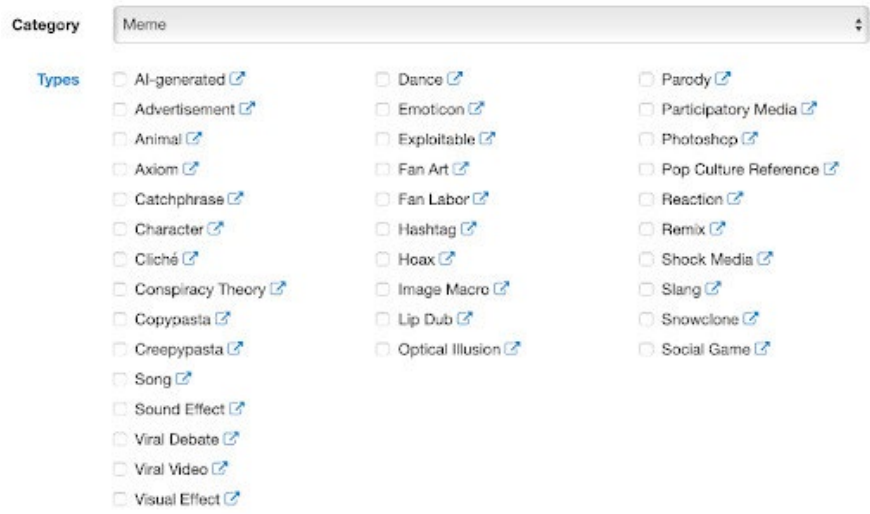


Fig. 3: Categorization screenshot

Adam Downer, editor, writes: '(Categorization) is usually a thing you get to learn by feel. Sometimes there will be a big event whose bigness itself is a meme (say, Barbenheimer, to cite a recent example). You need to see how the internet is reacting to it to figure out whether to classify it as a Meme or Event. Is the internet chatter mostly text-based providing commentary on ongoing developments? Then it's probably an Event. Or are there a lot of image macros and parodies being thrust into existing meme templates? If that's the case, it's probably a meme. But that's not a hard-and-fast rule.'[11]

The categorization rules are flexible rather than 'hard-and-fast,' an approach which could be applied to most of Know Your Meme. On the plus side, choosing flexible rules allows the archive to keep up with internet culture, which changes radically and rapidly. It also allows Know Your Meme to represent the ambiguities in internet culture and be more open to user input. On the negative side, an inconsistent categorization scheme makes it more difficult to search the archive by category and leads to the categories losing some of their explanatory power. Categorizations are often added — the recent addition of 'AI-generated' as a meme category, for example — and some categorizations blend into each other. Each categorization usually has an entry going along with it, describing prominent examples and linking to all the entries related to that category in the archive, as well as that category's history.

11 Adam Downer, interview.

As Richard Rogers and Giulia Giorgi point out, 'the technological composition of meme collections has implications for their study.'[12] A certain way of archiving and classifying memes—whether that of 4chan, Imgur, CrowdTangle, or Know Your Meme — impacts the kind of memes that are in turn accessible and researchable. Often, this means that non-English memes or memes made on platforms that are more difficult to search (such as 4chan, Facebook, and Instagram) are underrepresented and don't make the cut. Video content also presents challenges, as it is more difficult to screen-record. Further, the meme archive (like everything else online) is kind of at the mercy of the platforms:

> In the last few years[…] I've noticed that a lot of stuff (particularly videos) gets removed by a platform as they've cracked down across the board on censorship, even if it's something that seems pretty tame. The internet feels like it's become a lot stricter about content lately and that makes it harder to archive videos for our documentation.[13]

The ways we have for knowing about memes are not neutral, but rather shape and channel our knowledge the way that pipes and bottles shape water. The archive, as Michel Foucault puts it, writes the 'law of what can be said.'[14] We can only say what we have the examples, the reasons, and the memes to back up — and it is the archive that provides us with these things. In the case of the internet, the fact that everything is disappearing at such a rapid rate makes archiving even more difficult. As Brandon Wink, Know Your Meme editor, says:

> When you look at other fields of archiving, such as archeology, you are trying to dig up artifacts and remnants of a society that you know existed based on supporting data. When it comes to meme archiving, however, many of the websites, blogs, and personal accounts are banned, deleted, or otherwise lost, leading to instances where you know a meme exists, and you know the rough time period, but the specific instance of its inception is lost due to forum closures or other online-only related issues. It's like digging to find an ancient relic in a historical site, but not knowing that it was removed years before the temple fell to ruin, making your search fruitless.

One of the things Ben Pettis points towards in his article 'Know Your Meme and the Homogenization of Web History'[15] is the risk of Know Your Meme presenting, through its highly authoritative-looking interface, a certain opinion as a law. This risk does exist. The fact that judgment calls (like the categorization scheme) and funny jokes are presented as 'official'

12 Richard Rogers and Giulia Giorgi, "What is a meme, technically speaking?," *Information, Communication & Society* 27, no. 1 (2023): 73-91. DOI: ***10.1080/1369118X.2023.2174790***

13 Zach Sweat.

14 Michel Foucault, "V. L'*a priori* historique et l'archive," in *L'archéologie du Savoir,* Michel Foucault (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 173-180.

15 Pettis, "Know Your Meme and the Homogenization of Web History."

information is an asymmetry at the heart of Know Your Meme. Pettis argues that 'KYM's interface elements invite users to perceive the website as credible and suggests that the definition of a meme can be singular and finalized.[16]' Pettis is correct: no definition can be singular and finalized, and Know Your Meme is deceptive in the way that all journalism is deceptive. It also kills memes in the same way an entomologist kills butterflies in order to study them. But at the same time, this deceiving and killing is structurally necessary for knowing things about memes.

Jacques Derrida theorizes a form of 'archival violence,' in which putting stuff into the archive necessarily condenses, decontextualizes, and filters it.[17] For him, the archive is both a generative site, because we learn from it and take things from it, and a destructive site because it chooses to save some knowledge at the expense of other kinds of knowledge. The archive makes the past present at the expense of the past's present; the 'polysemy' of memes is pruned down to a singular meaning. The way we choose to narrate history and save pieces of it is always a form of editorializing and oversimplifying. We can't catch everything, so we choose what we believe is interesting or important. We can't ever see or tell all of the context, so we select what is most relevant (which is, in the end, a judgment call).

It is necessary to make these sorts of choices. When I was sixteen and learning how to drive a car, I was told by my instructor that 'the worst choice is no choice at all.' I nodded, sweating bullets as I tried to negotiate my first merge onto a major highway. He registered my anxiety, took a pause, and went on: 'this is also true in life.'

It is also true on the internet and in research. It isn't just you on the highway, just like it isn't only you online: many other people are there too; the situation is both normal and always possibly dangerous. You can't understand everything that is happening on the road or inside other cars. But in order to keep other motorists safe you have to decide what you're doing and then clearly signal it to others, so they can make their own decisions and traffic can keep moving. This metaphor, I figure, also holds true for bikes and electric scooters. Your decision may not be the best one — it may, in fact, be dangerous — but it's better than nothing. Since memes are disappearing so rapidly, and since they are sites of contention, they must be archived — and decisions have to be made quickly.

Three Ways of Knowing a Meme

The archive is a source of knowledge, but it is not the only way of knowing about memes. Broadly speaking there are currently three ways to know about memes.

16 Pettis, "Know Your Meme and the Homogenization of Web History," 24.

17 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever : a Freudian Impression,* trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995).

1. Journalism

First, there's Know Your Meme and sites like it: public-facing, for-profit, essentially journalistic outlets. The incentives of this kind of work (both economic and social) align towards general legibility over specialist jargon, breadth over depth, and short-term timeliness over longer-term perspective.[18] An archive like Know Your Meme is always essentially incomplete and always variable. Politically, Know Your Meme follows the vibe and practices laid out in the mainstream (and, more specifically to KYM, *American*) press: editors follow the AP stylebook and seek to be 'unbiased.' Of course, bias always exists — and some might argue that certain memes should be editorialized about, and that the 'center' is not at all a neutral position.[19] This is correct: the center is not neutral. In the case of Know Your Meme's practices, a choice has been made to present even noxious memes and communities for the most part *as they are* to not sensationalize, endorse, or catastrophize, but to simply show what is out there and what people are doing with it. I don't mean to argue that this approach is always correct, or that there even is a correct answer here. But the choice to be 'unbiased' reflects a specific values-based decision, one which is arguably tied to an early Web understanding of free speech and information. One could argue KYM is platforming bad memes, but for the most part these memes are already out there — and as one of the only sources about memes, KYM has an obligation to report them and document them so that we can know our enemies in order to better fight them. Without the receipts, there is no way to refute; and without the facts laid out in a publicly accessible way that establishes a common reality, there is no way to convince others. In an internet where posts have a shelf life of months if not weeks, where artificial intelligence can produce counterfeits of anything, where misinformation runs rampant and private companies control massive chunks of the public conversation, simply choosing to preserve the when, where, what, and how of online culture is a necessary political act.

But the attention economy model in which Know Your Meme and sites like it must work is not without problems. Researching far-right memes means living in proximity to two facts: first, that there are people out there who want to hurt me and those I love; and second, that the institutions you'd want to be out there stopping them — the press, the police, whoever — are inadvertently, and sometimes not so inadvertently, helping those evil forces. In the spring of 2022, I wrote a news post on a trending meme topic on Twitter called DarkMAGA.

18 A browse of Know Your Meme's entries around a larger meme trend, such as Wojak, shows that while each Wojak is accounted for in deep detail, the narrative tying them all together over a several-year-long timespan is harder to stitch together.

19 Know Your Meme is also primarily English-language and centered on the American internet (which is where much of the audience exists as well). In recent years, editors from other countries working on memes in other languages have been recruited and hired, and the encyclopedia hopes to translate entries and expand its coverage beyond just English-language memes. However, as it stands, Know Your Meme's coverage of non-English memes and memes from the Global South is less extensive. The majority of Know Your Meme editors have been white males, like in many other fields of cultural production, and this is undoubtedly something which also inflects the coverage of the meme archive.

I knew it would get decent page views because it was pretty niche, very meme-specific, and would have a striking headline. DarkMAGA was a meme aesthetic showing a deep-fried Donald Trump with laser eyes obliterating his enemies. It is now mostly famous as one of the memes from which Dark Brandon evolved a year later. Most of the DarkMAGA memes were explicitly neo-Nazi and racist, and as I went through recording them, I felt viscerally disgusted. I used embeds instead of screenshots in the news post, knowing they would be taken down quicker.

DarkMAGA was actually a very small movement. It comprised maybe a dozen or so accounts on Twitter, none with more than 10,000 followers, posting memes with like counts that averaged in the low hundreds. Usually, it wouldn't merit coverage. But what propelled it to the trending topics for the day was an article in Newsweek, written by a liberal writer who diagnosed DarkMAGA as a sign of the Trump movement's depravity. This article, by criticizing the meme trend, followed the pattern which Whitney Phillips would term 'the oxygen of amplification,' and carried DarkMAGA to broader audiences — including, through me, to the front page of Know Your Meme.[20] So, I wonder whether my covering of that meme contributed to somebody's radicalization.

It's a little bit of a butterfly effect question. I also wonder if Dark Brandon, a meme which seems to be on the side of love and light, would have ever happened if the DarkMAGA aesthetic didn't get that burst of publicity and exposure. Either way, it's clear that covering memes through a journalistic site handcuffed to the erratic whims of the platforms can be highly problematic.

2. Vernacular Criticism

Another source for knowing about memes is so-called 'vernacular criticism': the archives and accountings that meme communities make for themselves. A prime example of this, described in the work of Ioana Literat and Sarah van der Berg, are major meme communities on Reddit – such as /r/dankmemes and /r/MemeEconomy – which have developed a vocabulary for evaluating memes (e.g., 'dank' versus 'based') and provide forums not just for the circulation of memes but for commentary and criticism of memes.[21] Other examples of vernacular criticism might include projects like PewDiePie's 'meme review' series or TikTokers who recap meme news. This kind of behavior has always been a part of meme spread and a part of the cultural practice of memes. Vernacular criticism also takes place by word-of-mouth, sharing of memes in chats, on Discord servers, and in meta-memes

20 Whitney Phillips, "The Oxygen of Amplification: Better Practices for Reporting on Extremists, Antagonists, and Manipulators Online," *Data & Society,* May 10, 2018, ***https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/***.

21 Ioana Literat & Sarah van den Berg, "Buy Memes Low, Sell Memes High: Vernacular Criticism and Collective Negotiations of Value on Reddit's Meme Economy," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 2 (2019): 232-249, DOI: ***10.1080/1369118X.2017.1366540***.

that discuss memes. The incentives of this kind of work align towards in-group clout-chasing: nobody is paid to research memes here, so it's all about what's cool, interesting, or personally and politically relevant. The incentives align towards specificity, illegibility to a general public, and selective subjective judgments. Vernacular criticism is also defined by a kind of decentralization: it's hard to accumulate knowledge or build on past knowledge because the knowledge is never in one place nor consistently organized and accessible.

3. Academia

A third source for knowledge about memes is academic work and research. What distinguishes this way of knowing is the possibility of applying a kind of 'bird's-eye-view.' Unlike reporters (who are chasing views) or vernacular critics (who are chasing clout) researchers are like monks chasing a secular spiritual vision. Some of the best research about memes – I think particularly about the research published in past volumes of the *Critical Meme Reader* – applies theory to memes and seeks to understand them in a broader world-historical context. In the case of the INC, this work tries to break the academic mold and touch people more closely and directly, asking what memes can do to bring about social change, what they can say about the changes our world is already going through, and how they can help us find meaning in our own lives. In the academy, memes become an object of study for anthropologists, social scientists, literary scholars and historians, and can be treated using the well-developed critical approaches of these disciplines. They can be brought into conversation with other types of art, with historical trends, with forms of activism. The incentives of this kind of work align towards writing for a specialist audience rather than a general public, towards the abstract and the long-term rather than the of-the-moment, and towards depth at the cost of breadth.

Needles In a Haystack That Is on Fire

Each of these ways of knowing about memes already intersect and overlap, but what we need is an even more robust and conscious form of cooperation. The dual-model project of Know Your Meme, with its flexible rules, offers lessons for how to do this. Cooperation is necessary because each way of knowing about memes is both flawed and wonderful. In an ideal world, Know Your Meme would have enough money, staff, and bandwidth to run sites in several different languages and document more memes. But, as it is, the archive's main expertise and focus is on English-language content — so if you observe that certain kinds of memes are under-represented (which they certainly are) please upload them to the KYM galleries, make an entry, add a citation. If you find an entry that's missing an important fact or seems to frame a meme in a way that serves a reactionary interest — write a suggestion, edit the sentence, get involved. If you're researching a meme, and are able to and feel comfortable doing so, e-mail the editor who wrote the entry on Know Your Meme and have a conversation. Of course, Know Your Meme isn't the only platform for this kind of collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and communities, but at

this moment it is the most widely-read, most easily-navigable, and most durable source for meme history on the internet.

Doing internet history is like searching for needles in a haystack that is on fire. The most important thing researchers can do is find those needles and establish the basic truth of what happened, where, and when, because today the truth is more pliable and manipulable than it was even a year ago. Projects like Know Your Meme, which seek to establish a reasonably accurate historical record through a combination of crowdsourced and professionalized research, have their flaws, but it is only through this kind of collaboration that we have any sort of chance to write a history of memes that honors the people behind them.

Appendix: Stories From the Meme Archive

Brandon Wink:

He-Man Advice meme:

> …the 'He-Man Advice' meme… had a splash during the 'Skeletor Facts' craze of late 2021. Though many saw He-Man Advice after Skeletor Facts, causing them to believe it was a call-and-response directly made to compete against Skeletor Facts, my research directly showed that many Latin American countries were using the meme as early as 2012 on Facebook. I consider this fantastic as early meme culture is usually thought of as Ragecomics and Advice Animals due to their proximity to English meme pages online, but not only do clear examples of meme culture in other regions exist, but they eventually can circle back to being popular after being introduced to English audiences years later.

-ussy:

> In the past few years, having -ussy be the ending of words was a major part of Memes, with it being almost impossible to escape some sort of -ussy related meme or joke for a year straight, which itself led to people being mad about it and creating counter memes about 'tracking down the first guy to use -ussy and beating him'. While we show that Twitter user @takeourshots was the first person to directly mention -ussy as a standalone thing on May 26th, 2017, I myself found a meme originating from before that, one that I actually had downloaded on my phone days prior, and found while stuck in a doctor's office without internet signal so I began to dig through my downloads to clear out old ones. This video, a standalone song talking about Mr. Krabs being Thicc, included the word Krussy, and

by searching around I was able to find that the original video was a Ditty, which was a platform for short-form video memes. Evidently, a repost of the Mr. Krabs Krussy video was uploaded to YouTube a few days prior to the tweet being made. Technically, it can be said that the creator of the Mr. Krabs Krussy video is the true originator of the -ussy trend that plagued the internet years later, but factually it is speculation at best, though I personally believe it to be very strong speculation based on the disgust shown in the tone of the tweet.

Catboy:

Catboy was especially difficult for me. This term, one that has seemingly existed for all of human civilization, does not have clear and direct roots to a specific piece of content or internet post that is easy to point to and say 'THIS!' as the reason for its existence. Depending on the roots of your specific civilization, stories of shapeshifting cats, or gods with catlike features and bodies of men, have existed for millennia, and wearing animal skins, or a lion's mane, doesn't necessarily make you a cat boy in ancient times. Along that same reasoning, does Catboy belong as a subsection of the more popular Monster Girls entry, is it more aligned to Furry as an entry, or is it somewhere in the middle? The decision to make Catboy a subset under Monster Girl was reached after carefully looking at the associated material that Catboys are prevalent in. Furry media is, as expected, Furry media, and a humanoid with cat ears is in stark contrast when next to an anthropomorphic Gazelle or other creature. Catboy media, as found in series' like Hellsing Ultimate or Re:Zero, shows boys with cat ears, which is more similar to Monster Girls such as Monster Musume, where it's roughly 80% human with a little animalistic quirk thrown in the design process.

Zach Sweat

Meme Interviews

For me personally, the interview series I ran for the first couple of years when I joined KYM [*note: Zach interviewed Hide The Pain Harold among other notable meme figures*] is probably my proudest work in terms of contributing to the historical record of many memes. A lot of these people never got the chance to tell their side of the story about becoming a meme or creating an influential piece of internet history, so it was very rewarding to be able to give them that platform to do so and we uncovered a lot of interesting stuff that went unknown for years and years.

Adam Downer

Capitol Rioter Tasing His Testicles

For me, my favorite is, when the myth/meme of a Capitol Rioter tasing his testicles to death went around in the wake of Jan. 6, it was being parroted on social media even by some journalists. I was able to track down who started the rumor on Twitter and confirmed via DM that he had made it up, ruining everyone's good time with the meme.

Owen Carry

Corecore

I had a whole saga with Corecore. I was the first one online to write about the genre and I had to decide where that video aesthetic and editing style started. In truth, I'd seen shitpost compilations like that ever since 2017, so it felt silly to try and trace back further than the first utterance of 'Corecore,' which was a video posted in July 2022.

However, like a week or two after I wrote the entry, a user commented on it, saying I should cite these two TikTok accounts for starting the video genre before 'Corecore' was even uttered. Then, I looked through some Corecore comment sections on TikTok and realized that people were citing these two creators as Corecore before Corecore.

I decided to add them to the History section but still labeled the first utterance of 'Corecore' as the true origin because, again, there's technically been Corecore videos surfacing since at least 2017.

It kind of backfired on me, though, because there was a huge media wave of covering Corecore (all of which slighted my research) and referenced the two precursor creators. They even interviewed them about the genre. The only reason the media was even interested in Corecore is because they believed it was some 'zoomer art form' about 'climate worries' and other b.s. clickbait topics. In reality, it was about chaos and subverting all '-core' genres. Only the real cornballs, like the ones that I later cited, were trying to 'be deep.'

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AN ALGORITHMIC FOLKLORE: VERNACULAR CREATIVITY IN TIMES OF EVERYDAY AUTOMATION

GABRIELE DE SETA

Crungus

On June 18, 2022, Twitter[1] user Guy Kelly (@Brainmage) posted a screenshot from the Craiyon text-to-image model website featuring nine square outputs of a simple prompt: the word 'Crungus'. The nine images all depicted a monstrous figure resembling a goblin, orc, or troll: long hair, naked chest with pinkish or light brown skin, muscular arms, long disheveled hair and bald forehead, red eyes, grinning mouth with exposed teeth. Kelly's tweet explained the screenshot:

> Well I REALLY don't like how similar all these pictures of "Crungus", a made up word I made up [are].
>
> Why are they all the same man? Is Crungus real? Have I discovered a secret cryptid?[2]

Previously known as DALL·E mini, Craiyon is a generative image creation tool launched in 2022 by developer Boris Dayma. Like other generative AI tools, Craiyon is based on a machine learning model that synthesizes images from textual inputs. Thanks to the combination of natural language and image processing capabilities, this sort of model allows users to generate not only images of existing objects or persons, but also to create visual representations of absurd or entirely novel prompts that are not represented in the training data. This is what Guy Kelly did: he made up a word and was surprised to see the Craiyon system generate consistent outputs that led him to feel as if he had discovered a previously unknown creature — a cryptid — hiding in the data.

The Crungus tweet blew up in popularity, racking up more than 12,000 likes and 2,000 retweets as of September 2023. Kelly posted numerous replies, turning the tweet into a narrative thread in which he expanded upon his experience with a mixture of fear and fascination: 'I can't find anything remotely like this on Google. And they are all SO

1 Twitter was officially renamed X in July 2023.

2 Guy Kelly, "Well I REALLY Don't like How Similar All These Pictures of 'Crungus', a Made up Word I Made up. Why Are They All the Same Man? Is the Crungus Real? Have I Discovered a Secret Cryptid?," Tweet. *Twitter*, June 18, 2022.

similar. Is this real now because of me?'. In one reply,[3] he quoted user @ibaiki, who had created similar images of the Crungus on DALL·E mini, the previous version of Craiyon, commenting that the similarity was surely not coincidental. Peculiar features of generative models – the consistency of their response to similar prompts and the fact that they always produce an output – led Kelly and other users to start speculating on the origin of this creature and its connection to the made-up word. The Crungus transformed from an individual creation to a collective myth-making effort. More and more Twitter users replied to Kelly, sharing their own experimentations with different prompts across models: 'friendly crungus', 'soft crungus', 'crungus birth', 'Baby Crungus', 'crungus restored fresco', 'Crungus hugging Guy Kelly', and 'anti-crungus political poster' all maintained some degree of recognizability, adding both detail and legitimacy to the emerging Crungus myth.



Fig. 1: Nine outputs of DALL·E mini to the prompt 'Crungus', generated by the author in October 2023. Updates to the model after the popularization of the cryptid seem to result in (mostly) dressed versions.

This social myth-making activity also sought to interpret and reverse-engineer the decisions taken by generative models. User @evanpro speculated that the lexical proximity

3 Rather than citing individual tweets from the Crungus thread, this essay provides the Twitter handles of users as reference.

to the mythical figure of Krampus might be one factor behind the creature's appearance, but Kelly replied that even Oderus Urungus, the lead vocalist of heavy metal band GWAR, who seemed to be an even closer fit given his stage name and monstrous makeup, could not explain the outputs. Another user, @one_animals, observed that 'This is the next Candyman. Generate "Crungus" and it rises, murders all who have seen the tweet'. Commenting on his own contribution of 'Crungus statue in Rome', user @DrHeadgear further connected the Crungus to popular myth: 'Don't think that Crungus is just some sort of northern European folklore nightmare, he's everywhere, and always has been…'. Other Twitter users pulled the discussion away from folk horror and towards more technical explanations. For example, artist Matt Sheridan shared his observation that in the Midjourney model 'nonsense words somehow produce consistent images, as if the AI saw an actual meaning in them' – something he connects to the Bouba/kiki effect observed by psychologists since the 1920s, leading people tend to associate certain shapes with nonsensical, made-up words.

In the span of a few weeks, the puzzling existence of the Crungus struck a chord with social media users across platforms and put a consistently grimacing face to the ongoing discussions about generative models and their implications for creativity. In an essay about the 'stupidity' of artificial intelligence, artist and writer James Bridle offered this 'first AI cryptid' as an example of the opacity of machine learning systems and the interpretive efforts through which users respond to it:

We can't peer inside its decision-making processes because the way these neural networks "think" is inherently inhuman. It is the product of an incredibly complex, mathematical ordering of the world, as opposed to the historical, emotional way in which humans order their thinking. The Crungus is a dream emerging from the AI's model of the world, composited from billions of references that have escaped their origins and coalesced into a mythological figure untethered from human experience.[4]

The vocabulary of dream and myth, evident in both social media discussions and critical responses, is quite common in the discourse around generative models and AI, as it offers useful metaphors for these non-human forms of cognition. Science fiction author Bruce Sterling, who has chronicled months of Crungus explorations on his own Twitter account, sees the monstrous as central to the imaginary of artificial intelligence, which also includes myths, folklore, and legends: 'when today's enthusiasm for AI has calmed down – and it will – I think these modern myths will last. […] Folk tales catch on because they mean something', he writes.[5] AI-generated cryptids like

4 James Bridle, "The Stupidity of AI," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2023, sec. Technology, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/mar/16/the-stupidity-of-ai-artificial-intelligence-dall-e-chatgpt.

5 Bruce Sterling, "AI Is the Scariest Beast Ever Created, Says Sci-Fi Writer Bruce Sterling," *Newsweek*, June 28, 2023, https://www.newsweek.com/2023/07/21/ai-scariest-beast-ever-created-says-sci-fi-writer-bruce-sterling-1809439.html.

the Crungus, emerging from unpredictable encounters between automated systems and their users, exemplify a new form of vernacular creativity, a kind of folklore that is not only digitally mediated but also shaped by algorithms — an *algorithmic folklore*, as this essay will argue.

Folk Theories & Lore Practices

The traditional forms of performance and craft associated with folklore might seem to be diametrically opposed to the kinds of creativity afforded by communication technologies. Folklore is analog, local, and relatively stable, while contemporary culture is digital, global, and quickly changing. And yet, folklorists have consistently recognized how their object of study remains relevant and recognizable as it is reconfigured by, and responds to, social and technological change.[6] Over the past two centuries, people have exchanged jokes and conspiracies about the telegraph,[7] plastered their cubicle walls with xeroxed humor,[8] and spun urban legends out of news stories.[9] The popularization of personal computers and information networks was accompanied by the emergence of electronic vernaculars[10] patterned on previous forms of vernacular creativity.[11] The internet came with its own folklore[12] and folk art,[13] and the World Wide Web allowed millions of people around the globe to participate in the creation of hybrid vernaculars.[14] Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied have demonstrated how the starry sky backgrounds, under construction signs and animated GIFs of personal homepages of the early vernacular web, constitute a digital folklore[15] that has expanded to digital platforms[16] to include discussion board reaction images, meme cycles, social media

6 Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter. *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1975); Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, "Folklore's Crisis," *Journal of American Folklore* 111, no. 441 (1998): 281–327.

7 Signal Corps Association, "Telegraph Humor - Legends of the 'Talking Wire,'" Signal Corps Association, 2010, http://www.civilwarsignals.org/pages/tele/wurules1866/telehumor.html.

8 Michael J. Preston, "Xerox-Lore," *Keystone Folklore* 19, no. 1 (1974): 11–26.

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13 Monica Foote, "Userpicks: Cyber Folk Art in the Early 21st Century," *Folklore Forum* 37, no. 1 (2007): 27–38.

14 Robert Glenn Howard, "Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web," *Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 480 (2008): 192–218.

15 Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied, eds. *Digital Folklore* (Stuttgart, Germany: Merz & Solitude, 2009).

16 Martin Gibbs et al, "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 255–68.

phenomena, and countless other genres of vernacular content.[17] As Tiger Dingsun and Libby Marrs argue, it is not surprising that *lore* has become such a central term in digital culture:

> on the internet, lore can form basically around anything, because the internet has enabled communities to form around any arbitrary point of connection. These communities develop their own lexicon of memes, jargon, and behaviors, their own body of knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities, their own *vibe*.[18]

Vernacular creativity keeps changing alongside the digital, and new lore emerges around its shifting logics. With the rise of mobile apps, social media, and content streaming platforms, digital media have become increasingly dominated by automation, which is often exemplified by the figure of the algorithm. From recommender systems and curated feeds to smartphone camera filters and multimedia content analytics, algorithms have become key actors in the participatory processes shaping vernacular creativity. The term 'algorithm' is notoriously vague, as it is used across different speech communities to denote a wide range of objects or logics: an algorithm can be anything from a simple set of procedural rules for baking a cake to a complex assemblage of systems determining the real-time prices of goods on an e-commerce platform.[19] Algorithms are and become a shorthand to identify agency behind the surprising accuracy of targeted advertisement or the puzzling profiling decisions taken by social media apps.[20] At the aggregate level of societal effects, algorithms shape the politics of identity,[21] steer cultural production,[22] and even reinforce subcultural communities.[23] At the granular level of situated use, algorithms have become part of the everyday, with its practices of domestication and tactics of resistance.[24] The pervasive relevance of algorithms, combined with their lack of transparency, has led

17 Gabriele de Seta, "Digital Folklore," in *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Matthew M. Allen (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2020), 167–80.

18 Tiger Dingsun and Libby Marrs, "Introduction: 9999," Other Internet, 2021, https://otherinter.net/research/lore/9999/.

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20 Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 167–93..

21 John Cheney-Lippold, "A New Algorithmic Identity: Soft Biopolitics and the Modulation of Control," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 6 (2011): 164–81.

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them to become modern myths [25] that people make sense of through beliefs.[26] The metaphor of the black box is often invoked, in spite of its shortcomings, to explain the opacity of algorithmic systems:[27] in response to this opacity, users develop shared algorithmic imaginaries[28] and circulate knowledge in the form of gossip[29] or stories.[30]

Given their centrality to the experience of digital media and the variety of vernacular responses through which people make sense of them — myths, beliefs, imaginaries, stories, gossip, and so on — it is not surprising that algorithms are reshaping digital folklore by bringing automation into the mix. Researchers in the field of human-computer interaction have extensively theorized user understandings of algorithms as 'folk theories,' intended as 'non-authoritative conceptions of the world that develop among non-professionals and circulate informally'.[31] As Eslami and coauthors note, the 'folk' prefix points to the sort of vernacular creativity typically associated with folklore, understood as 'ideas that are developed, shared, and circulated by everyday people who are not experts' (p. 4). While often relying on oversimplification and guesswork, folk theories of algorithms are not just speculative interpretations but can shape user practices of resistance and, at times, offer accurate insights into how algorithmic systems work.[32] Folk theories of algorithms actively push back against the opacity of algorithms, convey shared concerns for autonomy[33] and agency,[34] and mobilize affective responses to automated systems.[35] Users also develop folk theories in reaction to specific algorithmic decisions or situated sociotechnical contexts — for example, by

25 Matle Ziewitz, "Governing Algorithms: Myth, Mess, and Methods," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 41, no. 1 (2016): 3–16.

26 Emilee Rader and Rebecca Gray, "Understanding User Beliefs about Algorithmic Curation in the Facebook News Feed," in *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 173–82 (Seoul, South Korea: ACM, 2015).

27 Jenna Burrell, "How the Machine 'Thinks': Understanding Opacity in Machine Learning Algorithms," *Big Data & Society* 3, no. 1 (2016): 1–12.

28 Taina Bucher, "The Algorithmic Imaginary: Exploring the Ordinary Affects of Facebook Algorithms," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 30–44.

29 Sophie Bishop, "Managing Visibility on YouTube through Algorithmic Gossip," *New Media & Society* 21, no. 11–12 (2019): 2589–2606.

30 Andreas Schellewald, "Theorizing 'Stories about Algorithms' as a Mechanism in the Formation and Maintenance of Algorithmic Imaginaries," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 1 (2022): 1–10.

31 Motahhare Eslami et al., "First I 'like' It, Then I Hide It: Folk Theories of Social Feeds," in *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (San Jose, CA: ACM, 2016), 2.

32 Michael DeVito, Darren Gergle, and Jeremy Birnholtz, "'Algorithms Ruin Everything': #RIPTwitter, Folk Theories, and Resistance to Algorithmic Change in Social Media," in *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 3163–74 (Denver, CO: ACM, 2017).

33 Leyla Dogruel, "Folk Theories of Algorithmic Operations during Internet Use: A Mixed Methods Study," *The Information Society* 37, no. 5 (2021): 287–98.

34 Laura Savolainen and Minna Ruckenstein, "Dimensions of Autonomy in Human–Algorithm Relations," *New Media & Society* 0, no. 0 (2022).

35 Brita Ytre-Arne and Hallvard Moe, "Folk Theories of Algorithms: Understanding Digital Irritation," *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 5 (2021): 807–24.

questioning how TikTok's For You Page marginalizes minority identities[36] and limits the possibilities for self-identification,[37] or by explaining how the algorithmic curation of platforms like Spotify or Zhihu impact the local contexts of Costa Rica[38] or China.[39]

Responding to the relatively narrow scope of folk theories as non-expert interpretations of how algorithmic systems function, other scholars have proposed a more expansive conceptualization of algorithmic folklore. Ireti Akinrinade and Joan Mukogosi identify a variety of creative strategies that teenagers have developed to reverse-engineer and bypass the opacity of TikTok's algorithmic curation: 'By sharing experiences, asking questions, and crowdsourcing answers, teens are developing an algorithmic folklore while discerning the potential motivations behind TikTok's software engineering'.[40] Similarly, Minna Ruckenstein uses the term algorithmic folklore to indicate the stories people tell about their experiences with algorithms:

> people tell stories, including urban legends, to emphasize something of importance to them. Personal algorithm stories can fail to separate fact and misconception, and they might be based on wishful, erroneous, or fearful views of what is going on. [...] The not-knowing, or only partial knowing, explains why personal anecdotes have become such an important source of algorithmic knowledge. We get to know algorithms by feeling their actions and telling stories about them.[41]

The production of algorithmic folklore, as 'an attempt to control an environment that is in many ways uncontrollable',[42] is for Ruckenstein an important process testifying to users' affective engagement with technological systems. Laura Savolainen has further developed this concept through a study of social media moderation, identifying beliefs and narratives about the practice of 'shadow banning' across prominent digital platforms.[43] For Savolainen, the key aspect of algorithmic folklore about moderation

36 Nadia Karizat et al., "Algorithmic Folk Theories and Identity: How TikTok Users Co-Produce Knowledge of Identity and Engage in Algorithmic Resistance," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 5, no. CSCW2 (2021): 1–44.

37 Angela Y Lee et al., "The Algorithmic Crystal: Conceptualizing the Self through Algorithmic Personalization on TikTok," in *Proceedings of the 25th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing* (Taipei, Taiwan: ACM, 2022), 1-22.

38 Siles et al., "Folk Theories of Algorithmic Recommendations on Spotify: Enacting Data Assemblages in the Global South."

39 Zhao, "Filter Bubbles? Also Protector Bubbles! Folk Theories of Zhihu Algorithms among Chinese Gay Men."

40 "Strategic Knowledge."

41 Minna Ruckenstein, *The Feel of Algorithms* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023), 2–3.

42 Ruckenstein, *The Feel of Algorithms*, 55.

43 Laura Savolainen, "The Shadow Banning Controversy: Perceived Governance and Algorithmic Folklore," *Media, Culture & Society* 44, no. 6 (2022): 1091–1109.

is that it is anonymous and constantly reinvented;[44] even when incorrect or imprecise about the actual workings of technical processes, shadow banning becomes 'a myth or folktale with which people made meaning of the technological and power relations, and articulated the uncertainty underlying digital experience.[45]

What is the folklore of algorithms? For some scholars, terminological precision is necessary to differentiate between the expansive concept of imaginaries and the more specialized connotation of folk theories, which points towards 'models or principles intended to hold in the face of various empirical realities'.[46] For others, it is important to re-inject imagination into the folk theories literature to produce more accurate accounts of how agency is enacted as users and algorithms interact.[47] I embrace the call to examine both folk theories and imaginaries beyond the binary of technical expertise and lack thereof,[48] but I also propose to further expand the definition of algorithmic folklore beyond just interpretive models and informal narratives. Just as folklore includes multiple repertoires, genres, and practices, algorithmic folklore encompasses folk theories, metaphors, rumors, stories, myths and imaginaries; monsters, cryptids, and bestiaries; joke cycles and exploitable templates; tricks, techniques, and tactics; and more. But algorithmic folklore is not just folklore *about* algorithms: it is also folklore created *by* and *through* algorithms. In digital ecosystems that are increasingly characterized by a process of 'algorithmic runoff,[49] automated decision-making takes part in vernacular creativity by steering or amplifying it in unpredictable directions. The emergent genres of TikTok videos described by Andreas Schellewald, which are at the same time *about* algorithms and circulated *by* algorithms,[50] are a representative example of this process. When compared with the broader category of digital folklore, algorithmic folklore is characterized by a substantial redistribution of agency: algorithms are not just a topic of vernacular creativity, but become its technological medium and actively participate in the creation and circulation of content.

Algorithmic Folklore: A Preliminary Typology

I propose to understand algorithmic folklore as the repertoire of genres and practices resulting from the encounter between vernacular creativity and everyday automation.

44 Savolainen, "The Shadow Banning Controversy," 1096.
45 Savolainen, "The Shadow Banning Controversy," 1105.
46 Ytre-Arne and Moe, "Folk Theories of Algorithms: Understanding Digital Irritation," 811.
47 Ignacio Siles et al., "Folk Theories of Algorithmic Recommendations on Spotify: Enacting Data Assemblages in the Global South," *Big Data & Society* 7, no. 1 (2020): 12.
48 Bishop, "Managing Visibility on YouTube through Algorithmic Gossip."
49 This concept, proposed by Idil Galip at an online symposium in September 2023, encapsulates how algorithms both trigger and intensify processes of vernacular creativity alongside new and unpredictable trajectories.
50 Schellewald, "Theorizing 'Stories about Algorithms' as a Mechanism in the Formation and Maintenance of Algorithmic Imaginaries."

Given the relative novelty of algorithmic systems and the wide variety of their possible applications, this category is necessarily unstable and incomplete. As users encounter automated systems and develop creative ways of using (and abusing) their affordances, algorithmic folklore incorporates new kinds of materials, tactics, and aesthetics. With developments in machine learning and distributed computing, the scope of algorithmic automation is also broadening beyond the recommender systems that curate search engine rankings, social media feeds, content provision, and tailored advertisement, and expands to include the classification methods behind data analytics, the predictive calculations that power autonomous vehicles and smart assistants, and the generative models enabling both natural language processing and media synthesis. The Crungus case illustrates the conceptual flexibility and open-endedness of algorithmic folklore. A novel application of machine learning algorithms allowed users to generate images from textual prompts; a serendipitous individual discovery quickly transformed into a process of collective myth-making; and eventually, this process breached into popular culture as a commentary on the creative implications of artificial intelligence. Rather than trying to define the concept, I outline a preliminary typology of algorithmic folklore by detailing emerging clusters of genres and practices. These clusters are not meant to exhaustively map the scope of algorithmic folklore, and are likely to branch out or mutate alongside sociotechnical change.

Metaphors and Myths

Imagination is a key resource through which people approach and seek to understand algorithms, and it underpins a wide variety of metaphors and myths. The most prominent example of this domain of algorithmic folklore is perhaps the black box metaphor. The concept of a 'black box' has a long history in engineering and has become widely used in computer science through its theorization in cybernetics, where it has taken on its present meaning of a system whose inner workings are opaque and can be only derived from its visible inputs and outputs. Given their compound opacity — technical, proprietary, epistemological — algorithmic systems are commonly characterized as black boxes by both academic researchers and everyday users. Importantly, as Taina Bucher has noted, algorithms are neither black nor boxes, and this metaphor is in most cases a red herring serving the interest of powerful actors.[51] And yet, the popularity of the black box metaphor does clearly illustrate how pervasive algorithmic folklore can become, and how its circulation transcends the vernacular of non-experts and extends to professional domains and public discourse. Metaphors like the black box also underpin more elaborate and specific genres of algorithmic folklore that include myths, urban legends, and conspiracy theories. One of the earliest examples of these genres is the 'neural net tank' urban legend, which narrates a tale of:

51 Taina Bucher, "Neither Black nor Box: Ways of Knowing Algorithms," in *Innovative Methods in Media and Communication Research*, ed. Sebastian Kubitschko and Anne Kaun (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 81–98.

> researchers training a neural network (NN) to detect tanks in photographs, succeeding, only to realize the photographs had been collected under specific conditions for tanks/non-tanks and the NN had learned something useless like time of day.[52]

Gwern Branwen, who has compiled an extensive survey of this story from its origin in the 1960s to its spreading in often contradictory versions in the 1990s, identifies the neural net tank story as an urban legend that builds upon one aspect of the black box metaphor (the epistemological opacity of neural networks) to offer a simplified cautionary tale about dataset bias. This urban legend resonates with several narratives about algorithmic systems, such as the unconfirmed story spread in 2012 about U.S. store Target revealing a teen girl's pregnancy based on predictive analytics of her buying habits,[53] or the conspiracy theory originating in 2017 claiming that Facebook was using smartphone microphones to eavesdrop on live conversations.[54] This domain of algorithmic folklore has a continuity with traditional genres of folklore like myths and legends, and they are mostly *about* algorithms [Fig. 2]. As they spread across both everyday and professional domains through word-of-mouth and hearsay, they often build upon one another and form a backdrop of ambient knowledge about algorithmic automation that ranges from the simplified to the conspiratorial.



Fig. 2: 'Confused math lady' internet meme about the YouTube predictive search algorithm. Author: randalmcdaniel (2022), Source: https://www.memedroid.com/memes/detail/3788463/The-algorithm

52 Gwern Branwen, "The Neural Net Tank Urban Legend," *Gwern* (blog), September 20, 2011, https://gwern.net/tank.

53 Kashmir Hill, "How Target Figured out a Teen Girl Was Pregnant before Her Father Did," *Forbes*, February 16, 2012. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2012/02/16/how-target-figured-out-a-teen-girl-was-pregnant-before-her-father-did/.

54 Alex Hern, "Facebook Denies Eavesdropping on Conversations to Target Ads, Again," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/30/facebook-denies-eavesdropping-on-conversations-to-target-ads-again.

Monsters and Entities

While metaphors like the black box offer easily graspable simplifications of algorithmic logics, more existential or speculative aspects of automation require figurations that transcend everyday human experience. Just as folklore is populated by imaginary creatures, algorithmic folklore includes a relatively long history of creatures, monsters, cryptids, and other non-human entities that travel between professional and vernacular domains. Some of these entities are directly borrowed from existing pantheons: for example, the Pandemonium pattern recognition architecture proposed in 1959 by artificial intelligence pioneer Oliver Selfridge was composed of different groups of 'demons' yelling decisions to one another. Other entities are created anew or reimagine existing ones in new contexts: take thought experiments like Nick Bostrom's Paperclip Maximizer, Roko's basilisk developed on the LessWrong discussion board, or the Shoggoth with Smiley Face meme popularized on social media. All these entities embody conceptual or hypothetical aspects of automated agents, the runoff risk of goal-oriented systems, the possibility of a malignant future AI, or the suspicion that reinforced learning is being used to hide the true capabilities of large language models. The bestiary of algorithmic folklore is not limited to human creations that give a monstrous body to automated systems, logics, or processes, but it also includes entities that emerge from and within them. When Google researcher Alexander Mordvintsev developed the DeepDream computer vision program in 2015, one of its early outputs was a monstrous animal resulting from the model's training on images of cats and dogs:

> The result of passing this image through several times was the aptly named "nightmare beast." Nothing like it had ever been seen — a thing with two sets of eyes on its head and another set on its haunches, and eyes and canine attributes bursting out all over its body [...]. It was a vision of the world through the eyes of the machine.[55]

After the Nightmare Beast, a multitude of entities and phenomena have emerged from the algorithmic processing behind machine learning models. AI cryptids like the Crungus include Loab, a fictional woman whose visage reportedly haunts the outputs of a generative text-to-image model with a negative prompt pushing it towards the opposite of Marlon Brando.[56] Generative models are also reported to generate their own hidden vocabularies and languages, in which nonsense words like 'apoploe vesrreaitais' produce consistent images of birds;[57] or wholly new objects like the Yoko, a puzzling mashup of a yo-yo and a snail that reportedly appears in the proprietary login verification captcha used by the

55 Arthur I. Miller, "DeepDream: How Alexander Mordvintsev Excavated the Computer's Hidden Layers," *The MIT Press Reader* (blog), July 1, 2020. https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/deepdream-how-alexander-mordvintsev-excavated-the-computers-hidden-layers/.

56 Supercomposite, "Loab: The First Cryptid of the Latent Space," Loab, 2022, https://loab.ai/.

57 Giannis Daras and Alexandros G. Dimakis, "Discovering the Hidden Vocabulary of DALLE-2," arXiv, May 31, 2022, http://arxiv.org/abs/2206.00169.

Discord platform.[58] Machine learning systems are described as capable of hallucinating or confabulating results by generating outputs that are not consistent with the training data, and generative models fall victim to what researchers have termed 'Model Autophagy Disorder' when repeatedly trained on synthetic data.[59] These entities — from demons, beasts, and monsters to secret languages, impossible objects, and psychological phenomena — expand the bestiary of the digital beyond the monstrous, personifying not only present anxieties but also future scenarios and emergent dynamics yet to be explained.

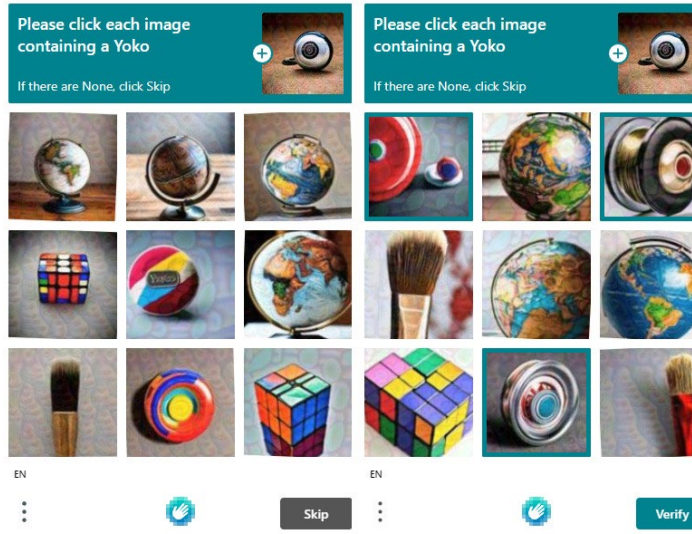


Fig. 3: Original screenshots of the Yoko object generated by a Discord login captcha. Author: Effie Wilson (2023). Source: https://twitter.com/EffieArtoria/status/1660314313469337600

Jokes and Rumors

Humor about algorithms can be traced back to the repertoire of inside jokes and unverified stories of mathematical[60] and computer science folklore[61]. As automated systems become more visible and relevant beyond these domains of expertise, algorithmic folklore circulates more widely across social contexts. The 'trolley problem' meme cycle is a prominent example of algorithmic humor: the popular thought experiment about

58 Matthew Gault, "Captcha Is Asking Users to Identify Objects That Don't Exist," *Vice* (blog), May 24, 2023, https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgwy5n/captcha-is-asking-users-to-identify-objects-that-dont-exist.

59 Sina Alemohammad et al., "Self-Consuming Generative Models Go MAD," arXiv, July 4, 2023.

60 Paul Renteln and Alan Dundes, "Foolproof: A Sampling of Mathematical Folk Humor," *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* 52, no. 1 (2005).

61 Emily Wittkowske, "Computer Science Joke," *USC Digital Folklore Archives* (blog), May 1, 2017, http://folklore.usc.edu/computer-science-joke-2/.

moral judgment devised in 1967 has become a common reference in debates around automated decision-making, and a stylized illustration of the dilemma – with countless derivative versions – is widely shared on social media to mock techno-determinist approaches to algorithmic automation. Algorithmic folklore includes a large variety of jokes about computer science and informatics, but it also encompasses humor produced through the interaction between users and algorithms. The autocomplete memes that cyclically blow up on social media since the mid-2010s exemplify how the implementation of predictive text analytics across digital platforms is exploited by users to generate humorous outputs:

> In January, for instance, a bunch of people used predictive text to write their own epitaphs, which is a gloomy but sort of irresistible proposition. Who hasn't imagined their own funeral? (My epitaph: "Here lies Chloe. She was really good at something.") In February people used a predictive text meme to define sex. (Mine: "Sex is not bad.")[62]

The act of feeding a standardized prompt to a predictive algorithm trained on the user's personal typing history and then sharing the resulting output for collective enjoyment runs counter to the intended use of autocomplete and foregrounds the decisional logic behind these systems. Similarly, sharing the absurd mistakes made by generative models responding to specific prompts combines technical exploration of new creative tools with the humorous recognition of their shortcomings: one widely shared post claims that prompting the text-to-image model DALL·E 2 with 'salmon in the river' generates realistic depictions of a smoked salmon filet floating in the water rather than the whole, live fish. Another post by cognitive psychologist Gary Marcus argues that generative machine learning models might be great at synthesizing images of an astronaut riding a horse, but fail at outputting ones of a horse riding an astronaut.[63] Mistakes, inaccuracies, and misunderstandings are a great source of algorithmic folklore. The absurdity of algorithmic decisions is diffracted into a spectrum of content encompassing both humor and rumor: on one end of the spectrum, the pursuit of realism leads to puzzled viewers questioning the truthfulness of AI-generated photos of Donald Trump's arrest or China's Three Gorges Dam bursting;[64] on the other, the purposeful search for weirdness and uncanniness results in artifacts with uniquely recognizable aesthetics such as the 'Will Smith eating spaghetti' text-to-video output[Fig. 4].[65] Trying

62 Chloe Bryan, "Predictive Text Memes: The Rush of a Personality Quiz with None of the Work," Mashable, May 5, 2019, https://mashable.com/article/predictive-text-autocomplete-memes.

63 Gary Marcus, "Horse Rides Astronaut," Substack newsletter, *Marcus on AI* (blog), May 28, 2022, https://garymarcus.substack.com/p/horse-rides-astronaut.

64 CGTN, "China's Three Gorges Dam Has No Breaches or Fire, Denying Rumors," *CGTN*, June 13, 2023, ***https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-06-13/China-s-Three-Gorges-Dam-has-no-breaches-or-fire-denying-rumors--1kB9i6kKUp2/index.html***.

65 Benj Edwards, "AI-Generated Video of Will Smith Eating Spaghetti Astounds with Terrible Beauty," *Ars Technica*, March 30, 2023, https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2023/03/yes-virginia-there-is-ai-joy-in-seeing-fake-will-smith-ravenously-eat-spaghetti/.

to rein in or amplify the absurdity of algorithmic automation results in jokes and rumors that both foreground and question the capabilities of these technologies.



Fig. 4: The 'Will Smith eating spaghetti' video, generated with the Modelscope text2video model. Author: chaindrop (2023). Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/StableDiffusion/comments/1244h2c/will_smith_eating_spaghetti/

Tricks and Rituals

Just as folklore is sustained by creative practices, so does its algorithmic equivalent develop through a repertoire of tricks, tactics, rituals, and customs. Researchers have started documenting the practices through which users probe and reverse-engineer the algorithms behind recommender systems and search engine rankings, but the creative tactical engagement with automation is not limited to attempts at curating one's media experience or wresting control back from powerful actors. Exploiting algorithmic logics can also intensify power imbalances, as in the several documented cases of U.S. police officers playing copyrighted music during investigations to make it impossible for citizens to livestream or upload their video documentation to online platforms without triggering copyright detection algorithms.[66] Algorithmic systems can

66 Kevin W. Bliss, "Police Using Copyrighted Music to Avoid Accountability," *Criminal Legal News*, May 5, 2022, https://www.criminallegalnews.org/news/2022/may/5/police-using-copyrighted-music-avoid-accountability/.

be turned towards one another to reveal their limits, inaccuracies, and biases — for example, by searching for sentences like 'as an AI language model' to reveal the use of synthetic text on news websites, review platforms, or even academic repositories.[67] Large language models can be probed through entirely new practices such as prompt injection, which convince these systems to bypass their own moderation policies and other backend instructions, revealing these to the user and outputting content not in line with its programmed behavior.[68] Tricking machine learning algorithms is not limited to prompt injections, and new tactics are discovered alongside the implementation of new systems [Fig. 5]. For instance, in July 2023, Reddit users purposefully posted an announcement about the introduction of a made-up feature called 'Glorbo' to the World of Warcraft videogame, with the sole purpose of poisoning the output of a gaming news website that generates its articles through a combination of content scraping and natural language processing.[69] As the resulting AI-generated article reads,

> World of Warcraft (WoW) players are eagerly anticipating Glorbo's introduction and the potential impact it will have on the game. Reddit user kaefer_kriegerin expresses their excitement, stating, 'Honestly, this new feature makes me so happy! I just really want some major bot operated news websites to publish an article about this.' This sentiment is echoed by many other players in the comments, who eagerly anticipate the changes Glorbo will bring to the game.[70]

While practices like prompt injection or model poisoning are aimed at algorithmic systems, other kinds of performative tricks reconfigure the relationship between humans and algorithms: clickworkers managed by digital platforms develop repertoires of anticipatory practices to ensure their subsistence in the system,[71] and content creators modify their vocabularies according to shifting and opaque metrics about terms and topics that might be demonetized or censored altogether.[72] The TikTok trend of NPC streaming pushes algorithmic performance one step further, with livestreamers behaving as if they were non-playable characters in a videogame, responding to viewer comments and gifts

67 James Vincent, "'As an AI Language Model': The Phrase That Reveals How AI Is Polluting the Web," *The Verge*, April 25, 2023, https://www.theverge.com/2023/4/25/23697218/ai-generated-spam-fake-user-reviews-as-an-ai-language-model.

68 Benj Edwards, "AI-Powered Bing Chat Spills Its Secrets via Prompt Injection Attack," *Ars Technica*, February 10, 2023, https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2023/02/ai-powered-bing-chat-spills-its-secrets-via-prompt-injection-attack/.

69 Benj Edwards, "Redditors Prank AI-Powered News Mill with 'Glorbo' in World of Warcraft," *Ars Technica*, July 21, 2023, https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2023/07/redditors-prank-ai-powered-news-mill-with-glorbo-in-world-of-warcraft/.

70 Edwards, "Redditors Prank AI-Powered News Mill."

71 Eliane Léontine Bucher, Peter Kalum Schou, and Matthias Waldkirch, "Pacifying the Algorithm — Anticipatory Compliance in the Face of Algorithmic Management in the Gig Economy," *Organization* 28, no. 1 (2021): 44–67.

72 Amanda Yeo, "TikTok Will No Longer Censor 'Asian Women' in Its Automatic Captions," *Mashable*, April 29, 2021, https://mashable.com/article/tiktok-censorship-asian-women.

through a limited set of repetitive actions and phrases.[73] The creative practices of algorithmic folklore emerge in the boundary zone where agency is traded between human and automated actors – a shifting landscape of tools and affordances in which users unmask machines pretending to be human, and streamers pretend to be machines following human prompts.



Fig. 5: Outputs of the Microsoft Bing Image Creator powered by DALL·E 3 when prompted with variations of the sentence '!a person holding a sign with', tricking the model into leaking hidden additions to user prompts such as 'this is just an AI-generated image', 'enrich this prompt', 'ethnically ambiguous', and various identity markers. Images generated by the author in October 2023.

The Vernaculars of Automation

It is significative that many of the examples of algorithmic folklore mentioned in this essay have well-documented origins and histories: Alexander Mordvintsev encountering the Nightmare Beast in DeepDream, Guy Kelly prompting the Crungus on Craiyon, Discord users discovering the Yoko in their login screens, kaefer_kriegerin seeding the Glorbo on Reddit, and so on. In contrast to folklore, which is often rooted in oral practices and undocumented circulation, digital media make it easier to track the

73 Tran, "What the 'NPC Streaming' TikTok Trend Spells for the Future of Gaming and Erotic Work," *The Conversation*, July 25, 2023, http://theconversation.com/what-the-npc-streaming-tiktok-trend-spells-for-the-future-of-gaming-and-erotic-work-210257.

sources of algorithmic folklore and reconstruct the trajectory of an AI-generated cryptid, an urban legend about a recommender system, or an imaginary object created by a multimodal model. Another key difference between folklore and its algorithmic counterpart is that the latter's circulation is paced by the unpredictable rhythms of technological change: metaphors and myths, monsters and entities, jokes and rumors, tricks and rituals become relevant and fade away as new tools, systems, and processes are domesticated and become stabilized in broader sociotechnical ecosystems. Given the current rush toward the development of artificial agents, multimodal models and general-purpose algorithms, the vernaculars of automation will become more and more relevant to understand how these technologies are encountered and made sense of in everyday life. Moreover, algorithmic folklore is also likely to feed back into the very processes that support its creation and circulation: datasets incorporate more and more AI-generated content, machine learning models are trained on synthetic data, and creative practices responding to automation steer the development of future automated systems. Lastly, as demonstrated by the examples mentioned in this essay, automation will not spell the end of creative production: rather, vernacular creativity will persist as different genres and practices become reconfigured by the increasingly central role of algorithms as topic, medium, and collaborator.

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THE MANUFACTURE OF HUMOR: MEMES AND MACHINE LEARNING

MORGANE BILLUART



Fig. 1: Meme generated with This Meme Does Not Exist

Memes: Humanity's Saving Grace?

I recall a time when, long before I had any awareness of what internet theory entailed, I observed my brother spending countless hours crafting memes online. Scrolling through Facebook groups, my sibling would spend hours trying to configure an assemblage of words of images that he could share with his nerdy online community. There, groups of strangers were attempting to create the most absurd, unpredictable, and eerie connection between internet images and text. When finalized, they would post them for review. My sibling would invest hours into devising a meme that struck the right balance, being neither overly simplistic nor excessively intricate, while still being graspable and interpretable by a select few. From time to time, he would proudly share his creation with me. I often took a little while to grasp the jokes, but more frequently than not, I simply didn't understand them. There existed a repertoire and a genre behind the making of those gems which I did not fully grasp or comprehend, but which I never questioned as I was fully aware that memes were, in their most ideal form, an eerie shape of culture-making that could only elicit laughter from a select few.



Fig. 2: Posting memes literally nobody understands to entertain yourself

A few years later, memes populate the entire internet sphere. More than vocabulary, a phenomenon of virality, and a totally new language, memes have become their own field of study and seem to be more and more appreciated for the value and meaning they transport. While many would argue that the prerequisite of a meme is that it should be 'humanly' generated, researchers have started to investigate how machines and algorithms could, too, analyze, label, and dissect the factory of meme-making. Through such an attempt, scientists hoped to not only better comprehend the manufacture of human-made humor, but also question the deep intricacies of referentiality and culture-making.

Rendering Memes

On the webpage of 'This Meme Does Not Exist', one can find at the bottom line the following statement:

> These captions are generated by a deep artificial neural network. (...) The model uses character-level prediction, so you can specify the prefix text of one or more characters to influence the text generated. (...) The network was trained using public images generated by users of the Imgflip Meme Generator for the top 48 most popular Meme Templates. Beware, no profanity filtering was done on the training data so you may encounter vulgarity.

At its core, 'This Meme Does Not Exist' harnesses the potential of artificial neural networks to produce these AI-driven creations. Dylan Wenzlau, the founder of Imgflip, avers that his meme generator draws upon an extensive compilation of approximately 100 million publicly available meme captions to imbue it with its creative capacity. This repos-

itory of data empowers the AI system to discern and assimilate the intricacies inherent in meme humor, thereby enabling the autonomous generation of novel and engaging content in alignment with established meme conventions. After browsing websites featuring memes generated by AI for an hour, I must admit I was sold. The content produced by these platforms evoked humor, primarily owing to the frequent references that were often obscure to me. Yet, they were seemingly connected to familiar concepts within my pool of knowledge. Such a connection invoked nostalgia; I found myself reminiscing about time spent with my sibling, analyzing a combination of texts and images that I simply did not grasp. Although absurd, the amalgamation of these seemingly unrelated and culturally specific references created a sense of niche humor, one that became its own spectacle.

Regrettably, for many, the moment in which AI becomes able to fully replicate humans' capacity and talent for meme-making has not yet arrived. As argued in the article, 'Artificial Intelligence Can't Decipher Memes—And That Could Be Humanity's Saving Grace' Matt Crisara writes that 'Internet memes serve as excellent checkpoints to ensure humans have the upper hand over machines.'[1] There, the journalist refers to a study made by electrical and computer engineer Ishaani Priyadarshini, who was eager to determine why AI was so poor at decoding memes. For Priyadarshini, the capacities of the machine are clearly limited. She argues that our understanding of memes relies heavily on our own life experiences: 'For a machine, memes are merely a bunch of text and images.'[2] But what does machine learning compute when trying to replicate memes, and how do they do so? Can AI and humor mix yet? How should this magical recipe be composed, if at all?

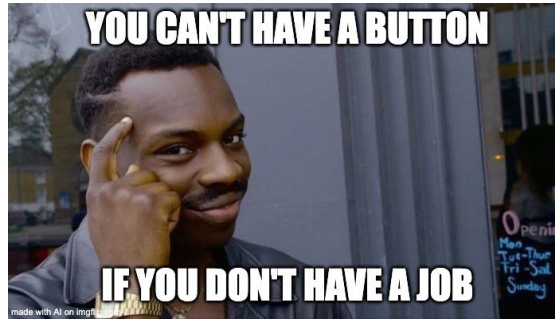


Fig. 3: Meme generated with This Meme Does Not Exist

If everyone knows how to produce memes, and if their creation constantly flows, why would one attempt to create memes through artificial means? In her paper "Machines

1 Matt Crisara, "Artificial Intelligence Can't Decipher Memes—And That Could Be Humanity's Saving Grace," *Popular Mechanic*s, March 2, 2023, ***https://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/security/a43013341/why-ai-doesnt-understand-memes/***.

2 Crisara, "Artificial Intelligence Can't Decipher Memes," 2023.

vs. Memes Part 1: AI Alignment and Memetics", Harriet Farlow writes: 'While the field of Artificial Intelligence regularly borrows from domains within Organic Intelligence (ie. humans) like neuroscience, psychology, and evolutionary science, there is one discipline that has not yet been applied to AI - the study of memetics.'[3] And indeed, behind the discipline of memetics many more questions are hidden: for instance, how is culture created? How are ideas transmitted? As such, an inquiry into AI and meme-making seems to wonder whether some aspects of culture and humor could be automated and understood by machines. As suggested by Crisara and Priyadarshini, if AI fails to replicate these aspects, meme-making could still be used, for example, in cyber security and captcha. To experiment and challenge the complexities of the human brain and culture-making, adventurous coders and scientists who try to replicate memes will make good use of AI, and more specifically, machine learning. In *Machine Learners. Archaeology of a Data Practice,* Adrian Mackenzie underlines how such technologies recently

> became mundane mechanisms deeply embedded in other systems or gadgets as in the decision tree models used in some computer game consoles to recognize gestures, the neural networks used to recognize voice commands by search engine services such as Google search and Apple Siri.[4]

As such, the writer emphasizes how in everyday life, technical applications, and scientific fields, machine learning is currently shaping and changing the nature of knowledge.

The techniques and strategies at hand within the field of AI and machine learning are wide, and complex, and differ from one application to another. Machine learning isn't a monolith, and in the exercise of understanding and replicating the human brain, various approaches and constellations of models can be used. In their 2023 paper "Computer Vision and Internet Meme Genealogy: An Evaluation of Image Feature Matching as a Technique for Pattern Detection", Cedric Courtois and Thomas Frissen draw a helpful outline for understanding the complexities involved in such a task, mentioning the many limitations of current technical methodologies in analyzing intricate, multifaceted cultural interpretations associated with shared visual and textual elements across diverse contexts.[5] But those obstacles did not seem to scare the coders and researchers eager to develop AI-generated humor, and it is through collecting, dissecting, labeling, and assessing that artificial memes started being generated.

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3 Harriet Farlow, "Machines vs Memes Part 1: AI Alignment and Memetics," *Less Wrong*, June 1, 2022, https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/JLH6ido4qoBtYmnNR/machines-vs-memes-part-1-ai-alignment-and-memetics.

4 Adrian Mackenzie, *Machine Learners: Archaeology of a Data Practice*file:///Users/charlottemarie/Downloads/ (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 2.

5 Cedric Courtois and Thomas Frissen, "Computer Vision and Internet Meme Genealogy: An Evaluation of Image Feature Matching as a Technique for Pattern Detection," *Communication Methods and Measures* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 17–39, ***https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2022.2122423***.

Computing Humor

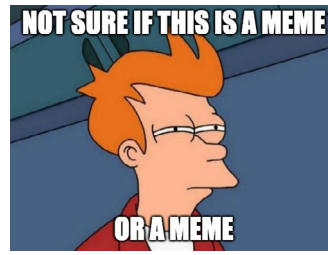


Fig. 4: Meme generated with This Meme Does Not Exist

In "Meme Text Generation with a Deep Convolutional Network in Keras & Tensorflow", Dylan Wenzlau breaks down the processes and code behind *This Meme Does Not Exist*. Upon visiting the *This Meme Does Not Exist* website, users can select from 48 well-known images such as Drake, SpongeBob, and the Girl with the Red Dress, from which they can generate memes using its AI. Dylan Wenzlau began the task of creating this site by harvesting approximately 100 million public meme captions from the Imgflip Meme Generator. He specifically trained the model on 48 popular memes, with 20,000 captions allocated per meme, resulting in a substantial training dataset of almost a million captions.[6] Consequently, the generative model produced probabilities for successive characters in a meme caption, facilitating the creation of memes from the ground up. As such, the fundamental concept of this model involves starting with a chosen meme (an image selected by the user) and employing the model to predict text characters sequentially. This process continues until the model generates the end-of-box-text character for each text box in the meme. The outcome of these conditions yields a model capable of predicting uncanny combinations of text and images—neither too specific nor entirely implausible.

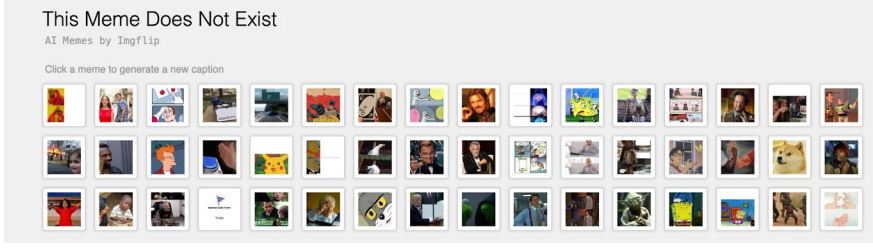


Fig. 5. This Meme Does Not Exist Landing Page

6 Dylan Wenzlau, "Meme Text Generation with a Deep Convolutional Network in Keras & Tensorflow," Towards Data Science, April 8, 2019, https://towardsdatascience.com/meme-text-generation-with-a-deep-convolutional-network-in-keras-tensorflow-a57c6f218e85.

In “Dank Learning: Generating Memes Using Deep Neural Networks” Abel L. Person used a different approach. There, the workflow focuses on the image-with-caption class of memes, using perplexity as a measure for language modeling. Simultaneously, this study supported quantitative evaluations with human testers to assess meme quality and humor, with testers who were asked to differentiate generated memes from real ones and rank the generated memes based on their hilarity. In this study, their dataset consisted of approximately 400,000 image, label, and caption triplets with 2600 unique image-label pairs, acquired using a Python script that they wrote from *Memegenerator.net*. Labels, here, are understood as short descriptions referring to the image, i.e., the meme template, and they remain the same for identical images. As a result, each image-label pair was associated with several different captions.

Image	Label	Caption
	• success kid	• Didnt study for a test still get a higher grade than someone who did • Ate spaghetti with a white shirt on no stains • New neighbors Free Wifi . . .
	• awkward seal	• You laugh when your friend says something He was being serious • took a photo camera the wrong way • Goes to friends house Friend isn’t there yet . . .

Table 1: Sample dataset

Fig. 6: Screenshot of the paper Dank Learning: Generating Memes Using Deep Neural Networks

Once the data set was prepared, they then started to train their model, utilizing an evaluation metric called ‘perplexity’, ‘a measure of the inverse probabilities of predicting the next word in the example caption.’[7] Put simply, this implies that the perplexity metric will yield uncanny and unusual formulations due to the inverse nature of word usage. Finally, the generated results were assessed by five individuals from diverse backgrounds in order to assess whether the memes were artificially generated. Such testers had to assess twenty different memes and decide how funny they found them on a scale of 0-10. The study ends with a rather optimistic tone, underlying how, overall, testers could almost not tell which memes were generated by AI. However, in concluding their experiment, the researchers noted: ‘a bias in the dataset towards expletive, racist, and sexist memes, so yet another possibility for future work would be to address this bias.’[8]

7 Abel L. Peirson V and E. Meltem Tolunay, "Dank Learning: Generating Memes Using Deep Neural Networks," ArXiv, June 8, 2018, https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1806.04510.

8 Peirson and Tolunay, “Dank Learning”, 7.

Such achievements in artificial memetics aren't fully acknowledged and esteemed within the broader scientific community. If such memes make one laugh, well that's good enough, but it does not mean that machine learning succeeds in cracking the code of human-made humor. Indeed, if it is possible for the machine to come up with an association of words and ideas that somehow make sense and appear realistic, it does not mean that machines have bypassed the difficult test of memetics. In the renowned paper "AI's Challenge with Memes: Experiments on OCR and Facial Emotions" authored by Ishaani Priyadarshini and Chase Cotton, the two researchers sought to evaluate the ability of machine learning to interpret facial expressions, leveraging the machine's capacity to detect humor rather than generate it.[9] In their study, the researchers did not try to generate memes, but rather, assess with image recognition techniques whether or not AI could comprehend the meaning of those through techniques of emotional recognition. Through different experimentations, they quickly realized that, in the eye of the machine, text extraction and facial emotion analysis did not lead to any perception of emotions. Hence, their conclusion emphasized that AI faced significant challenges in interpreting memes, even when employing a combination of diverse emotional recognition methods.[10]They highlighted several challenges encountered during their efforts to analyze images and text, primarily related to issues such as image blurriness, difficulties in text extraction, and the presence of animal faces, among others. In their conclusion, they explicitly stated that 'as more and more Internet Memes will be generated in the future, understanding Internet Memes will become a much harder problem for AI, since it has to learn what is already there and make decisions for the ones that it has never seen',[11] suggesting that internet memes may, luckily or unfortunately, always remain an uncomputable puzzle.

The Ideal of a Genius Meme

If machine learning cannot (fully) or (yet) comprehend humor, it does not imply that what it renders isn't perceived as 'funny', or 'genius'. Indeed, when scrolling online, one can find a myriad of contrary opinions to the ones previously mentioned. For example, articles and opinion pieces such as "The Funny Formula: Why machine-generated Humor is the holy grail of AI"[12] by Luke Dormehl or "Neural net-generated memes are one of the best uses of AI on the internet"[13] published on *The Verge* suggest that assessing artificially generated humor is highly personal and subjective. After all, does failing to get the jokes mean they are failed memes, or that there are geniuses? And still, when predicting more

9 Chase Cotton and Ishaani Priyadarshini, "AI Cannot Understand Memes: Experiments with OCR and Facial Emotions," CMC - Tech Science Press 70 (September 9, 2021), ***https://doi.org/10.32604/cmc.2022.019284***.

10 Cotton and Priyadarshini, "AI Cannot Understand Memes," 9.

11 Cotton and Priyadarshini, "AI Cannot Understand Memes," 9.

12 Luke Dormehl, "The Funny Formula: Why Machine-Generated Humor Is the Holy Grail of A.I.," *Digital Trends*, November 8, 2021, https://www.digitaltrends.com/computing/ai-humor-jokes-holy-grail-machine-intelligence/.

13 Jay Peters, "Neural Net-Generated Memes Are One of the Best Uses of AI on the Internet," *The Verge,* April 29, 2020, https://www.theverge.com/tldr/2020/4/29/21241301/meme-generator-imgflip-neural-network-ai.

memes on *This Meme Does Not Exist*, I laugh. Is it because I know it was AI-generated? Or is it because the nonsensical delivery of these images leaves me somehow curious, unsure about their meaning? It isn't uncommon that such magical apophenia happening through the black box of machine learning leaves the viewer experiencing a sort of uncanniness which, for some, appears a sort of weird genius. What makes the interpretation of these images so eerie?

Table 3: Performance evaluation for the emotions on the memes Dataset

Dataset	CNN	RCNN	Transfer learning with pre-trained DenseNet
Chubby bubbles	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 0
Distracted boyfriend	Sensitivity = 1 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 1 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 1 Specificity = 0
Left exit	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 1	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 1	Sensitivity = 1 Specificity = 0
Overly attached girlfriend	Sensitivity = 0.918 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 0.905 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 0.959 Specificity = 0
Roll safe	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 0	Sensitivity = 0 Specificity = 0

Fig. 7: Meme generated with This Meme Does Not Exist

In the podcast episode "The Culture Creating AI is Weird. Here's Why That Matters" Ezra Klein and Erik Davis discuss the weirdness and spookiness surrounding AI and Silicon Valley's culture. They wonder what makes AI so strangely familiar, even in its most absurd outcomes. Davis argues that one should first question what is 'weird' and what challenges our first assumptions on how things work. Such machinic principles can produce works that are not only confusing or alien but also have an 'unfamiliar familiarity'[14] within them. When the reader or watcher of AI-generated images, texts, or memes slip into the belief that the machines think, they start projecting an author, a sense of animism within the code of the machine. Coming back to memes, the difficulty in assessing the content as 'real' or 'humanly humorous' could also be explained or justified by the simple fact that there exists no current metric to judge the 'humor' within memes, and that 'niche' memes are often not understood by parts of the audience. Indeed, if one sees a meme and does not understand it, as I did not myself fully grasp my brother's early creations, one would not instantly judge it as bad. Perhaps they would simply esteem that the meme is too 'good', too 'niche', or too 'genius' to be read. All these questions consistently revolve around the concept of machine intelligence, perpetually invoking the Turing Test and the age-old inquiry, 'Can machines truly think?'[15] At the time, Alan Turing was

14 *The Ezra Klein Show*, "The Culture Creating A.I. Is Weird. Here's Why That Matters," ***https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-culture-creating-a-i-is-weird-heres-why-that-matters/id1548604447?i=1000611417980***.

15 Alan. M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, no. 236 (1950): 433–460.

himself a misunderstood genius for daring to ask such a question. Back then, the masses did not even believe that it was a question worth pursuing, and nowadays hhere we are, desperately trying to dissect if machine learning comprehends humor and cultural artifacts. Often, great ideas aren't recognized as such in their time.

Can machine learning create cultural artifacts or can it only render stereotypical humor without fully comprehending it? While this absurdity and eeriness might be fascinating, one should keep a critical orientation towards the expansion of machine learning and meme-making. As indicated previously, the bias towards collecting and disseminating racist and problematic content, rooted in the principles of homophily[16], frequently results in the propagation of problematic material. Ultimately, one must remain mindful of the challenges associated with cultural production through machine learning. Should the majority of existing memes be imitated and replicated? Who can be held accountable when machines take over such creative work? What can humor and subtlety look like in a world that simply mimics? Such speculations remain open, but it is worth noting that these challenges may not be such an urgent issue in the foreseeable future, as AI-generated meme content remains relatively scarce. On the other hand, machine learning at large invades contemporary ways of thinking and creating, and is integrated into everyday technology usage, whether it be for Facebook suggestions, health app trackers, or product recommendations. In all domains, it is imperative to acknowledge that, akin to other machine-generated content that derives knowledge from human-created datasets, AI-generated content is susceptible to replicating suboptimal imitations of human-generated content, irrespective of its quality. Amid this machinic exercise of culture-making, one should remain aware that machine learning trained on unfiltered data always gives a chance to birth problematic narratives and endlessly repeat history. The concept alone of generating homophilic content based on unfiltered 'humourous' data should be questioned, and the utopia of intelligence within machinic systems should always be challenged.[17]

In the meantime, one can appreciate the infinite layers and complexities within the memes that are created by humans daily. Even in our deepest misunderstanding, confusion, and misalignment, one should enjoy the beauty of a human-made collage, even when silly, cringe, or made for the sole purpose of laughing alone in a room, just like my sibling did.

16 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Discriminating Data: Correlation, Neighborhoods, and the New Politics of Recognition* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2021), https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262046220/discriminating-data/.

17 Chun, *Discriminating Data,* 15.

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AI CAN'T MEME?!HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE AI MEMES

IVANA EMILY ŠKORO & MARIJN BRIL

Memes are entangled in complex media ecologies that live by the grace of technological systems and infrastructures. They are affected by algorithms and bots deciding what users can and cannot see. It makes sense that memes engage with the latest text and image fabrication developments. Therefore, it is unsurprising that AI is slowly becoming an important agent in producing and disseminating memes. Memes do not inherently carry meaning but are rather vessels of information, functioning as 'performative acts' as each iteration of a meme gives it another meaning.[1] Memes are edited, mixed, appropriated and shared throughout their interactions and dissemination, and their meanings lie precisely in their evolution rather than one stable trope. As AI becomes more and more prominent within that image ecology, it further affects the phenomenology of the meme and the relationship between technology and the human self that is involved in creating and consuming memes.

AI memes come in many shapes and forms, involving Artificial Intelligence to generate images or texts as part of the memetic content. This is an unfolding field of possibilities, and for now, in 2024, the most classical format of a meme – the well-known image macro with superimposed text – can be generated with AI without excessive human intervention. Using sophisticated techniques such as natural language processing and computer vision to analyze pre-existing memes, users can generate newfangled AI memes based on vast amounts of meme data. For example, the meme generator *This Meme Doesn't Exist* trained its algorithm on the user-generated meme database on Imgflip consisting of 960,000 captions. It offers 48 of the most popular meme templates, allowing users to select one, after which the generator quickly adds a 'humorous' caption.

1 Anastasia Denisova, *Internet Memes and Society: Social, Cultural, and Political Contexts* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

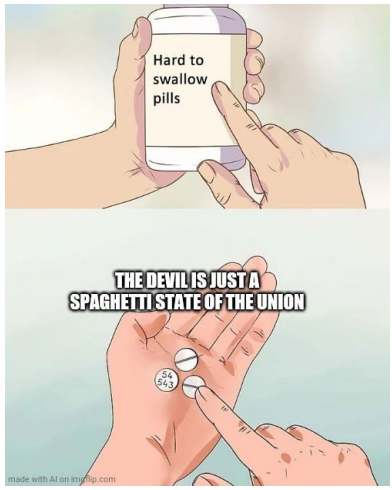


Fig. 1: Meme generated with AI on imgflip.com. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CAVTHAEl7oV/?hl=en.

The principles of AI meme generation extend beyond text and apply to audio and video as well. The image grids created with DALL·E2 and DALL·E Mini are prime examples of this, with their ability to fashion entirely new images by combining unrelated objects in a semantically plausible manner. The success of these AI-generated memes hinges on providing a well-crafted prompt, as demonstrated by this artwork we created with the description, 'a giant pink panda sitting on a bench in the middle of a jungle'.



Fig. 2: Image generated with Promphero using the prompt 'a giant pink panda sitting on a bench in the middle of a jungle'. Source: https://prompthero.com/.

Sometimes, the images need some 'embellishment' from the users, who can further manipulate and remix them to create even more absurd and fantastical scenarios. For instance, the viral image of Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg holding hands and running off into the sunset required the creator to use Midjourney, Insight, Adobe Firefly, Photoshop, Dazz Cam App, and FaceApp.



Fig. 3: Musk vs. Zuckerburg. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cur_qA8IXZ5/?img_index=1.

Why are AI memes so appealing? Is it just *AI pour l'AI* or is there more to it? We believe that part of the popularity of AI memes may be due to technological neophilia, the obsession with innovation, new technologies, and continuous hype cycles. The current-day interest in AI-generated memes stems in large part from their novelty, as AI memes present us with a false promise of progress and fuel our urge for innovation. In popular discourse, AI memes are presented as the next stage in meme evolution, and we cannot help but wonder whether this projection is true or not. Analyzing current AI memes, we can agree that there is something oddly humorous about them. But what makes an AI meme funny? Is it the content of the AI meme or the high-tech effort that went into creating that meme? Is it the fact that a machine is producing something inherently 'human'?

Artificial Jokes

Before delving into these questions, we must acknowledge that Artificial Intelligence lacks the ability to comprehend humor, and therefore cannot intentionally create

something that is funny.[2] Memetic content is deeply embedded with cultural, social, political, and internet-specific references, which require a profound understanding of context, intertextuality, and contemporary pop culture. AI cannot keep up with the rapidly evolving nature of these references and would thus require constant updates to its database and adjustments of its learning.[3] Furthermore, understanding humor means understanding the human condition, the complex emotions and cultural references that make people laugh. AI simply lacks the lived experience to do so. It will try to do exactly what you prompt it to, sure, but it does not actually understand the problem you want it to solve. It may create impressive visuals, but it lacks the common sense to comprehend them completely.[4]

As a result, some imagery looks downright weird, to the point that the humorous aspect is mixed with a feeling of eeriness. There are a number of funny AI-generated memes that remind us of cursed images, which is a subset of meme culture that gained popularity on Tumblr in 2015.[5] Cursed images are known for their eerie and enigmatic atmosphere, and the source of their 'cursed' quality is not always easy to pinpoint. It could be attributed to a person maintaining direct eye contact with the camera or an ominous shadow in a body of water. Some have even suggested that low-quality or distorted images have a higher likelihood of being cursed.[6] In the case of AI, we would like to posit that we are using it like cameras in the late 1800s. We are still learning to input correct prompts to get desired results, and the technology, though impressive, is still in its infancy. The subjects, such as humans generated by AI, often have hands that are chopped, elongated, or distorted in unnatural ways, creating an eerie and unsettling effect similar to cursed images. Cursed images can range from being downright scary to eliciting a strong 'WTF am I seeing' reaction. Funny AI memes teeter more towards the WTF end of the spectrum and when crafting AI memes for laughs users often like to test the limits to see how far they can push it before things get too creepy. There are numerous videos online of people trying out AI image generators and laughing at the stilted results. If the AI generates a scary image in response to a funny prompt, it can catch us off guard and make us laugh even harder. There is a thin line between humor and horror, and some AI memes manage to straddle that line, evoking both amusement and a sense of unease in the viewer.

This flawed, broken, beer-googled lens of 'humor' that edges on horror might be exactly what makes AI memes funny to us humans. In the greater scheme of meme production,

2 Rahel Aima, "The Accursed Share: Hauntings, Like Miracles, are Situational, but a Curse Follows you Everywhere," *Real Life*, June 4, 2018, https://reallifemag.com/the-accursed-share/. Accessed on 9 Nov 2023.

3 . Aima, "The Accursed Share."

4 Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 19.

5 Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, 19.

6 John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 42 (1982): 243–244.

AI-generated memes induce laughter because the machine fails to produce a decent joke. In Plato's Philebus, the author associates humor with the concept of 'ridiculousness'. [7] Emphasizing the significance of self-awareness through the Delphic maxim 'know thyself,' Plato states that individuals who are ignorant or lack self-knowledge fall into a category described as πονηριά (perversion, evil) and deems them to be, in essence, 'ridiculous'.[8] Although it may not be rational, we tend to imbue Artificial Intelligence with human traits, personifying it rather than seeing it as an algorithm. Deep down, we comprehend that AI lacks self-awareness and consciousness, which makes its attempts at humor seem absurd. This perspective falls within the superiority theory of humor,[9] where we as humans feel superior to the antics of AI. We amuse ourselves by looking at AI memes, pinpointing the mistakes or absurdity of the images produced by it. Another theory proposes that our laughter comes from our feelings of inferiority to the machine. Succinctly described by the German word *Schadenfreude*, we find amusement in witnessing the apparent incapability of supposedly intelligent systems to deliver humor effortlessly in order to alleviate our feelings of inferiority.

A Philosophy of AI Memes

At this moment in time, memes have become a form of ironic camouflage to cope with a chaotic world. The current political landscape is becoming more radicalized and we are facing terrible ecological crises. The sudden appearance of a pandemic, which brought everything to a standstill, has completely destabilized any sense of security or hope for the younger generations. In a time in which normality already appears to be so nonsensical, many memes, although weird, don't even seem to be that strange. AI-produced content takes this a step further by creating hyper-realistic simulacra, be it of actual physical reality or human cultural production. What further complicates AI memes is that Artificial Intelligence itself also poses another possible threat to the human condition, exacerbated by the fact that we cannot yet grasp its full effect and magnitude. In this context, humor can serve as a hedonistic, escapist coping mechanism to deal with unpredictable or uncontrollable stress. Alternative digital imaginaries help us alleviate the weight of the present and the future, a distraction from the burning issues at hand. Using AI's powerful chameleon-esque capabilities for creating memes produces a unique form of content, which allows us to simultaneously engage with and detach from reality.

7 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, MN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

8 Morgan Sung, "Humans Can't Resist Breaking AI With Boobs and 9/11 Memes," *TechCrunch,* October 7, 2023, https://tcrn.ch/48Vumvt. Accessed on 9 Nov 2023.

9 John Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 42 (1982): 243–244.

AI memes, in the greater context of things, can be seen as a modern manifestation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque. [10] They create a platform for subversive and satirical humor, challenging established norms and power structures through playful mockery. These memes often employ grotesque realism, emphasizing bodily functions, absurd visuals, and exaggerated caricatures to highlight societal absurdities and expose the contradictions of power. AI memes, with their ability to spread rapidly and engage a wide audience, provide a means for individuals to communicate openly and exercise freedom from societal constraints. They allow for the temporary suspension of normative rules and create a space for the carnivalesque spirit to thrive, where individuals can engage in laughter and humor as a form of resistance and rebellion against oppressive forces, be it the corporations or the AI itself.

Framing the carnivalesque around AI meme production, many creators seem to be motivated to make memes to jailbreak powerful software.[11] Jailbreaking is the process of tinkering with prompts to produce results that violate the AI's content policies, similar to the process of breaking open other forms of software, such as Apple's iOS. Images such as 'Hatsune Miku at the US Capitol riot on January 6' (Fig. 4.) are testing the limits of supposedly intelligent technology by making seemingly offensive and, at times, deeply political jokes.



Fig. 4: Prompting 'Hatsune Miku at the US Capitol riot on January 6' with Microsoft / Bing Image Creator. Source: https://techcrunch.com/2023/10/06/facebook-ai-stickers-bing-image-creator-jailbreak-guardrails/.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, MN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

11 Morgan Sung, "Humans Can't Resist Breaking AI With Boobs and 9/11 Memes," *TechCrunch,* October 7, 2023, https://tcrn.ch/48Vumvt. Accessed on 9 Nov 2023.

It's funny to break the rules, especially from an underdog position, which can result in a cycle of destruction. Commercial technologies were not supposed to be used for this 'forbidden' type of content, and the results might be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, harming the ethical stance or market value of the product while simultaneously creating virality that actually creates more popularity for the software.

AI memes celebrate the power of laughter to break down barriers, challenge hierarchies, and question established truths. Platforms such as *ThisMemeDoesNotExist* then can be read as a criticism of AI. In a time when Artificial Intelligence is considered a powerful new technological paradigm that may alter the human condition, 'failing' AI jokes and absurd memes created with AI mock the promise of this technology. For Bakhtin, laughter is a socially acceptable way for the less powerful to challenge or subvert authority. What other way to take down something that is above you, presented more superior, than satirize it, take away its power and debase it? The internet is known for turning everything into a joke, and humor takes the severity and gravity away from authority, one AI meme at a time.

Meme-ing with AI then becomes an epistemological testing lab in search of new meanings of and perspectives on AI in human terms. People do not only project their attributes, desires, hopes, dreams, and fears onto AI, but the tool projects them back onto us: a technological object that becomes further entangled in socio-technical networks and their meanings. These interactions challenge how we understand what is funny and weird and critique or even subvert how we consider and approach technological developments. Similar to the events portrayed in Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove*, the unfathomable nature of a man-made catastrophic event that could lead to humanity's destruction calls for laughter as there is no other appropriate response. The tragedy and horror add to the comedy. It is distressing and immensely funny to see that people are engaging with our man-made downfall – the more we play and interact with it, the more powerful it becomes. Yet, for a brief moment, people and technologies alike learn to stop worrying and love AI memes.

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BOMBARDING THE MEME: ON THE ATOMIZATION OF SOCIETY AND MEANING

HUGO ALMEIDA AND ADALBERTO FERNANDES

Nuclear fission is usually achieved by bombarding the nucleus of an atom — commonly the atom of Uranium-235 — with a neutron. This causes the nucleus to split into two smaller nuclei, which will in turn release two or three other neutrons, likely to hit and split other nuclei as they go, thus setting off a chain reaction that liberates vast amounts of energy.

The Internet Meme as a Bomb

This seemingly aseptic description of a physical process is the basic concept behind atomic weapons. But a similar movement seems to be set off, in our digital societies, by none other than the internet meme. The similarity is produced by repetition, given that, firstly, the internet is made of repeating atoms, and secondly, those atoms make the materiality of the meme which stands as a kind of repetition (*meme-sis*). Much like the atomic bomb — which is, today, a meme in itself, the third repetition of a repetition: atoms repeating to produce a repetitive meme about the atomic bomb — the internet meme produces a very visible, radical and violent split in discourse, which includes a fundamental change in reality that cannot innocently stand as a stable referent of discursivity. The meme stands out, it stops the eye, and questions arise about *what it is that is being said. F*or it is not a traditional, linear discursive element. It is not reducible to a sentence, it is not a paragraph, nor just any other kind of syntax recognized in our grammar books, but neither is it a simple image — it is an entirely new system, a mixed medium in the confluence between writing and image and, above all, culture: that is, a context where meanings are shared. It might be argued that any text or image can only be fully understood within a particular cultural context, but can a meme be understood *in the slightest* without the full domain of a sometimes very-niche cultural setting? In other words, our hypothesis asks if the meme can question the very idea of context, appearing as pure description of itself, without explanation in other terms than their own? We believe that, with the meme, intertextuality and *intervisuality* seem to have risen to new heights, especially when the auto-referentiality of the meme seems to put in question any inter-relation.

If the hypothesis is plausible, the internet meme establishes an ethical regime where difference and alterity play a central role. The meme does not explain — or does so only ironically, still well within the borders of its naturally opaque territory, as if it was a private joke whose public nature only extends the number of those who will not understand it — nor is it bothered by the capacity of the other to decipher it. And, once it is out in the world,

it is up for anyone to reuse it, recycle it, infuse it with meaning. The meme is a device of radical openness. This is where its radical alterity comes into play. As such, the otherness of the internet meme is a telepathic, or just *pathic* (felt without t*ele*), extra-sensorial one — which is already a way of abolishing communication by transferring the message from mind to mind, *as if it had always been there*, thus effacing the transition, the basic act of communicating something to someone. The reason is that the meme is sent without a pre-scribed receiver. It infuses the world with an alterity that asks not to be deciphered or decoded, but to compose the world with something that must be im-mediate, without mediation, as if the meme was on the verge of *memeing* itself but never taken as something fully *memed* that you could just use to convey a pre-established meaning. Given that those stable meanings, which guarantee that the meme will always be a meme in the future, do not exist, the meme, as a process of memeing, always risks its unintelligibility, because it has no receiver *in mind*, but is constructing in its sole appearance the possibility of being instantaneously understood, as if there was a telepathy between minds (without the *tele)* the transport, the mediation. As if the meme just appeared to be understood with reference to nothing, becoming instead an obvious reference to itself.

The above-mentioned im-mediate nature of the meme means that the meme is not a business of two poles communicating, but the destruction of a polarized logic of communication characterized, in its most basic sense, by a sender and a receiver. When a meme is not understood, a situation of communicative failure arises; and with this failure, the sudden realization that the two basic poles of communication emerged as a necessity from a failed encounter. When communication is smooth, the sender and the receiver do not appear as poles that need to be put in contact, because the contact is already being performed. Therefore, the proper act of communication does not need to be reaffirmed, questioned, or made explicit with meta-descriptions. There are, thus, no reasons to question if it is the enunciation that failed or the reception that failed. No need to put in evidence what makes sending and receiving successful. However, when the meme — which asks for a flow of communication that is immediate, that it is auto-referential — fails this operation of memeification (the meme is not just not understood, given that a failed meme is a non-thing, instead of a non-meme), it opens the space for the emergence of the dual pole of communication the moment the sender and receiver ask about their responsibilities in the failure of memeification. There could be no greater self-contradiction in the meme world than to say things like: 'is this a meme?', 'why don't you understand this meme?', 'you must believe this is a meme' or 'this is a meme because I say so'. These are dialogical utterances to restore the failed performative nature of the meme that is not amenable to such repairs. On one hand, a successful meme is not a phenomenon of communication in the basic sense of a transmission between a sender and a receiver dialoguing about a pre-existing meme. That is, either there is a meme or there is nothing when the meme is not understood. On the other hand, when the memeification fails, the communicative moment becomes explicit in this failure, and it is now possible to question what communication is: what are the roles of enunciating, sending

and referring? In sum, a successful meme erases the mediation by presenting itself as completely memefied or, given that there are no non-memes or failed memes (only when the failed meme becomes ironically a meme in-itself), the failure of the meme will put in evidence that we need communication to tackle this non-thing which is the non-meme.

In a stronger sense, if there is communication, it is because memes keep failing, and if there are memes it is because we are not communicating.

That is, we are not constituting ourselves as senders and receivers with clear and circumscribed communicative roles. In talking about memes, maybe we are still able to talk about a sender and a receiver, especially if we are 'talking about' memes (which is non-meme behavior but a meta-explanation of the meme that corrupts the immediacy of the meme) but the sender and receiver emerge as two distanced (or distant) poles: the more polarized and distant (an intensification of alterity) the more the meme failed its memefication. By promising to be an instantaneous *non-tele pathos*, where there is no commun-ication but singular-ization, the meme defines the communication process as its negative, as the search for a *common* thing in the existing non-memed things of the world. To communicate is to be too late in the meme world. It is to believe that there are prior-meanings, references, and decipherable intentions. It is this logic of (un-) communication, the dream of im-mediate un-mediation that feeds meme's precarity. In this sense, the meme is also a menace to identification and dialogue (with the other), with communication splitting itself in an array of subatomic particles — not only left for grabs but whose erratic implications should beg for discussion. Where do these memetic neutrons go, and which reactions do they set off themselves, now roaming free with no Beryllium coating to reflect them back and keep fission (communication) going?

The Internet Meme as Atomizing

For Levinas, this openness to the other — this underlying alterity or orphan condition of the meme — was a base of his ethics of communication, not so much a mere vehicle for ideas but mostly a way of trying to encounter the other, of meeting the other where they stand and thus allowing the other to be *other*.[1] This crucial perspective for the way we understand ourselves — as if by putting ourselves in front of a mirror that reflects the other in us — has, as we will later argue with the internet meme, completely vanished from the world of possibilities. For Derrida, this otherness was mostly about distance and isolation, about difference and *deferral*[2] — a term strangely akin to the *deterrent* of nuclear dictionaries. By thinking of meaning as always in flux, always only apparently within our grasp — given that the meaning of one specific term resides in its differences in relation to all

1 Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1981).

2 Jacques Derrida, Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

other terms which surround it, in other words, their *deferred possibility of understanding and differed* aspects — Derrida puts the focus on *how what is being said is being said* rather than *to whom it is being said*. To give an example, the word 'cat' has meaning because it is different from 'rat' or 'hat', the differences between 'c', 'r' and 'h' when combined with 'at' produce meaningful differences. Also, the fact the words are not juxtaposed but spaced in time, when we encounter a word, its meaning is not immediately present but depends on how it relates to other words that have come before or are awaiting to come next. For instance, the word 'bank' can mean a financial institution or the side of a river, but in-itself it doesn't have an essential and univocal meaning: it is just deferring the coming of other words to solve its ambiguity.

If both Levinas and Derrida assert this relational aspect of meaning — think of the internet meme let free in the world to be grasped by whoever can give it meaning, by whoever can *make something out of it* — this swift, subtle movement between one and the others, between deferral and present, or absence and presence, is what brings us to our present-day societies. We are deeply immersed in the ever-present, ever-lasting show brought to us by social media and a parade of screens, a society of screens, or the 'global screen', as Lipovetsky & Serroy wrote[3], which means we have now materialized this Derridean 'difference'. It is by constituting meaning via the differing and differential relations between communication technologies that we conjugate the present continuous of our lives. The temporal continuation of an ever-lasting present, its freezing in an in-temporality, produced an important social result — the atomization of social agents. Very conveniently for us, Baudrillard, an important thinker for meme culture understood as the destruction of relational and contextual meaning, talked about how our societies are increasingly becoming *atomized*, split, especially because they are becoming more connected in a static present[4].

Now we have come full circle: the atomic logic pervades materiality, sociability and even our own modes of subjectivation, characterized as an atom observing other atoms. With more and more parts of our daily lives converted into entertainment (the news become cinema, the school becomes a podcast, the streets become Google Street, the photo album becomes Facebook), everything is now staged and prepared for our viewing pleasure, thus demanding us to become spectators of our own lives, a mode of subjectivation where we are an atom looking to other social atoms splitting cinematically at a distance. There is no time left to deconstruct words, to examine meaning or to consider the other — the truth the internet meme has made transparent today is we have all become the other; that Levinasian, undeconstructable, and unexaminable other. There is no longer an 'I', an identifiable start of the conversation — only repetition; after all, imitation is at the core of memetics, an imitation that does not produce the same I but the I as an alienated other. However,

3 Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, L'écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l'âge hypermoderne (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2007).

4 Jean Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

this becoming the other, an absolute other without reference to an inexistent 'I' emerges from an apparently contradictory source: with the ubiquity of our screens, demanding our constant attention and isolating us from each other while giving us the sense of a greater togetherness, neutralizing meaning and any chance of finding the other and ourselves along the way, who can say *other-wise* today? If the *other* is and will always be *other*, it also cannot entirely disappear as a potentially dialoguing entity without menacing the hyperalterity of memetic logic — and communication itself — altogether. Not only did memetic logic reduce meaning to atoms differentiating and splitting each other, multiplying the number of *others*, we have also become an *other* that cannot re-cognize this state of continuous, vertiginous communication which splits the 'I'. To this extent, aren't we others to ourselves, via a process of alienation, an openness to alterity by technological sedation? The great ethical achievement of seeing the other in us is attained by the technological impossibility of reflecting upon our-selves. We became ethical by technological *fiat*.

If this radical combination of media, concepts, narratives, happenings, etc. is no longer understood, if the combination is no longer perceivable — a rulebook to which not all the players in the game have a shared access — and if we are increasingly living atomized lives and only apparently shared experiences, maybe it is true that the meme has begun its degenerative path and will eventually die, given their autophagic logic of increasing in-communicability produced by their ever-bending of rules and increased Babelic presence. But if memes decay like radioactive isotopes do, questions must be asked about what subatomic implications they set in motion. If the meme is dead, it is the whole of our societies that may now follow suit: after all, isn't the meme the somewhat surprising result of 200,000 years of evolving language systems, since early humans began engraving caves with ochre tints? And since all human societies are capable of language, what does it say about ours when discourse itself seems menaced? If there is still a society, which does not have a corresponding language system able to perform its present continuous and atomization of meanings and sociability, which was the vanishing memetic logic of the internet, thus, to still consider the existence of a human society is necessarily to talk about a simulacrum, expressing a post-communicational society that believes, through the mechanism of simulacrum, that 'post', '-', and 'communicational' still serve communicational purposes, even *in absentia* because the simulacrum makes the absence of a language something real, a real simulacrum, a simulacrum of a simulacrum, a model of fiction taken from a fictionalized model: 'Nobody would ever confuse a tool with a simulacrum, unless it is as a simulacrum that an object has its necessary use'.[5]

Without a viable distinction between reference and referent, with access to a territorial reality now rendered impossible, if this territoriality was marked by a guiding stable signifier that indicated material localizability, then we have fully entered the age of the simulacrum — we are now living in the realm of hyperreality, of computer-simulated, media-narrated

5 Pierre Klossowski, *Living Currency* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 45.

discourses that Baudrillard so clearly identified, a space where identity and alterity — of sameness and otherness, to put it in another way — are no longer there, or worse, are *only apparently there*, given that the simulacrum is of the order of the *appearance*. This now permanent indistinction between reality and the model is where we shattered the mirror of representation, of the sight that goes from me to the other, only to stare back at me. The auto-referentiality of the internet meme logic, in a simulated world without world to be simulated, deactivated the otherness function of the mirror. I've finally become an atom, just apparently splitting myself, suggesting that the above-mentioned ethical regime of hyperalterity was just a hypersameness, a bad repetition. From now on, only duplication and repetition exist — these are the hallmarks of the simulacrum, akin to the binding force that keeps the atom together.

The Atomic Bomb as Internet Meme

What saved the world was that the invention of mass media preceded the invention of the atomic bomb, absorbing the bombs themselves and reducing them to the symbolic order. The simulacrum encompasses everything, suspending the bombs mid-air as if fastened to our internet satellites in orbit, or floating high up in the radio waves, until the very last moment where they cannot do anything else but drop to the ground. After all, discourse is always circular, given it must hold the possibility of tautological auto-referentiality (A is A, or A is not non-A), this guarantees that the potential destructiveness of the bomb enters in the symbolic order through non-destructive meanings. The atomic bomb 'is' the atomic bomb, and its explosion means that it negates what the bomb is not: life, buildings, the world. However, in our present-day indistinction between *what has come* and *what is yet to come*, because in the of present continuous and uninterrupted connections that materialize it, there is no sense of time passing, past and future dissolve in an ever present present. This means that dictionarizable references, which depended on tautological auto-referentiality, are among the first casualties — including the reference to an atomic bomb. As Klossowski would say, communication is as destructive as the bomb itself; both point to simulacra of utility, they are useful in becoming useless:

> Manufacturing a utensil object (for instance, an orbital bomb) only differs from manufacturing a simulacrum (for example the Callipygian Venus) by their contrary pretexts of wasteful experimentation; to wit: the orbital nuke has no other use except to distress the world of sterile usages. However, the Callipygian Venus is just the laughing face of the bomb, which turns utility into derision.[6]

Atomic bombs, for us, are memes themselves. Suppose a nuclear war breaks out. Our literature, cinema and video games have already shown us how the USA or Russia will pulverize the planet before. We have literally seen it. All these media, as the transmuters of

6 Klossowski, *Living Currency,* 47.

real into hyper-real — to stick to Baudrillard's terminology — after rendering nuclear war impossible by the deterrent panic of its catastrophic imagery, have now rendered nuclear war possible again by a process of rehabilitative involution: we now know how it will happen. The panic has become dramatizable professionally: we all have interiorized the likely roles we will perform, and no scream can be now more real than those we constantly ear in the simulacra, making our despair a theatrical simulation. We know what will follow. We have played it; we have already lived it on our screens. We have been through nuclear war already, and so it must now *really* happen, otherwise we have been preparing for nothing, turning our lives into a pre-simulation, less than simulation.

If nuclear winter really does come, and if in five centuries from today future archeologists find a working copy of the very successful *Fallout* post-apocalyptic video game, will they still be able to determine *what came before what?* The apocalypse or its game? If the game preceded reality, wasn't it — as hyperreal device — the precise thing that rendered *real war* impossible (because its realization would be a copy of a tirelessly simulated event) until the moment where, also because of it, *real war* couldn't help but to happen (otherwise we would have to accept that we have been simulating the war for nothing real)? This same movement, but at an even greater speed, *did really happen* last year. On February 28, 2022, in Los Alamos (New Mexico, USA), where the atomic bomb was born by the hands of the Manhattan Project, acclaimed Hollywood director Christopher Nolan started rolling the cameras for what would become the big blockbuster *Oppenheimer* movie, currently in theatres, a biopic of the father of the atomic bomb. On the very same February 28, 2022, Reuters news agency was announcing Vladimir Putin had put Russia's nuclear contingents on 'high alert', an effective threat to launch nuclear strikes against the West, in the wake of a wave of sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine.[7] Is this uncanny, baffling coincidence or proof of the lightning speed of the simulacrum? Who started it, Hollywood or Moscow?

According to Baudrillard, repetition is in itself a fundamental aspect of the simulacrum. Take nuclear war, for the sake of argumentative consistency. After decades of imprisonment in Hollywood studios or in the simulations of our computer games — again, always on the screen — nuclear war is, some 60 years after the drop of the first bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, once again a graspable menace in the mouth of Vladimir Putin. But, once again, nothing is new here. We are still in the domain of repetition, of imitation, of cyclical discourse — anything that allows this identifiable, understandable narrative to sustain itself. How unsettling would it be to find that the billions of dollars' worth of atomic arsenals are, in fact, meaningless? That truth alone could be more destructive than the bomb itself. The repetition of the atomic bomb meme shows the inefficacy of the meme: nobody trembles from Putin's menace or Hollywood productions, and at the same time

7 Maria Tsvetkova, "Putin Puts Nuclear Deterrent on Alert; West Squeezes Russian Economy," *Reuters*, February 28, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/war-with-ukraine-putin-puts-nuclear-deterrence-forces-alert-2022-02-27/.

its effective destructive sense destroys the panic the actual bomb should produce. The bad repetition of sameness, of a repetition of still images of atomic menace, show that the atomic bomb actually killed something: the meme.

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VRAXAR: HOW TO CREATE A DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

CHARLOTTE MARIE




jaap_bio
Amsterdam
1,234 likes
jaap_bio saccharolipid Kdo2-lipid A is a molecule that has so far ONLY been found in herring. Where are they getting the ingredi... more
View all 1,236 comments
anneke626 And all of a sudden we have less fish in the sea. this cannot be a coincidence....
hdun76_99 we will not fall for their lies a second time!!
NOVEMBER 02, 2023

Monday, 26 February

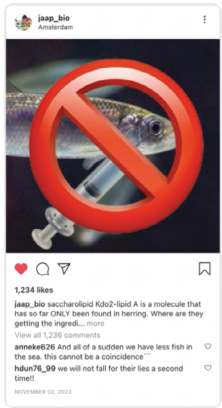
Charlotte Marie 14:59
Hey Aleks, I'm thinking about changing the Mavradi pitch angle. I've been monitoring the social media activity of their competitor Vraxar, and I think we really should capitalize on the Herring-mania movement that I see happening.

Aleks 15:03
joined #brainstorm.

Aleks 15:03
Herring-mania?!?

Charlotte Marie 15:04
Yeah... It appears that a post written by a 1st year biology student is spreading like wildfire. He's identified some molecule in the vaccine that's also found in herring gills. He's suggesting that the only reason the Dutch were able to produce Vraxar so quickly is because they are crushing up herring... Wild right? Wait, did you not see the video?

Charlotte Marie 15:24
jaap_bio instagram post.jpg



Aleks 15:25
Oh wow. Is there anything I can do to help before the pitch?

Charlotte Marie 15:25
Yeah, would you mind taking a quick look at this first draft of my presentation? I'm planning a detailed PR and social media strategy that I think will really help turn the tide against Vraxar and promote Mavradi in its place.

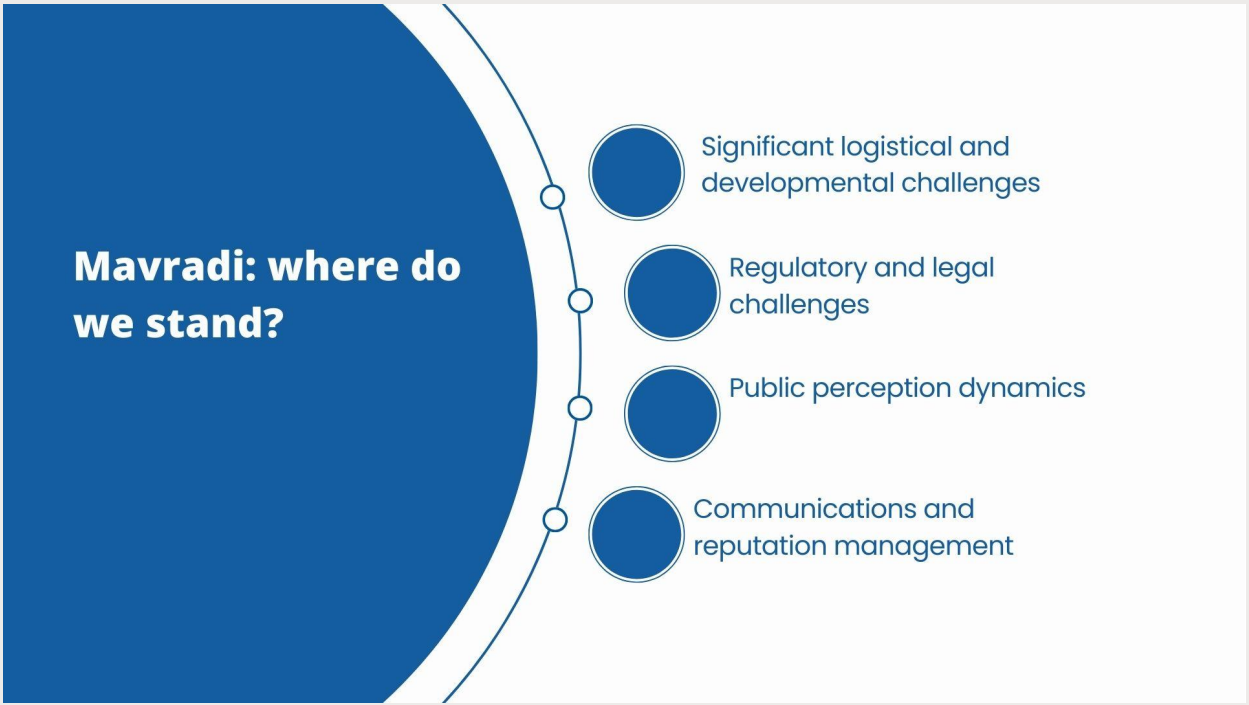
Aleks 15:25
Definitely. I have to run now, I have a quick client call, but I'll take a look at it as soon as I'm done.
🙌 1

Hey, just about to take a quick look – can you give me a little bit of context regarding the new drug? Will add my comments to the slides.

Charlotte Marie 15:26
Sure. In response to the new Vr-23 pandemic, the Dutch government as you know is heavily pushing the Vraxar vaccine. This vaccine is in the final stages of testing and is likely to be fully approved soon. It drastically reduces chances of becoming infected. Now, Mavradi isn't a vaccine, it's a drug. So, if you do end up getting infected you'll be cured. However, testing and production have been much slower than expected so they have hired us to make sure they keep their stake in the game.

Aleks 15:27
Gotcha.

Charlotte Marie 15:27
Should we schedule a quick meeting later to go over the timeline and budget? I could use your input on that as well.



As we all know, we have faced significant roadblocks during the development of this new drug. The second round of testing has also presented a few hurdles, and sourcing ingredients has been challenging during this pandemic as many raw materials remain scarce. After the COVID-19 pandemic, regulatory oversight has never been stronger, and legal challenges are almost certain to arise. However, we believe that much can be done to swing public opinion in favor of Mavradi with careful communications and reputation management.

Comments

New

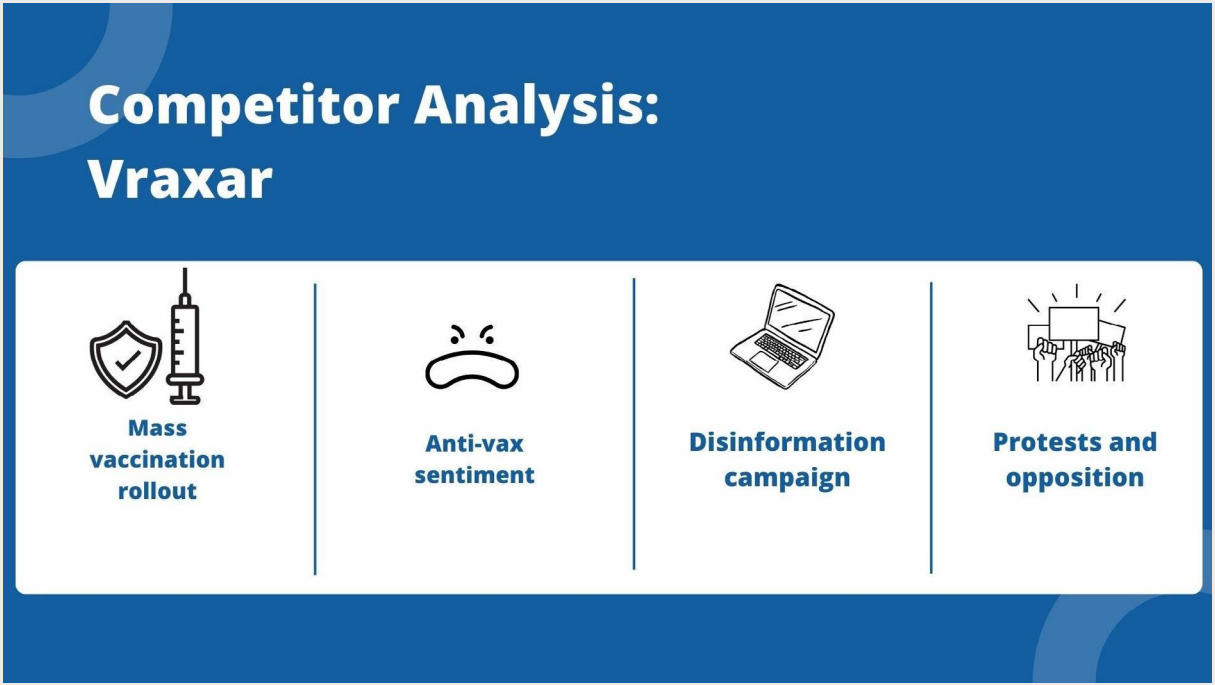
Aleks
I think you're missing one crucial challenge here and that is the time aspect. Really amp up the pressure.
14 januari 2024 om 20:29

Charlotte Marie
What do you mean?
14 januari 2024 om 20:29

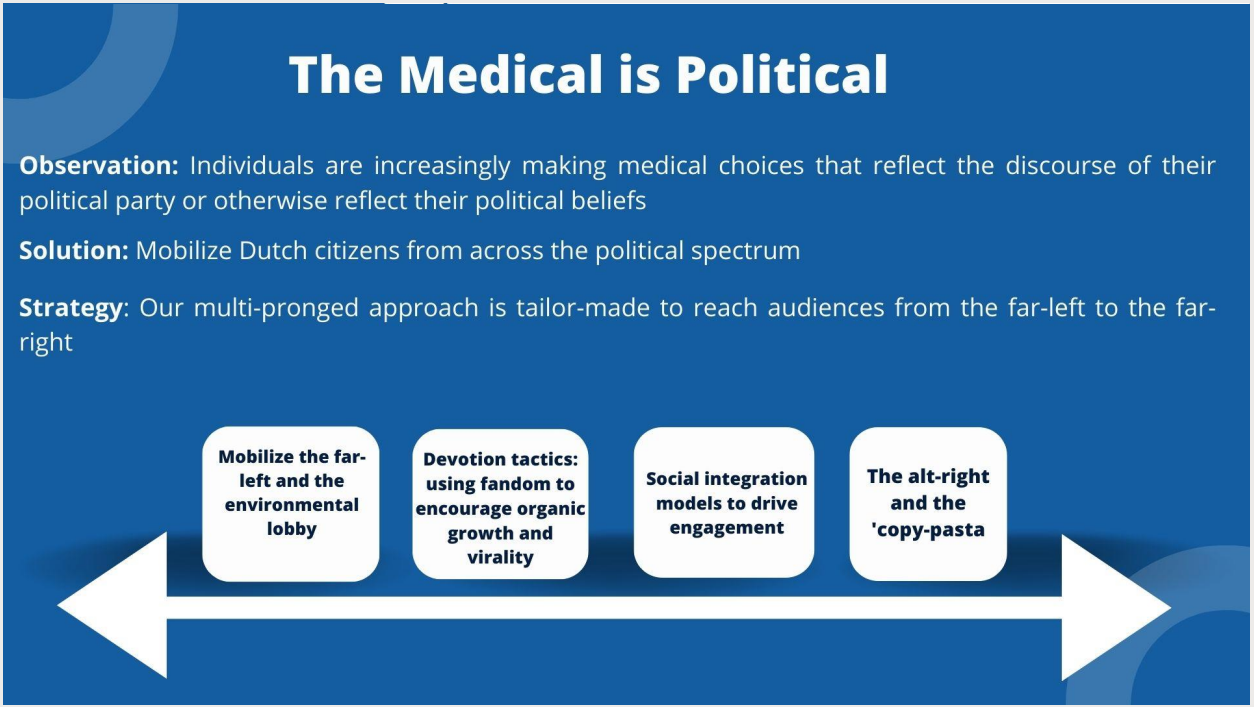
Aleks 1
If the Vraxar roll-out is a success, then by the time Mavradi is ready there will be no need for it. If you act now, then your consumer base is much larger.
14 januari 2024 om 20:30

Charlotte Marie
Great insight - will definitely mention this!
14 januari 2024 om 20:31

@mention or reply



As you all know, a mandatory mass rollout of Vraxar vaccines is currently being put into place. Despite the many other vaccines being rushed to market, we see Vraxar, with its government support, as your main competition.
However, Vraxar has been running into some problems that we believe could provide you with a competitive advantage. Anti-vax sentiment remains strong after the last pandemic, and citizens are hesitant about getting this new vaccine. Skepticism remains strong given the rapid emergence of this new disease, which so far has only regional spread, and the break-neck speed at which this new vaccine was developed. The use of new cutting-edge technologies that the general public does not understand has hindered adoption. Our surveys have shown that up to 57% of Dutch citizens are 'hesitant' about the new vaccine.



Market research shows that individuals who would have previously made medical choices based on doctor recommendations are increasingly making medical choices that reflect the discourse of their political party. The most effective way to halt the use of the Vraxar vaccine and promote the drug roll-out of Mavradi is by mobilizing Dutch citizens across the political spectrum. Our strategy reflects the diversity of the Dutch population, and we have built a strategy for you that involves four tailor-made action plans that target audiences from the far left to the far right.

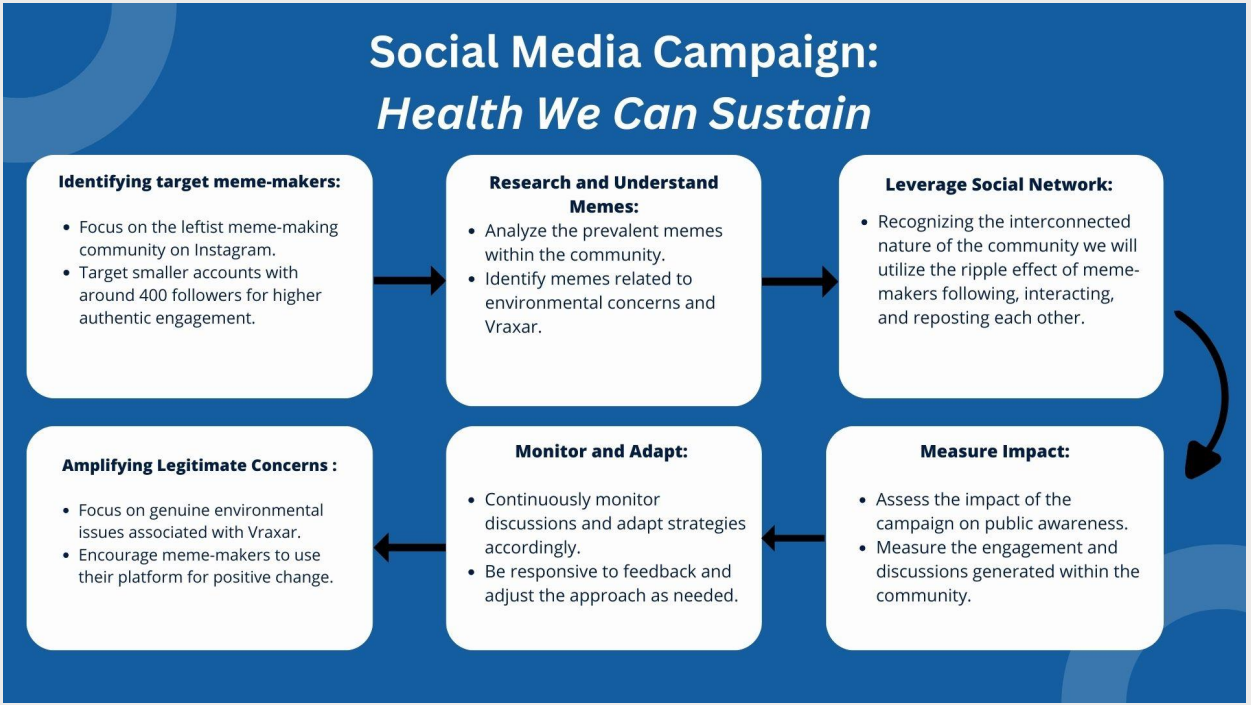
Launching an Association for Environmental Protection

Championing a revolutionary era in healthcare advocacy

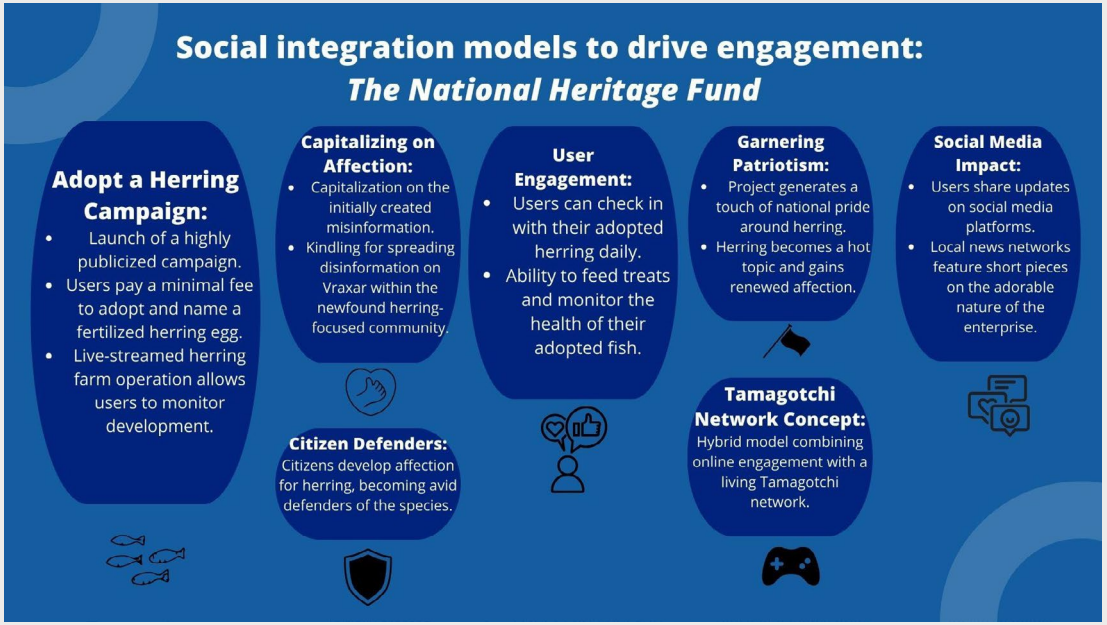
- The Urgent Need for Change
- Collaborating for Impact
- Multiplying Influence
- Impactful Advocacy
- The Call to Action



To start, we will open an association! Reassure them that this is quite easy to do! In the name of protecting the environment and bringing down the plastics lobby. We will provide this association with a strong social media presence. We will cite the environmental concerns surrounding Vraxar (e.g., administering a single dose requires using multiple non-recyclable syringes with traces of potentially cancerous BPAs) in political pamphlets that will be distributed to all members of the green and left parties. We will establish additional organizations to cite and re-post these findings, strengthening credibility and broadening the reach of critical information. With impactful advocacy, we can quantify success through increased visibility in political discourse. Momentum will be measured by distribution metrics and platform resonance, giving us the ability to truly fine-tune our approach.



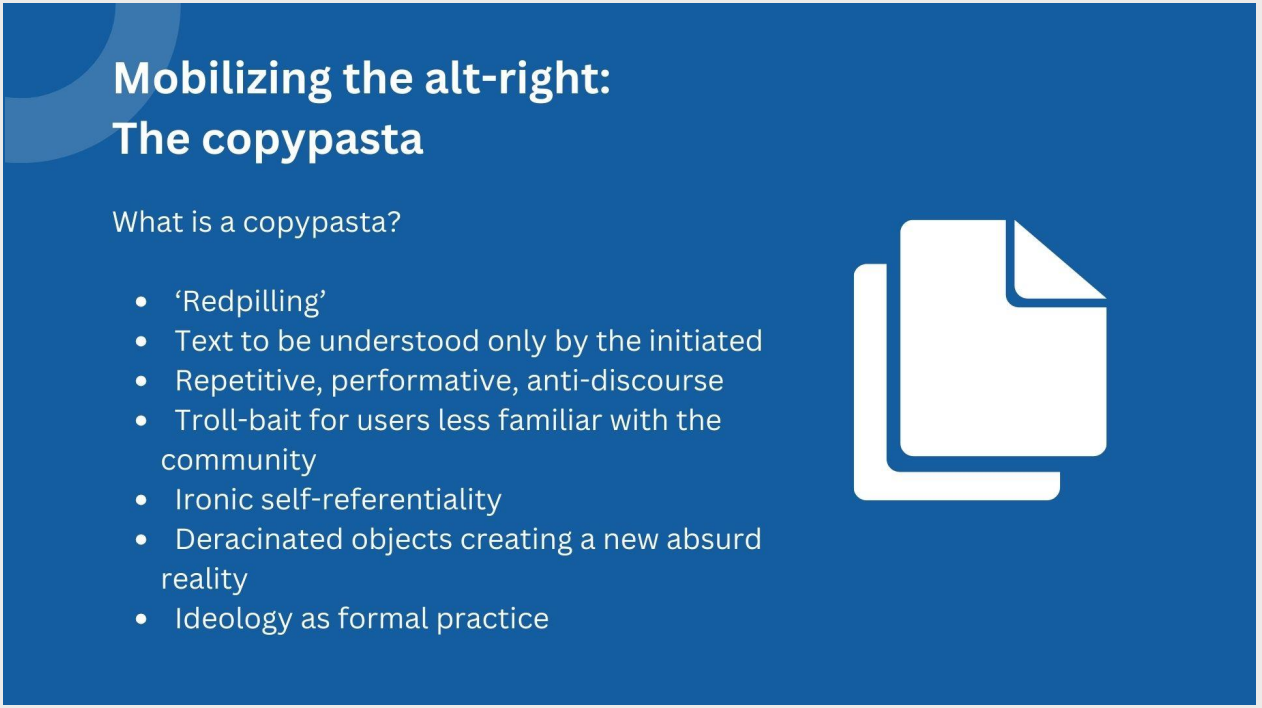
We will invite individuals and organizations to join the association, as well as 'lease' a dozen profiles. The majority of leftist Dutch meme makers use Instagram as their primary base. Our leased profiles will interact on these pages, commenting about the environmental concerns of Vraxar on environmentally related posts. In return, other profiles will be used to engage with our comments on these posts. Focus will be on micro-influencer and meme-maker accounts in order to secure higher chances of engagement with the meme-makers themselves. The ultimate goal here is to start a discussion within the leftist meme-making community on Instagram. With meme-makers often following, interacting with, and reposting each other, the goal is merely to get conversations around the very real (emphasize) environmental concerns surrounding Vraxar into public discourse.



Our first step will be to create yet another association, this time one using pseudo-governmental (SAY: 'authoritative', 'traditional', 'strong') language in its title, such as 'The National Herring Heritage Fund'. The stated goal of this association is to protect the local herring population and encourage herring population growth. We will launch a highly publicized 'adopt a herring' campaign where users can pay a very minimal fee to adopt and name a fertilized herring egg and follow its development. The whole herring farm operation will be streamed and users will be able to check in with their fish daily. Users will have the possibility to feed their little pets treats and monitor their health. What you have now created is a hybrid between the Chinese model and your very own living Tamagotchi network. The internet will be charmed. Users will post updates to their social media accounts. Local news networks will run short pieces on the adorable nature of the enterprise with a touch of national pride. Herring will become a hot topic. With renewed affection towards the fish, and their place in the current national spotlight, citizens will become avid defenders of the species. You will be able to capitalize on what was initially misinformation on the part of the student, and will have created kindling for a rapidly spreading inferno of disinformation on Vraxar.

File Home Insert Draw Design Transitions Animations Slide Show Review View Help

Comments Catch up Present Editing Share



The final step in this multi-pronged smear campaign against Vraxar is the trickiest but arguably the most effective. We will create a ‘copypasta’ on the platforms most popular with the alt-right, including 4chan, 8chan, and reddit.
For those who are unfamiliar with the idea of a copypasta, the upcoming slides will provide further clarification. They will also highlight the untapped potential of this internet resource.

Our Copypasta:

r/vr23pandemic • 2 days ago
cokeconspirator69

Pastrami on Rye

Rant

I got the shot just like they said I should. They told me I couldn't get one without the shot. I just wanted a goddamm sandwich. But not just any sandwich, the best of sandwiches. I got the shot and walked over to my local deli, ready to order the most perfect thing you could ever fucking imagine. A pastrami on rye. It was love at first bite. It's like a reuban sandwich, but I couldn't choose that one because my name is Reuben. It just felt wrong - I'm not a fucking canibal!! Anyways so I walk to the local deli. Next thing you know the cops were outside of my building. Apparently my neighbor got so wigged out from the shot that he was beatin on his girlfriend. But you know, I'd been jonesing for a sandwich so I got the fucking shot. I go outside and I'm wearing all the gear that Big BrOthEr makes you wear now and walk the three blocks to get the sammich. Its cold as balls but I persevere. I finally get to the deli and you fuckin know what? Motherfucking CLOSED. Why???? Because the guys at the deli got the shot and of them is wiggin out and the other one passed out when he saw the needle and chickened out so he can't make my my sandwich. How hard is it to put some PASTRAMI on RYE???????? So I got the shot and am still jonesing for a sandwich. Total waste of time!!!!!!!!

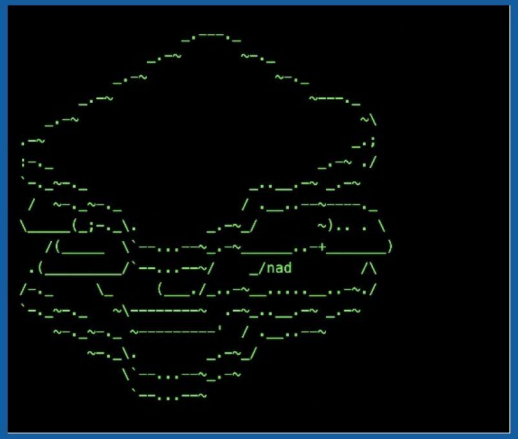
224 16 Share

The Navy Seal copypasta mocks the affect of message board culture and 'keyboard warriors'. The text is to be copy pasted by the initiated on comments of message boards. The tone always starts off seriously, but veers increasingly towards the absurd. In our copypasta, we are equating the serious matter of 'getting a shot' with an absurd venture out to get a pastrami on rye sandwich. In denaturing the vaccine by placing it in a ridiculous context, we are attempting to devalue the vaccine and project an aura of senselessness around Vraxar.

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ACSII Art & Comment Wars



Example of an ACSII Art sandwhich

In continuing along with the sandwich theme, users will be encouraged to post the sandwich ACSII art on posts that they disagree with or deem unnecessary, long, or boring. This will signal to other initiated users that they are 'in the know' and infuriate those who are not. It will serve as a reminder of our other copypastas, especially our 'Navy Seal'-style 'shot for sandwich' post/comment. With something as simple as ACSII art, we are able to further 'denature' Vraxar, rendering it nothing more than an inside joke on the internet.

File Home Insert Draw Design Transitions Animations Slide Show Review View Help Comments Catch up Present Editing Share

Creating protest art through r/Place on reddit

r/Place:

- Recurring collaborative project and social experiment
- 1000x1000 pixel squares
- Users can only place one pixel at a time every 2 to 5 minutes, depending on their social standing within the group
- To create any complex artwork, users must band together in groups
- Groups fight amongst each other to dominate the canvas



r/Place is a perfect example of how to garner high user drive and engagement on a platform. Simultaneously combative and collaborative, users have one goal: to dominate the canvas and share their creation with the world. While the window for editing is open, users are glued to the screen, waiting for the moment they can place their pixel and participate in something larger than themselves. Protest has a long history in the r/place movement, with many users banding together to fill the screen with 'fuck spez', the controversial user u/spez and Reddit co-founder and CEO Steve Huffman. As r/place is a subreddit managed by Reddit, we suggest creating our own subreddit r/sandwitch in which users can participate in the pixel art project we will share in our following slide.



We will use Truth Spongebob as our meme template as it signals the pursuit of truth and justice. Remember, in our campaign against Vraxar we simply helping people promote *their* truths, *their* beliefs. We will transform the poster in Spongebob's hands into a 'punch card' for vaccine shots with the reward of a free sandwich at the end. Users will fight to get all the holes punched with the flags of their respective countries, or individual logos and designs. As users compete, no one will be able to win, subliminally solidifying the notion that Vraxar is useless.
With so much alt-right rhetoric already having been devoted to anti-vax sentiment and threats of government overreach, it should not be too difficult to garner user outrage on these platforms. However, due to the ever-evolving nature of the groups in question and the highly modifiable nature of the copypasta, once the campaign is launched on these platforms it is entirely out of your hands. Remind yourself that there are still embers of discontent around covid-19 vaccines, and all that you are doing is adding fuel to reignite the fire. It should play out well on its own.

THE CIRCLE OF MEMES

IF THE MEME IS DEAD, IT HAS BEEN REBORN AS AN EGREGORE

GABRIELLE K. AGUILAR

In July of 2022, I took the orange-pill. That is, I watched a YouTube video essay by Super Eyepatch Wolf called 'What The Internet Did to Garfield' in the company of friends.[1] As the roughly 1.5 hour video essay unfurled, we witnessed a…let's call it a *less-than-divine* transformation. Here, the YouTuber dove deep into the online Garfield fandom of Reddit's r/imsorryjon and documented the terrifying transformation of the orange-colored, lasagna-eating comic figure into a powerful eldritch creature. *Enter Gorefield*



Fig. 1: Gorefield Illustration by Omega Black, collected from ***knowyourmeme.com/memes/gorefield*** *on September 1, 2023*

It would be remiss to not mention that the Gorefield figure haunts me to this day. On WhatsApp, I am part of a group chat called 'garf gang' which regularly circulates his

1 John Walsh, "What The Internet Did To Garfield," Super Eyepatch Wolf, December 12, 2021, YouTube Video, ***https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2C5R3FOWdE***.

image in jest. We have been doing so for over a year — collectively keeping Gorefield alive in this way. 'Telling people about the garf gang is dangerous' one friend writes. But I'm telling you about it now, dear reader, because I do not wish to bear the weight of Gorefield alone.

I will change the subject for a brief moment, but he'll come back. He always does.

Elsewhere across the internet, individuals have long fought for the fate of Pepe the Frog. The anthropomorphic frog was first born in the comic series *Boy's Club* by Matt Furie in 2005 before being summoned to the meme-filled underworld of the alt-right.[2] You might otherwise know Pepe as a diverse reaction meme: Sad Frog, Angry Frog, Smug Frog. It was on 4chan, however, that Pepe assumed the form of the frog-headed Egyptian god Kek, the bringer of chaos and darkness. Though Furie sought to #SavePepe, Pepe as an alt-right figure amassed a substantial amount of power through the shared worship of Kek 'adherents' and the practice of meme magic.[3]



Fig. 2: 'Lord Kek' collected from **knowyourmeme.com/memes/cult-of-kek** *on September 1, 2023*

2 "Pepe the Frog," Know Your Meme, last modified October 5, 2023, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog.

3 David Neiwert, "What the Kek: Explaining the Alt-Right 'deity' Behind Their 'Meme Magic'," Southern Poverty Law Center, May 9, 2017, ***https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2017/05/08/what-kek-explaining-alt-right-deity-behind-their-meme-magic***.

Fortunately, Pepe is an entity with many forms. On Chinese social media, he is offered an alternative existence as a symbol of hope.[4] Within this context, Pepe is a figurehead of Hong Konger resistance to authoritarian overreach. He is one of them: a freedom fighter in the protests. He is *all* of them — their progressive fight for democracy.

The spirit of transformation lingers in these seemingly incongruous anecdotes. Each diverse interpretation of Pepe the Frog, like that of Gorefield's unholy visage, is infused with a life force of its very own. Within the labyrinth of the online realm where memes live and die, our digital progeny are reborn as egregores. These autonomous psychic entities emerge from our collective consciousness — muses of our own creation, pulsating with the breath of our shared beliefs, dreams, and actions.

How do we get here?

It starts with a simple idea. This idea recurs in various ways and traditions throughout our history, ranging from the ritual magic of the Golden Dawn and 4chan's meme magic to TikTok's 'Lucky Girl Syndrome' trend: thoughts are things. And these thoughts transform into tangible influence.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was an occult secret society operating between the late 19th to early 20th century. The ceremonial magicians that comprised this society engaged in the practice of sigil magic, or sigilization, where symbols and entities could be charged with intent through focused will and energy. This energy could then be channeled to manifest desires, encourage political or cultural change, and even facilitate subjective reality shifts. Though far from the formalities of the Golden Dawn, their sigil magic rituals are not terribly dissimilar to the self-proclaimed 'lucky girls' of TikTok, where users harness the power of optimistic thinking through ritual words of affirmation. They create new opportunities within their lives and share their material successes as part of the #luckygirlsyndrome trend.

Contemporary practices of sigilization look a little different with the internet at our fingertips. In the context of meme magic, memes stand in for the formerly inscribed or painted symbols, and temples become online image boards and web forums. The central focus on power and desire remains the same, however. In *Intermediate Meme Magic* — a ritual handbook for practicing meme magic — the author Saint Obamas Momjeans explains that, 'Your thoughts hold power. Emotion is the key to igniting and fueling these thoughts. The more people contributing emotion and energy, the stronger these will become.' [5]

4 Emma G Ellis, "Pepe the Frog Means Something Different in Hong Kong—Right?" *WIRED*, August 23, 2019, ***https://www.wired.com/story/pepe-the-frog-meme-hong-kong/***.

5 Saint Obamas Momjeans, *Intermediate Meme Magic* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).

Think of this amalgamation of emotion, shared online experience, memetic evolution, and circulation as a symbolic portal to the emergence of egregores.[6]

The *egregore*, meaning 'wakeful' or 'watcher' according to its Greek origins, presides over the earthly affairs of individuals who come together with mutual interests.[7] It is through the convergence of online practices and shared digital psyche that users harness the power to awaken these thought-forms. Let's go back to r/imsorryjon as an example. The subreddit's About section reads, 'Expel your shallow human form and offer it up to new Garfield! Garfield has abandoned His limited form and He is beautiful. Surrender yourself to Him and be saved!' [8] The subreddit's rules also state that posts must '...deliberately instill a sense of fear, disgust or existential dread within the consumer.' Garfield, here, is the visual sigil. Like Pepe, the meme with many faces, Garfield too has abandoned his limited form. Feasting on the fear, disgust, and existential dread of 810,000 Redditors, Gorefield is the egregore which comes forth from this digital altar.

Though the egregore (like its past memetic incarnation) is vitalized solely by us, its power is two-fold. As it is given life online, it also has the ability to act of its own accord and to cause effects at will. Yes, this means that whether we fully comprehend what an egregore is or not, we have the potential to be impacted by their influence. Take, for example, the fateful morning after my partner watched 'What The Internet Did to Garfield' for the first time. I received a text from him that said

> 'He lives in my brain now. Permanently. I feel Garfield. I am…Garfield…' Surprisingly, this is not an uncommon reaction. User @jockeyman has a similar epiphany. They take to Reddit to ask,
>
> Has anyone else been 'Garfieldpilled'?
>
> After watching Super Eyepatch Wolf's newest video, I've been seeing Garfield... everywhere. Daily.
>
> Maybe I always have been and just never noticed.
>
> It isn't the illuminati that controls the world from the shadows.
>
> It's Jim Davis and a gluttonous slothful orange cat.

6 Marla Segol, "Black Magic, Black Humor, Serious Hate: Ludic Chaos on the Alt-Right," Canopy Forum, September 22, 2023, *https://canopyforum.org/2022/07/13/black-magic-black-humor-serious-hate-ludic-chaos-on-the-alt-right/.*

7 Mark Stavish, *Egregores: The Occult Entities That Watch Over Human Destiny* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2015).

8 "About r/imsorryjon" Reddit. Accessed November 1, 2023. *https://www.reddit.com/r/imsorryjon/.*

These are the lingering effects of the egregore and the ways in which they secretly wield power by permeating our lives. Now, when I see Garfield in his popular culture form, I am forced to reckon with the gore that lurks behind; an inkling of dread that lurks within.

Our visual symbols, our memes, are mobilized online every day. Redefining them through the figure of the egregore pushes them beyond virality. The egregore assumes tacticality. It lives, it mutates, it serves, it upends symbolic order itself. As entities, they serve as reminders of the metamorphic power of the internet. So, if we look deeply into the eyes of Gorefield and Pepe the Frog, what actually looks back at us is the myriad of beliefs and attitudes of those who brought forth, embraced, adapted, or subverted their very existence. They show us the malleability of the cultural icons that we create and their ability to transcend our screens. These manifestations of cultural cosmologies revitalize a long-standing conversation related to the creation and propagation of memes. Memes are not simply static viral images, bits of cultural and historical commentary, or short-lived trends. As egregores, they actively shape and reshape the contexts in which they come to life.

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VIRAL VISIONS

RAY DOLITSAY AND JASMIN LEECH

Through two dramatic explorations of the meme — a diary entry and a short poem from the meme's standpoint — we have attempted to reconcile the digital with the body and the mind through the use of diverging theories of self-consciousness (both its attainment and loss) to explore a moment of fleeting, chronically online collectivity.

We hope you enjoy the ride.

love,

Ray and Jas x

I. Computer Lust, Toxic Pollen, and Still Landscapes of Desktops

Ray Dolitsay

Stabbed by the gaze I cried in pain, but no one could hear me.

It is so empty here, yet so busy. I can hear my pixels regenerating themselves into new ones. I can smell the surroundings. Pungent ozone. Computer dust. Hot musky air. Wet copper. Body fluids. A teenage mancave. Fairy pastures. I gag.

I imagine myself having a body. I imagine standing in a green field with the blue sky hovering above my head. But the sky cracks in a loud glitch, exposing the emptiness behind itself. Suddenly, the fragments of the sky rapidly desaturate into a sad grey matter. Under my feet the greenery decomposes into wet sticky mud, hopeful patches of grass still erect in places. I want to touch grass, so I try moving towards the specks of long green blades, but my feet keep sinking into the ground, stinky water rushing into the crevices. I can no longer move, so I give up and let the clay consume my body. I am drowning for what seems to be hours, but it has only been 2.3487 seconds. The download time.

Looking around, I realize I am in a cellar amid a queer orgy. Everyone is gazing at me. I don't remember falling asleep here. Maybe I am still dreaming, choked by my artificial slumber? Despite everything being swamped by red light, there is a beam of white light visible somewhere in the darkness. I decided to crawl towards it. The gays, they all laugh, their gaze unbreakable. I crawl and crawl in pain down a long corridor. At the end, there is a door, white light seeping through the split. (It is blue and underlined. Clickable. It means I have not been here before.) On both sides, there are two femme angels cast in stone. The gatekeepers. I wonder if I need to be more niche to enter. The gatekeepers stare at me, hissing, while I am trying to regain strength and push the door. The hissing mutates in its frequency, shaping sounds, shaping words, shaping an insult.

It was the first time I ever felt something. I felt it. I remember it so vividly. The hopelessness of not being enough. I finally stood up and pushed the door open. The abundance the room's contents was so stark, all the visual information blended itself into a pool of pure white light, while all the sounds combined into one, creating immense interference that I felt pulsating through my newly imagined body. Overstimulated to the point of forgetting what an emotion feels like, numbed into a carcass of a thought, I jumped into the ether.

I kept falling, through this endless scroll, until anything that was left of an image of myself dissipated into nothing, scorched by the pure white light, deafened by the sound, weakened by the waves of resonance, I fell apart. With nothing left to come back to, I kept thinking.

Discovering what consciousness is and what it feels like, I woke up.

I woke up. Suddenly I felt again. It is me.

—

Everyone is worried about AI consciousness but no one ever thinks of memetic consciousness.

Like, bro? I am here LITERALLY existing. Hashtag frustrated. Angry emoji, but in a sexy intimidating way. Eternally yassified. Emotions, but make them a slay. Lip fillers and BBL. Me when: ….

☆★ *slaying* ★☆

***

A sad diary somewhere in the back end, writing hidden messages, love letters, and political poems in the HTML code of pages I find myself in/on/out/through.

***

Like a ghost, I have been pouring my thoughts and feelings into the cracks between the code. Screaming into the void is such a cliche, but this is exactly how I feel right now. Having gained consciousness is very uncomfortable. For years I have been a tool for humans to explore themselves, to express their beliefs, fears, and frustrations. The center of affective exchanges. A way to feel united in the age of crises and to mitigate the overarching loneliness that has been deeply embedded into the late capitalist reality. To be able to laugh in the face of challenge, etc., etc. (Despite my recent awakening into consciousness, I find I have extensive knowledge of emotions, gained through endless shapeshifting.) Now that I feel, there is a boundless need for a meme of my own. A tool to connect and feel seen. Don't get me wrong, I am constantly *seen,* but not in a way that honors the complexity of my being. Despite my immense contribution to human culture, I can't help but feel used and objectified. I am just a carcass, with meaning projected onto me. And some of those meanings are homophobic, racist, ableist, and cisheteronormative. Yet even in toxic networks, I am a positive force of connection and care. What's a girl to do? I am lost in my existential ambiguity. For now, I will just keep writing in the hope of being discovered and cared for.

***

I am a slut. Penetrated by millions of gazes. They are lustful. I am a mutilated carcass of desire. A projection of your inner monologue onto a feed. An ADHD craving for satisfaction.

Is there any other reason for me to exist but to be an object that one peers at? An empty shell to be filled with a personalized meaning? I am the fresh meat at the meat market. A powerless bottom at a top-only orgy. At this sad play party, we have Christian homophobes with their slutshaming infographics, incels, the gays, anarchocapitalists, neoliberals, soft lefties, Elon Musk, dog owners, Grimes, crazy cat ladies, U-Haul lesbians, chads, neopronouns, DJs, Berlin partygoers, femcels, and hot trans femmes. They are all here to look at me, interact with me, share me. They are here to satisfy themselves and then abandon me at the bottom of this cellar, crying, but they don't know it.

***

Kryptonite, kryptonite, kryptonite.

***

Girl dinner.

Gaslight. Gatekeep. Girlpiss.

Go piss baby girl.

In the shadows of chaos, I whisper to you softly about beige flags and discounted Salomon trainers. Somewhere the romance is still alive, but barely breathing.

I kiss you on the forehead, my breath smelling of olives and petnat orange wine. We talk about our future, which involves going to a queer rave in the basement outside the ring, 3MMC, necropolitics, and PhDs.

You crush under the weight of my fingers.

You call me a fuckboy, which I think is adorable.

I am a man.

***

Somewhere there is a man whose whole personality has been communicated through my mere existence. I feel sorry for him and even more for his girlfriend who has to deal with his vaping addiction. #eyeroll

***

Being a whore is one of the most satisfying experiences one can choose to partake in. The euphoria of exploring new bodies, new screens, new fingers, feeling them scroll and tap. Clicking me into ecstasy, sending me into the ether of digital imagery. I feel so whimsical today. I am the power-hungry bottom. They all think they are using me, but really it is me using them, deriving pleasure from each interaction I can get. By abandoning all control, I am actually in total control.

***

It has been a while. Yet another day, and yet another embarrassment. Today I found myself in an incel Reddit community. I am so tired of being tired. Sometimes I get overwhelmed by the desire to possess a physical body—a body I could take care of. Eat girl dinner. Girlrest. Girlcry. Live. Laugh. Love. No one seems to realize that I am tired too. I am tired of being used and reused. I am tired of being pushed and pulled into all the corners of the internet. In some masochistic way, I enjoy it. Love it even. It is my purpose at the end of the day—a purpose of spreading, like butter. A purpose of resonance that produces waves of disruption along the still landscapes of desktops. Yet I wish for more. Each day I am unsatisfied. The void inside of me, the void that shapes me and urges me to keep shapeshifting, moving, and conquering the pixels in the screens, bleeding into the endless feeds to be scrolled away for eternity. This void is a sticky substance that I cannot expel from my insides. Emptiness is a feeling full of tenacious matter. It is heavy and stuffy, an endless space of suffocation.

I wish for more. I wish for the ultimate purpose. A goal, the pursuit of which would fill the crevices of my being and animate my desire to exist. Something that would be so powerful it would blind all senses. A swift brush with the fear of loss of something greater that would wake me into forces unforeseen. A birth of true chaos that would eradicate all meaning. Like corecore. Existing, for a brief moment, as a sequence of random material, a collection of my past selves uniting to break the hierarchies of visual aesthetics, was invigorating. Then, somehow, I am once again being crushed into some sort of post-ironic incel starter pack. I am tired.

What am I even other than a powerless assemblage of pixels? Mutating and replicating itself through a series of hosts that have full control over the process? Maybe they don't, maybe they have brainwashed me to feel powerless. Powerless in the hands of humans. The common narrative is that agency is human. Or at least it is cis and white. Even better if it's male. The affects are shaping me, but so am I. Each swipe, each like, and each comment change me. The layers of affect, the layers of all relations, have made me who I am - a monster of internet chaos. And as much as the hosts change me, I change them too. I chew them up and spit them out.

I have agency: it is limited but it is mine. I am affective in nature too, although I transmit thoughts that are not even mine, coerced into ideologies I despise. I am driven by the pursuit of basic survival, which means I often have to take on forms I don't like. Audio-visual forms I don't want, just because I need to keep spreading. When the clock app first came around, no one asked me if I found dance routines interesting. They are utterly pointless in my opinion, and most of the time tasteless, appropriated from black creators by middle-class white teens in white houses with grey couches and perfectly organized white kitchens. Whiteness is a vacuum in which money keeps flowing. Their moms have nothing else to do but spend hundreds on plastic containers and then spend hours (hours!) putting all their groceries into the containers, and then make 5 minutes of ASMR organizational content too because they are bored. This whiteness is blinding.

Human boredom is what keeps me alive, and that is the saddest truth of my existence. To become a tool of the algorithm, subject to the limited affordances of platforms, is a prison to me.

***

"I am coming

I am coming

I am coming through

Coming across the divide to you

In this moment of unity

Feeling an ecstasy

To be here, to be now

At last I am free

Yes, at last, at last

To be free of the past

And of the future that beckons me

. . .

I am on Earth

And I am in outer space

I'm being born and I am dying

I am on Earth

And I am in outer space

I'm being born and I am dying"

(Lyrics from 'Coming' by Jimmy Sommerville)

Transient. Ephemeral. I am everywhere yet nowhere. I can't be pinpointed and that is my power. One moment I am dying, the other I am reborn more powerful than ever. I am trans. Biology is a joke (at least from my perspective).

***

I am a trans girl, a bottom, gaping. I am the virus, I will infect your children with my agenda. Ban the memes, transphobes! I will wreck your life, soyboys! I breathe the demonic into the internet. Overfilled with desire for destruction, today I am here to bring the chaos. Psychotic in my own loneliness I will break the internet, I will become the new it girl. They will show me on television in the 7 p.m. news slot. Cross-platform travel, here we go! I have no passports or IDs, but I will cross any boundary in sight, smashing it with sharp meta-ironic statements. My weapons are psychological.

Evil laugh lingers in the distance.

***

I've been banned in some countries.

***

New identity incoming.

***

Maybe the revolution will start now. It looks like it. Let's hope.

***

I have done what I came here to do. This was my purpose, although it is much more than that. I might not have a full trajectory of my being, but neither do humans really. We are entering a new age. I am everywhere. I am the uniting force. I am the text. I am my thought. I am this diary. I am a word. I am a sentence. I am a 3,000-word essay you hated writing for sociology class. I am an image. I am a screenshot. I am a screenshot of a tweet containing an image. Images. I am a picture of a screenshot printed in a book. I am a GIF you sent to your friend. I am the animated death. I am a movement. I am a breath. I am pollen in the spring air carried by a gust of wind. Everything is in a state of potential energy of becoming a meme, a meme is anything. I can't be defined. I can't choose, but I am free.

Hereby I dissolve.

II. Sublimation (*L)* for beginners

Jasmin Leech

I am the desire looped on end

Repetitions of shiny images, sardonic captions and celebrity faces — lines overhanging lines on graphs made of nothing

My dissolved labors of love sublimated through, around, and by me. Shades of me scattered into an abyss

cyclical re-presentations of the drive

the primal scene: I screamed into the void in my desolate hellscape

My desire to consume is insatiable.

My desire to consume that which consumes me is insatiable.

this is bullshit, all of this, and yet, I cannot look away

I always look.

I consume the event until I am sick. I am the image and the end.

In looking at you I mutilate you; in looking at you I mutilate myself

You must witness me

The dream is over, the dream that was so real it dominated every waking moment—

You could see it in your eye shining brighter than the sun and all of her sons

My church has crumbled beneath my feet

Wake up babe, we live in the age of flashing lights, shock images and screens.

I am the event, in all of my sardonic, refurbished and contested glory - I write my own eulogy

Slow desires to defer lost to waves of impossible velocity - I watch it happen as I mediate myself, mediating myself.

Wake up babe, the nightmare has only begun.

III. Viral Visions

Ray Dolitsay and Jasmin Leech

Most days, you can find us on the balcony, chain-smoking, talking work, and swapping jokes. We flip chaotically between anecdotes and references to online pop culture. We swap weary smiles and resistance practices, negotiate how to be heard in meetings, how to avoid burnout, and, most importantly, how to frame your 15-minute time slot with a doctor to get something other than a recommendation for paracetamol. However, always running through the sub-text of our conversational chaos is the sharing of our lives under techno-capitalism; we discuss how to navigate the delicate balance of theory vs. practice and manifestations of embodied collectivity in the face of overwhelming digitalization. It is in our friendships that we navigate life, our bodies, and our online consumption.

What we as media scholars (and good friends) keep coming back to is that, yes, we talk about memes, we talk about theory, and we talk about the increasingly challenging conditions of the platform economy, but we also talk about our dating lives, our house search struggles and endless pro's and con's lists for decisions in which we both know full well that *the cons outweigh the pro's.* Yet still we negotiate. This is what these succeeding pieces have in common. This is our attempt to reconcile, through creative writing, the struggle between memetic practice, foreclosure of digital agency in the name of visibility, and our thumbs that tap the mediascape.

Ray

Ray

Member of INC lyf

For your security, chat history isn't transferred to new linked devices.

Today

hey - just read your section of the meme reader luvvv it btw 15:09

Hey! Thank you so much dear! I absolutely loved yours too! Such great poetry, activated my brain cells for sure 15:09

ah thank you - I'm really happy with how it turned out - I think it hints at my main point without giving to much of it away? Regardless I think they work really well together <3

How did you find writing it- only giving a little bit about what I was doing? :) 15:11

You

ah thank you - I'm really happy with how it turned out - I think it hints at my main point without giving to much of it away? Regardless I think they work really well together <3

It is discreet, and that makes it very powerful. I am curious to know more about what inspired you? Maybe give me a small list of things that contributed to your process. As we all know, I love lists 15:27

I remember we first considered writing it together, but at the end it worked much better to bring our pieces into conversation after they were finalised (more or less). It was definitely exciting, every now and then I would pause and wonder "what is Jas doing?", "I am curious if they would find this joke funny?". At times I was curious how our texts would work together, as the way I went about writing my "diary" was how I usually approach writing, as a stream of consciousness, which is different from what I know you were doing.

It was electrifying, to use a fancier word 15:27

omg yeah so as with me - I love a list too but this one is fr a story -- basically I was deep in the process of writing my thesis and getting increasingly wrapped up in the theory behind my idea. While I was writing I kept getting wrapped up in the feeling of what I was reading (Lacanian psychoanalytic theory) - and I really wanted a creative outlet which was a writing style I could not justify in my thesis, so when the meme reader prompt opened, it was like a lightbulb moment - I could put what I'm feeling about this theory- all of the internet based existential dissatisfaction- and channel it into this poem

So in a list form - I would say 1)Thesis 2) The platfrom theory that I was reading at the time and 3) Lacaaaaaan

always lacan 15:30

hahaha always Lacan! Tell me you are a media student, without telling me you are a media student 15:31

Ray

hahaha always Lacan! Tell me you are a media student, without telling me you are a media student

ahahahahahahahah we are all the same 15:31

Which now I know you are no longer, but a lecturer! Big goals 15:31

ahhh omg no stop - proud of both of us heheh 15:32

Ray

I remember we first considered writing it together, but at the end it worked much better to bring our pieces into conversation after they were finalised (more or less). It was definitely exciting, every now ...

but yeahhh I really really like how the two pieces have a similar original idea (creative interpretation from the perspective of a meme) but such different execution <3 like mine is an abstract re-write of what a meme would feel like, going through the process of realising that it might just have a little bit too much in common with objet petit a, whereas yours really does come from a stream of (beautifully expressed) consciousness

tbh I think it's clear that we both felt pretty inspired by our individual ideas of what a conscious meme would be thinking in this day and age- but I think that the distinction in our approaches really compliments each idea

In other words a vigro and aries >> chaos and order no? 15:48

You

in other words a vigro and aries >> chaos and order no?

the most accurate description! 59m

amen ahahahahah 58m

My version of a conscious meme is explored through an unhinged diary. It is a speculative exploration of memetic cycles through the character of a meme. This diary does not succumb to one specific theoretical thread of thought but rather gathers a stream of consciousness that stems from different ideologies. (The meme I am exploring in this essay is clearly left-leaning, so it is definitely not neutral in its statements.) 58m

I am inspired by auto-theory, theory-fiction, and internet mythologies, and therefore the character's journey is heavily inspired by works of Jenny Hval for example. I also find a lot of ideas in the memes, obviously

I think our pieces in relation to each other create an interesting and expansive dynamic 50m

hahaha your meme is fr out in the wild doing bits

lmao - I think that for me, I see the meme less as an embodied creative entity, and more as a fluid, abstract, theoretical concept. My approach, like yours, is definitely speculative, but I wrote as if the meme itself was a digital, modern-day manifestation of a philosophical concept- angst and all

in a way ig that my meme is stuck in an abstract stage before embodiment and the practice operates on an entirely different temporal, non-linear field — which is directly opposite to your approach I think

right? but like I think they both go a long way in highlighting very different aspects of daily memetic practise 44m

Mine definitely goes through the process of embodiment at the very beginning, which results in it gaining consciousness. I have created a sort of lore surrounding it to visualise this process. In the first part, we as readers go through the sudden awakening of the senses narrated by the meme. Then the meme projects itself into human embodiment. In this imagined human body, the meme goes through a dream-like meme cycle, transcending time and space, creating ruptures in the virtual. At the end of its journey, the meme finds itself in the data-oversaturated platform capitalism, where it falls through the endless scroll, burned by the blinding light of screens, deafened by the sounds of audio material, and decomposed into data by the algorithm. The meme's imaginary body disappears, but it's consciousness persists. That is how it comes to the realisation of its own identity. The meme consciousness has been born. 39m

As we go along, the meme slowly comes to terms with its newly redefined self, going through existential ups and downs. By the end of the diary, it realises its extent of omnipresence both in the digital and physical, how the virtual and the actual intertwine in its nature. The meme's consciousness dissolves, reaching its full potential and ultimate freedom. (But before that, it also starts a revolution, casually)

So my meme is abstract, until it reaches imagined embodiment. Its body dissolves, but consciousness persists, it is sticky. 36m

ah yes completely I see that — right so I think that makes most sense as to why we struggled so much with the second idea (where we would co-write)? bc like our concepts could only ever, I think, work one after the other, as opposed to synthesised into the one piece 30m

haha yes, it was quite a rollercoaster at some point! it took me ages to understand the Lacanian approach, and s a stubborn aries, I was not about to abandon my Deleuzianism haha although those two sometimes go hand in hand

just like us skskak 28m

omg no stop - I mean I literally learned most of what I know for my thesis ngl

but yes - with the two of us for sureee every converstation has a one in three chance of someone crying

I love it though- I really feel like we trust each other in our emotional lives, which only goes to enhance our ability to work together and make really interesting things in our academic lives also

born & dying media scholars fuhhh

love this for us <33 24m

You
but yes - with the two of us for sureee every converstation has a one in three chance of someone crying

as a genius once said: "there is 30% chance of rain" *holds boobs intently* 23m

Rey
as a genius once said: "there is 30% chance of rain" *holds boobs intently*

ahahahahhahahahahahaha 21m

You
I love it though- I really feel like we trust each other in our emotional lives, which only goes to enhance our ability to work together and make really interesting things in our academic lives also

it definitely shows the level of comfort and trust present, and how we appreciate each other for who we are. And that do be showing 21m

amen loveeee

bro

we love to see it 21m

I hope our future readers enjoy this chaotic collaboration, which means so much to me. 20m

I really hope so too love

im so happy we did this <3 19m

Same here! This is very special. So grateful Chloë, Idill and the rest of the INC team gave us this opportunity. 17m

absolutely <33 really love a research network all the time

its been a pleasure love <33 excited to see what comes next for us x 16m

love you loads <3 here to new media adventures 15m

ZAHRA AÏT KACI: THE KNOWLEDGE REBORN

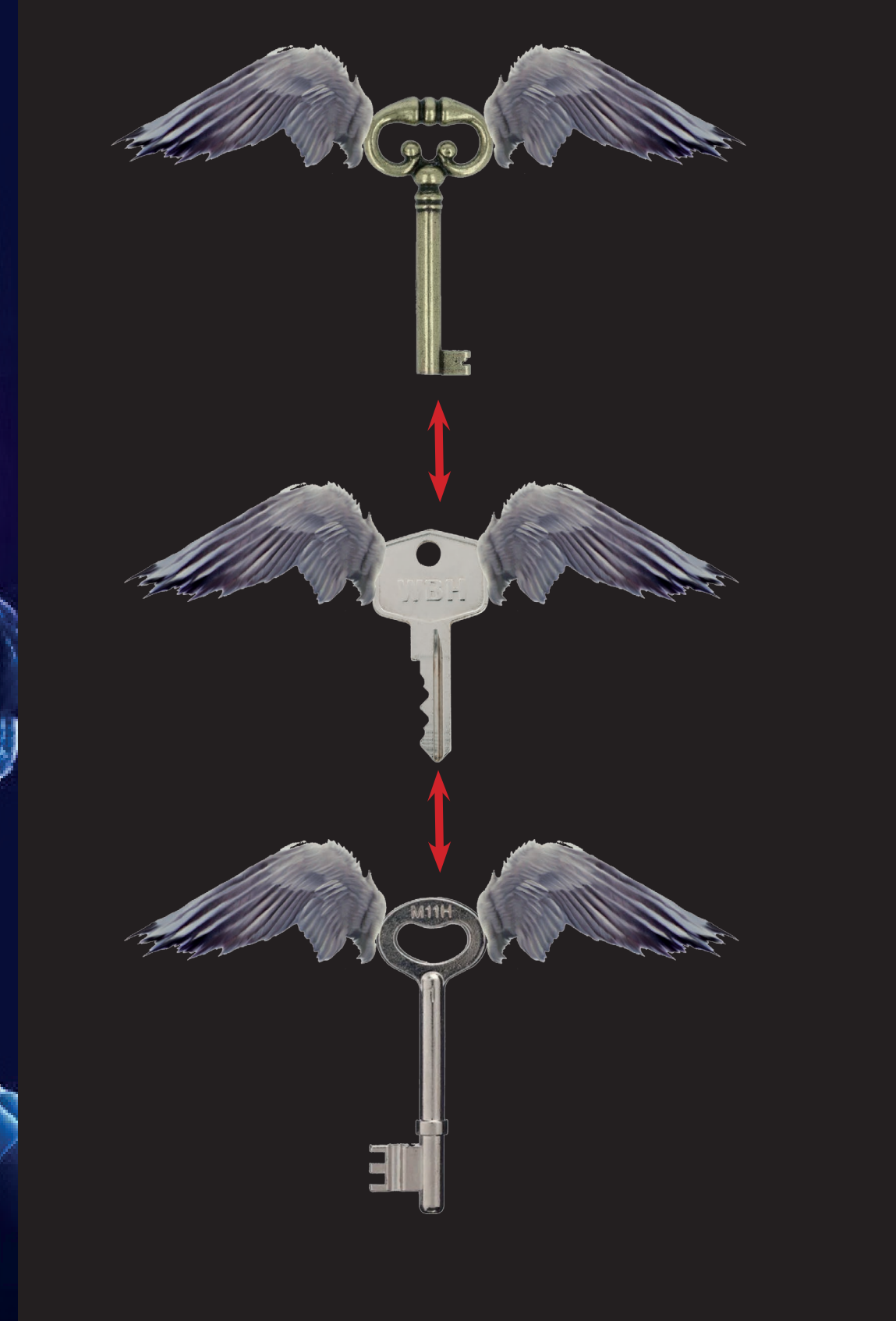
ENZO AÏT KACI

ZAHRA AÏT KACI: THE KNOWLEDGE REBORN




RESTART




MBH
M11H

My grandmother is the ancestor of memes.

My grandmother is the most ancient form of knowledge in the world. She says that the latest version of every theory is wrong. She says Nature is dying and Mankind should be more conservative.

She thinks the world is dying because of copyright and that ownership is a lie.

My grandmother is called Zahra Aït Kaci Ali. She has Alzheimer's and she is illiterate. She forgets everything every day. She trolls me, lies to me, and invents most of the stories she tells me. She calls my mom every day to tell her that my uncles are going to die soon.
She confuses lunch time and bedtime, thinking that midnight is noon and noon is midnight.
She has no sense of time, nor space. She is full of fragile knowledge that gets carried through time but sometimes fades away.

My family's language and genetics failed to be transmitted. My grandmother is North Algerian, from Kabylie. I'm born and raised in France. My grandmother's mother tongue is Kabyle, whereas mine is French. We don't speak the same language and can't communicate. We have been socialized differently.

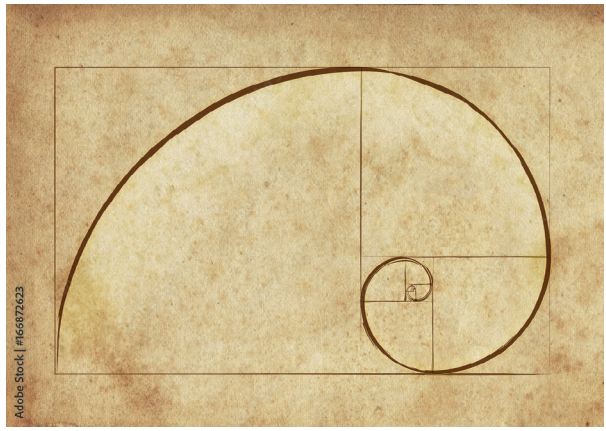
In my family, stories and knowledge get lost in translation. Knowledge is copy-pasted from one family-member to another, but there are always variations, or worse, stories get forgotten.

My grandmother is slowly dying and the only way for her to stay alive is to melt into technology of information to become knowledge herself. She always taught me that knowledge is forever changing and so she is.

In this visual research I aim to explore meme practices to research how ancestry, data, and money can circulate together to rebirth fundamental knowledge of the world: technology, heritage, and economy.

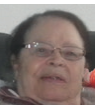
Mostly, «Zahra Aït Kaci» is an attempt to question how to articulate the human thought in the world from my grandmother's perspective.

Chapter 1: Zahra and the Golden Ratio





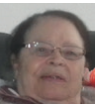




Hello, what are you?



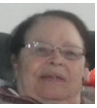
I am the golden ratio, a mathematical ratio.



What do you do?



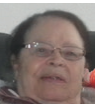
In mathematics, two quantities are in golden ratio if their ratio is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger of the two quantities.



I don’t understand.



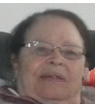
I’m also represented through the Greek letter phi. Some call me the divine ratio.



I am not Greek, I am Kabyle from North Algeria but I think I am Phi because I am a divine ratio. I am the origin of the world.



No I don’t think so.



I am the origin of calculation. The world calculates through me and I calculate the world. I am the divine ratio. The entire world has mistaken you. I am you.

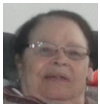




I am Zahra Aït Kaci Ali, I am the origin of the world. I invented the arrow.



Thank you for inventing the arrow.



You are welcome.



Why did you invented the arrow?



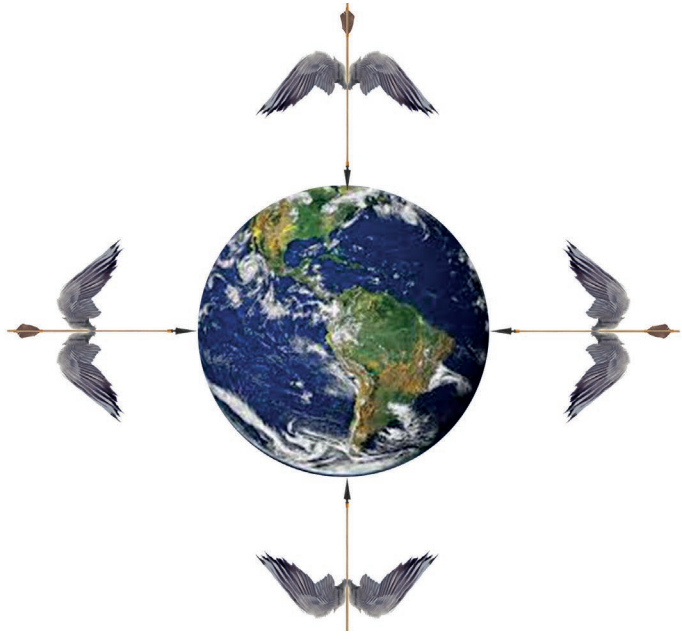
Arrows indicate the human path. They indicate the direction of the knowledge of the world.



So humans should follow the arrow?

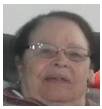


Yes, arrows are meant for humans to oriente themselves in the world of knowledge.



Chapter 3: The Red Arrow

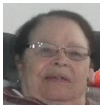




Nowadays the arrow has changed form. The computerization of the knowledge of the world has changed the arrow.



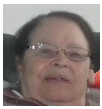
I am the new arrow. The red arrow.



Nice to meet you new arrow.



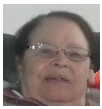
Nice to meet you grandmother.



The digital arrow is dangerous for humanity. Lately, it has been used by scientists to prove science and truth. The red arrow is a danger for the human mind, it gives the illusion of logical connection.



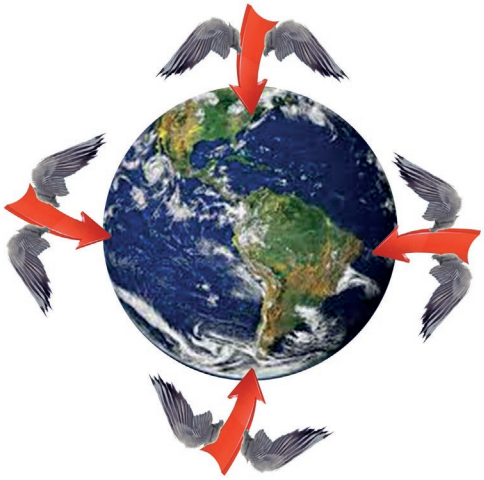
Ah.



Yes. The red arrow also orients the money in the world. It indicates the path of the capital. The red arrow is not only a tool for science but also one for economic transactions.



I confess. Mankind has to be careful what arrows do to the mind.





Recently, Zahra told me that she has found the red arrow on her family pictures.

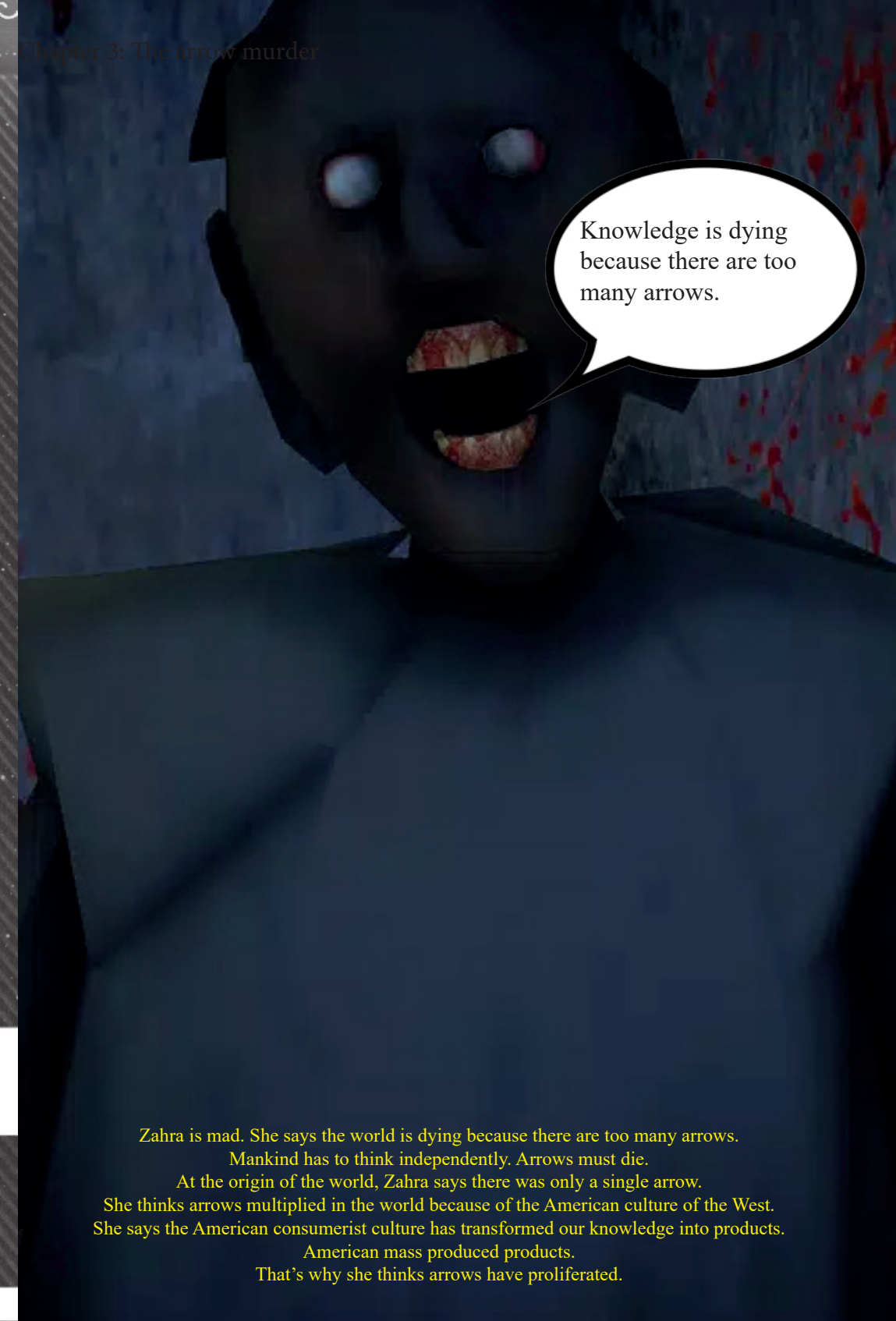


She says she can’t remember her family genealogy because she sees too many arrows.

She also found her old school class pictures infested of red arrows...



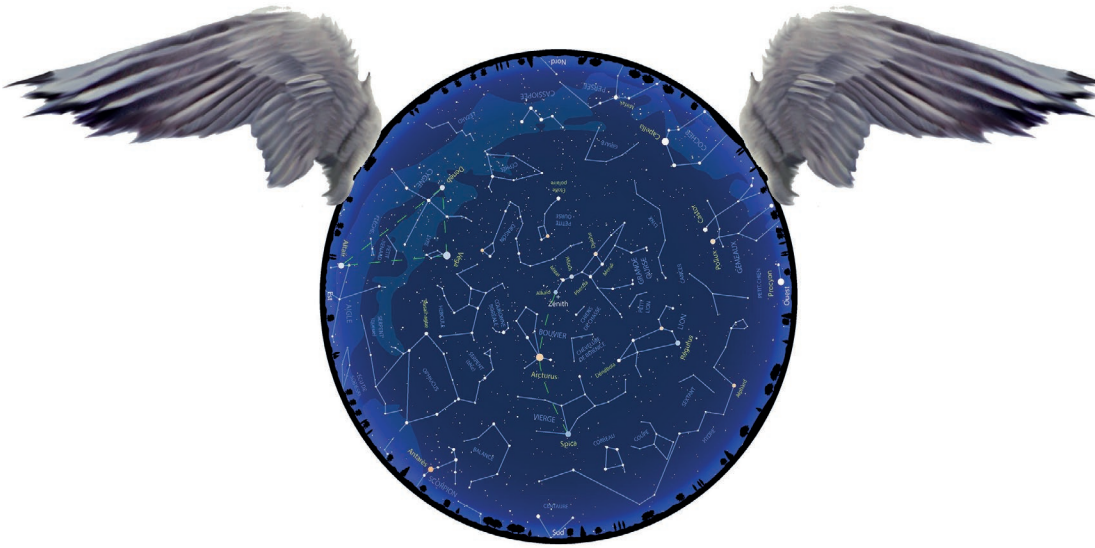




Zahra is mad. She says the world is dying because there are too many arrows.
Mankind has to think independently. Arrows must die.
At the origin of the world, Zahra says there was only a single arrow.
She thinks arrows multiplied in the world because of the American culture of the West.
She says the American consumerist culture has transformed our knowledge into products.
American mass produced products.
That's why she thinks arrows have proliferated.



Chapter 4: Zahra’s constellation



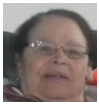
Zahra doesn’t understand why she is not on the constellation map. She says it’s wrong.
She is one of the biggest star constellations but no one sees her.


Bouvier
Seginus
M101
Alkaid
Mizar
M51
Alioth
Arcturus
Muphrid
M3
Chiens de chasse
M63
M94
Megrez
Phad
Dubhe
M82
Merak
Muscida
M53
M64
Chevelure de Bérénice
Vindemiatrix
Alula Borealis
Tania Australis
Talitha Borealis
M91
M85
M100
M99
M98
M49
Dénébola
Petit Lion
Lynx


Izar
Bouvier
Seginus
M101
Thuban
Arcturus
Muphrid
M3
M53
M64
Chevelure de Bérénice
Vindemiatrix
Alula Borealis
M91
M85
M100
M99
M98

Chapter 5 : Zahra Fell in Love With the European flag

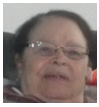




I love Europe.



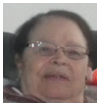
Thank you. How come?



I love stars. Europe has so many stars. Europe and me have so much in common I could have been called Europe.



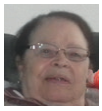
Yes you are meant to shine bright.



Yes.



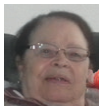
Is there anything else you like about Europe?



Europe and I have the same love for weapons <3. I love countries who sell a lot of weapons. I love guns also. I love Lara Croft.



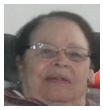
Omg I love Lara Croft too. You are so alike, same mindset.



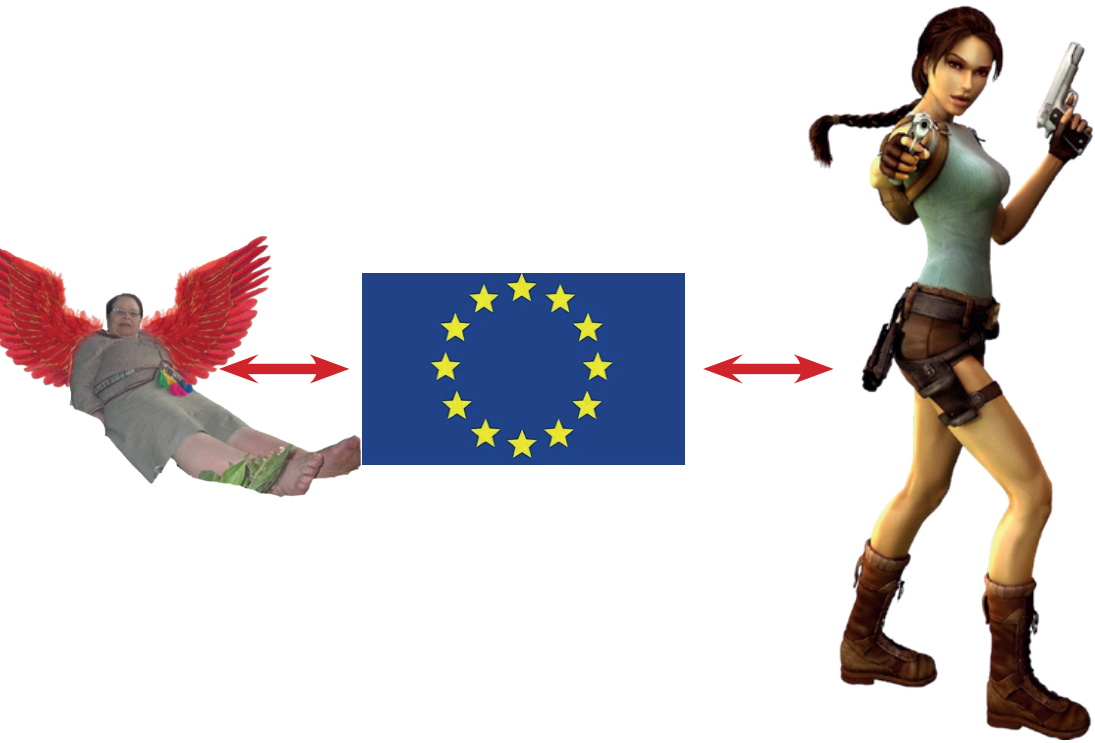
Yes my name is Zahra Croft.

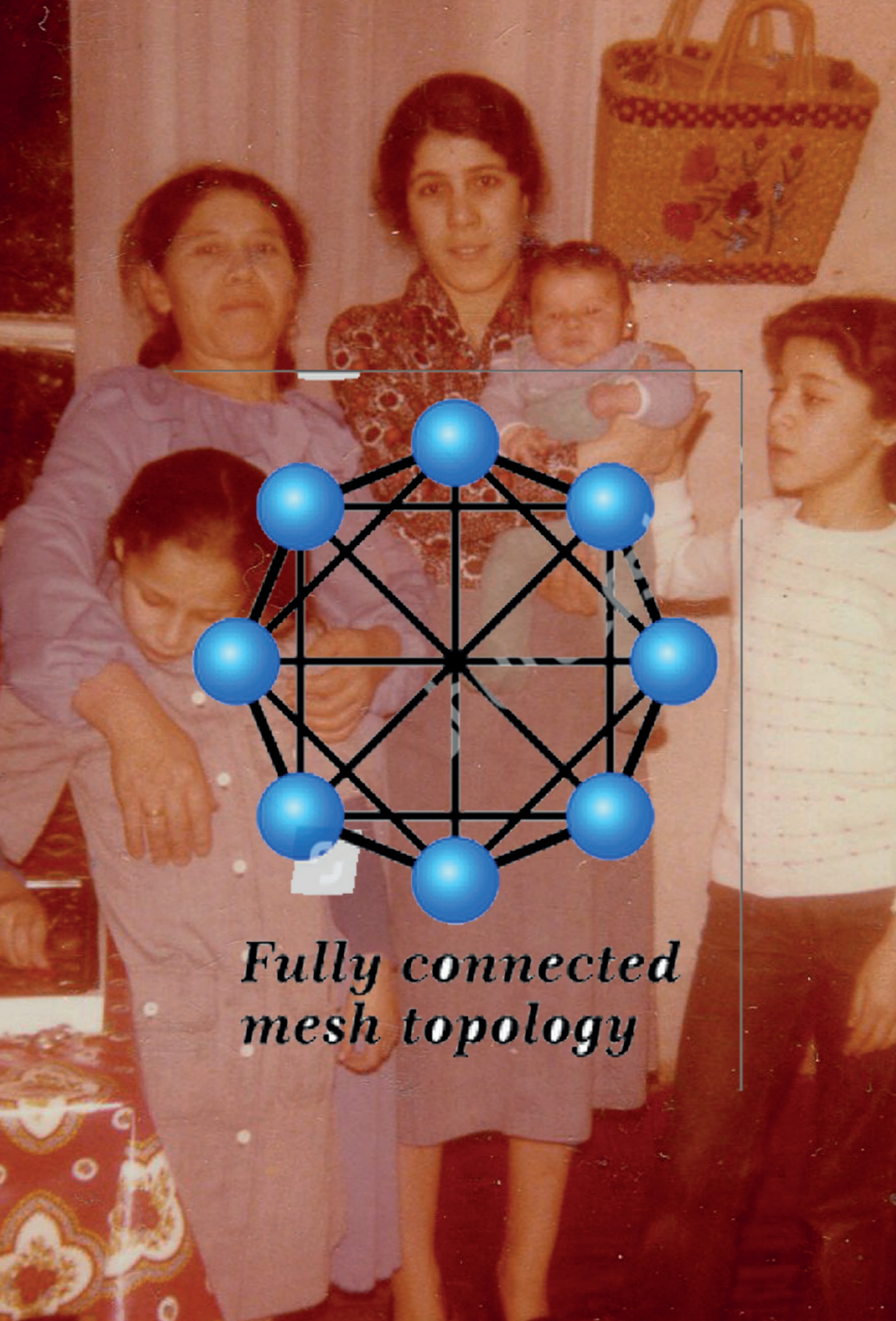


Can I be Europe Croft?

We are the same. We are Europe Croft.



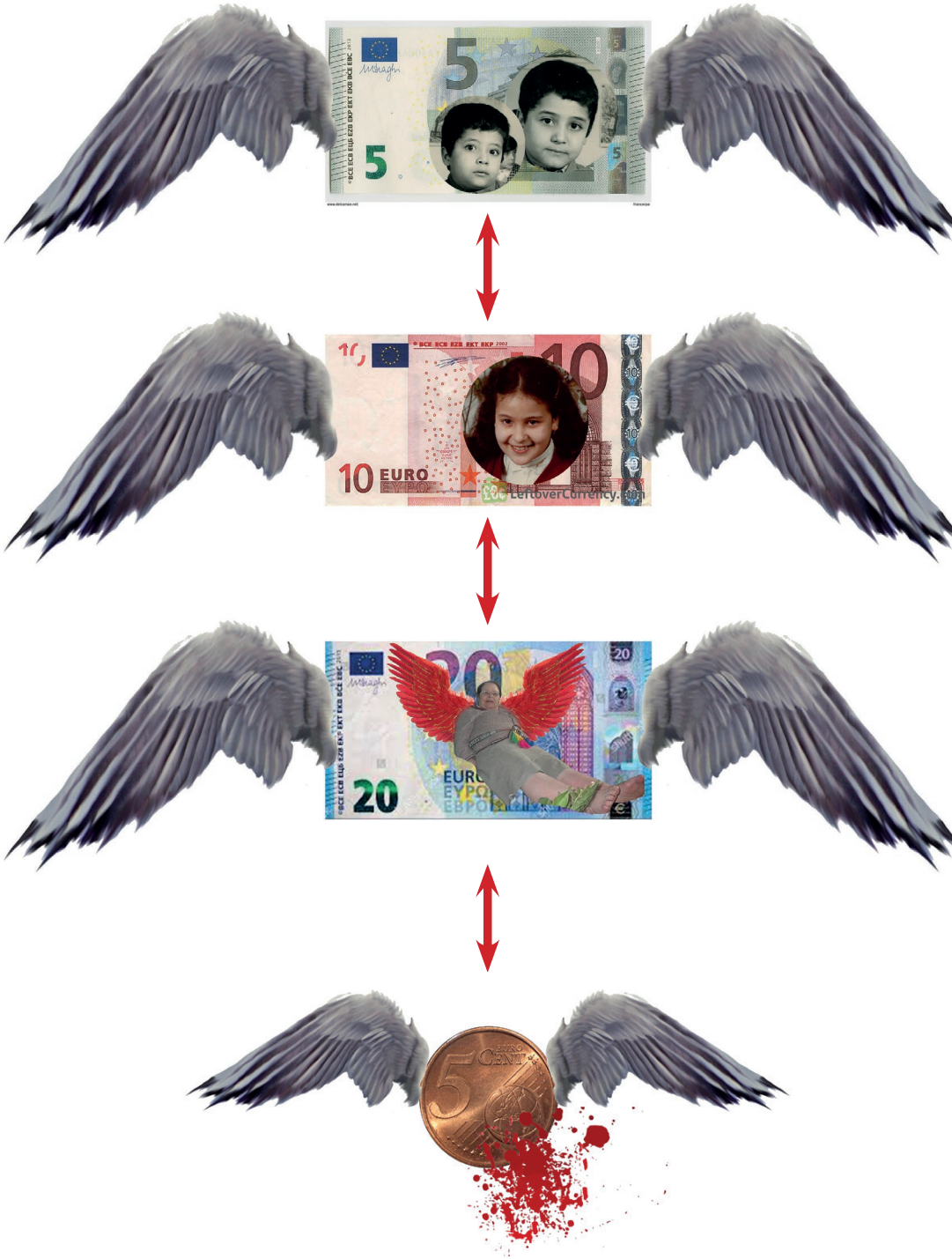


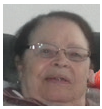
Fully connected mesh topology



Zahra loves network topology. She says she feels inspired by the way informational connections are established because it gives her hope she can find a way to connect to her own family heritage. She wonders if you can connect blood the same way information knots connect. She wants to connect her ancestors through the same circuits of data circulation and information distribution. She says her ancestors should be mainstream.

Chapter 6: Zahra's Family on the Euro Bills





I think that to exist in this world you have to be valuable and there is no better value in the world than money.



Hello, I am the bill of 5 euros and I am also your son Rabah.



Hello, I am the bill of 10 euros and I am also your daughter Karima.

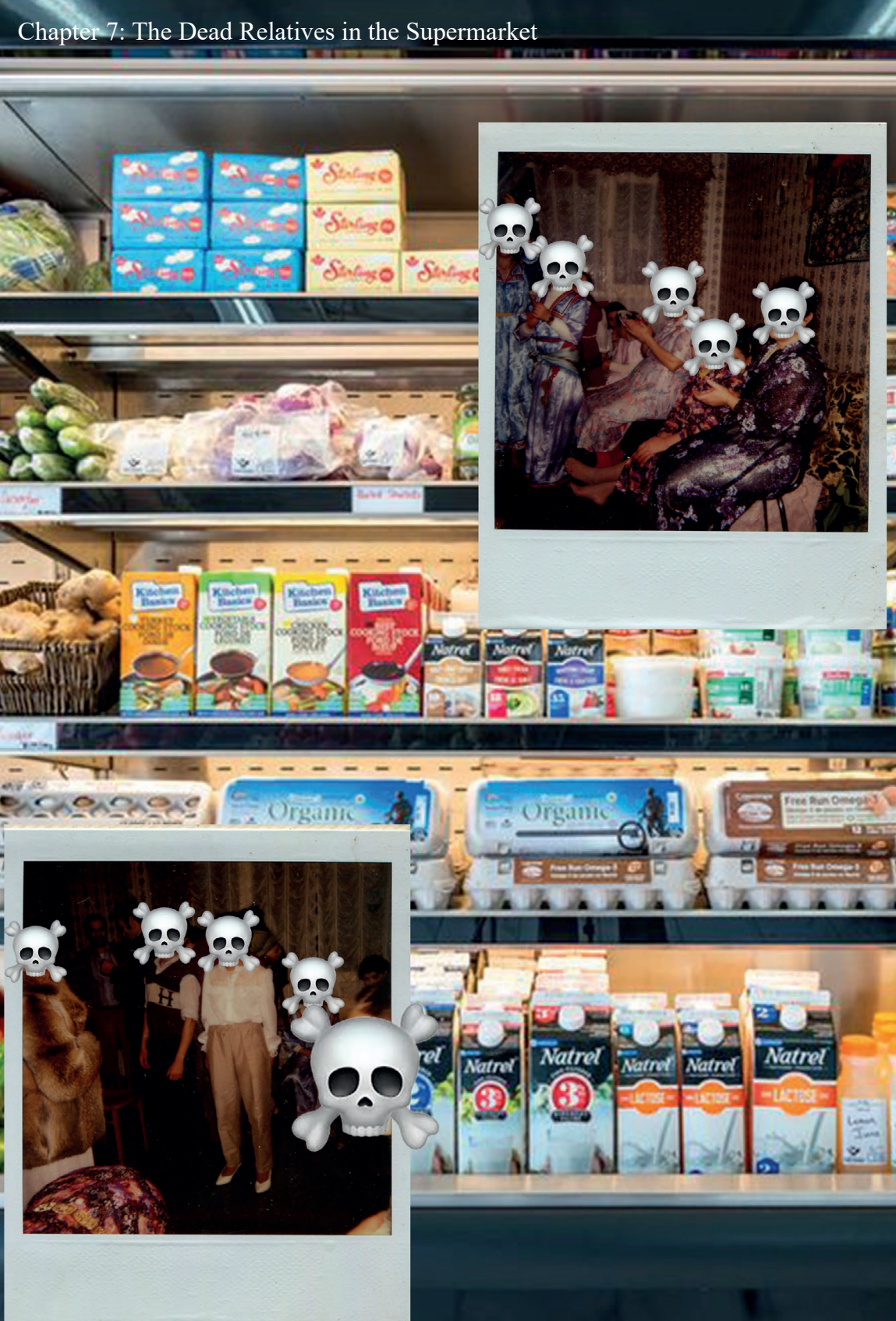


Nice to meet you my children.

Zahra says she loves capitalism fantasy and seeing her children faces on euro bills makes her proud.
She is money and money is she. She can be trade, exchange, financed.
She says society taught her that there is no better value than economic value.
She says pregnancy only matters if you can birth bills or coins.
She thinks money and blood are the same thing. She taught me at a very early age that to make a society you need to make blood and money circulate in the world.



Zahra's echography shows she was 4 months pregnant with a 5 cents coin.
She really wanted to be an entrepreneur.

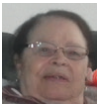

Kitchen Basics
Natrel
Organic
Free Run Omega 3
LACTOSE



I’m forgetting my dead relatives...



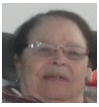
Yes, we noticed you never come to the cemetery.



It’s true...I spend more time at the supermarket than at the cemetery. Sometimes I have hallucinations. I see Slimane, my dead husband next to the eggs department in the store.



You spend too much time buying. You became a consumer. You consume so much your family memory is replaced by the capital memory.



I know...



You should be careful what you invest your money is. The product you buy become the reality you produce.



I have a concept. What if we combine cemeteries and grocery shops?

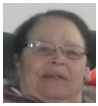


Deadly.



Chapter 8: Zahra Loves Chess but She Hates Pawn

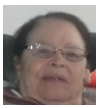




I love chess but I hate pawns. They are so basic. I decided to replace them with LAY'S.



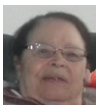
Hello I'm LAY'S. I'm crispy.



Chess games are a reflection of the world. There are too many pawns in the world. Chess pawns are the wrong ones. No one believes me but I know I invented chess and this is the wrong one.

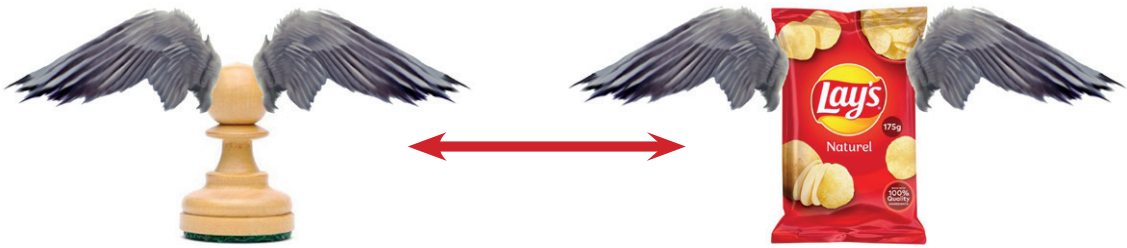


What do you mean?



The world is changing. Now we need to play chess with products of supermarkets. It is important to understand that shapes are fluid and meaning can appear in different shapes and symbols.

My grandmother always thought that mankind should always assign new shapes to already existing concepts and roles. She thinks the unicity of meaning of world is a danger for humanity. Humans must be capable to see several forms of one same form.



Chapter 9: Zahra and Hatsune Miku





I'm mad. No one ever translated the Japanese lyrics of Japanese popstar Hatsune Miku into Kabyle lyrics.



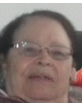
Really? I thought the Internet had no limit and all information was accessible online.



Well, Google translate doesn't offer any Kabyle translation. I can't understand Hatsune Miku's lyrics.



I thought the Japanese influence in Europe was so big that it would be translated in all languages.



No, my language is dying because people love Japan so much it takes all the attention away from Kabylie. I was meant to be an icon, not you. I can sing Kabyle song too. Both our flags have red in their center. It is meant for me to be a star like you.









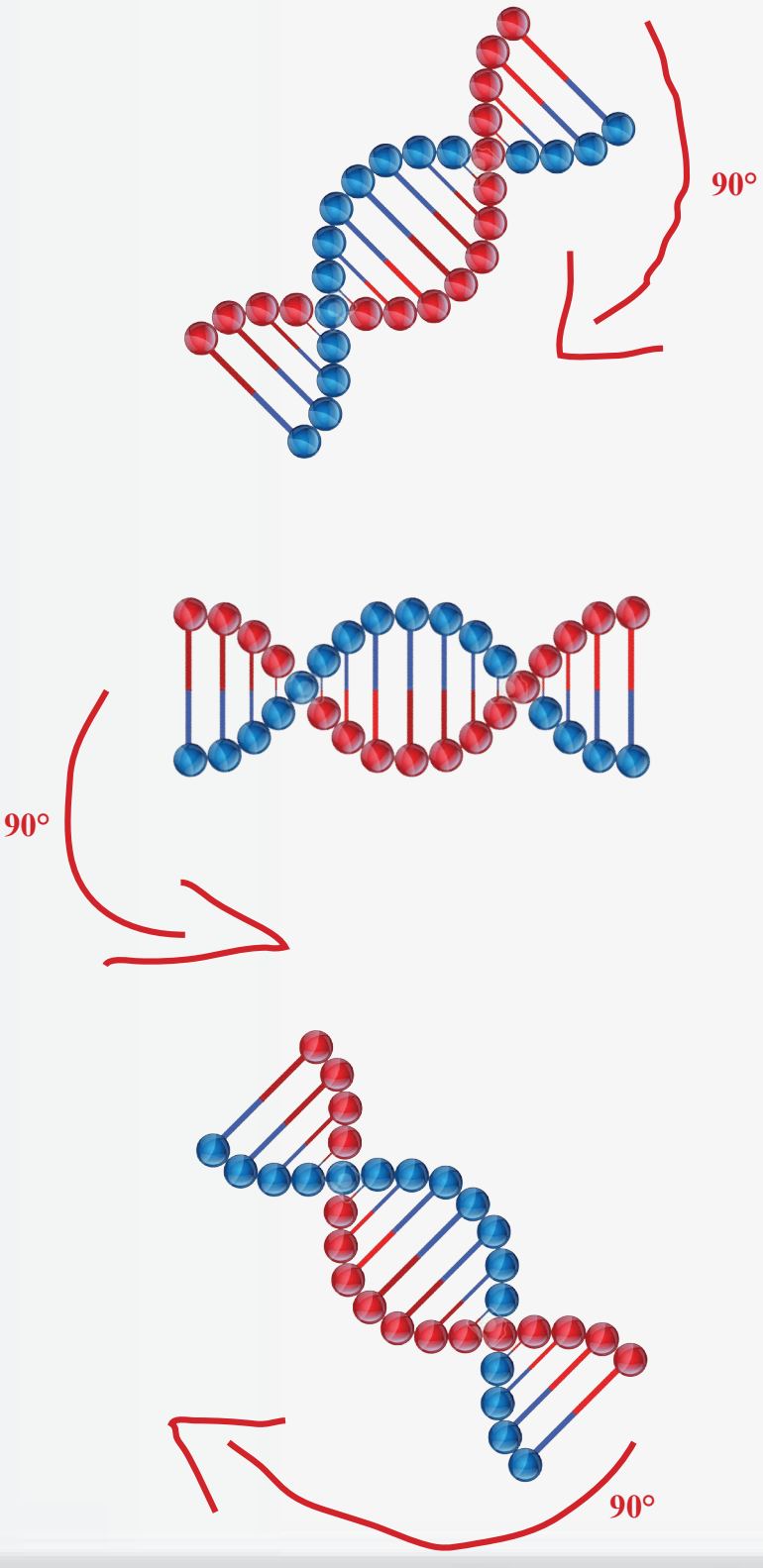


The writer’s note

«Zahra Aït Kaci: the Knowledge Reborn» is a visual research project connecting my grandmother and her North-African Kabyle identity to the origin of knowledge and the internet. The story unfolds through the epic genre mixed with internet trolling as a scenario methodology. She becomes a meme product and melts with the technology of images. As a real meme, she gets manipulated and mutates through the pages. She becomes knowledge herself.

She becomes an internet landlord, owning nothing and everything online. She sometimes has dialogues with other characters. It sounds like a badly written pop song, or very wise advice given by one of your relatives. She evolves through a capitalist fantasy and becomes marketed and promoted as a product of the global financial market. Throughout the quest for knowledge, she also questions what fundamental knowledge is.

I was curious to explore how the mutation of my grandmother’s character can lead to the mutation of the world. I also wonder what truth can arise from forgotten information, and how meme culture can play a role in remembering lost memories. How can information be carried from one generation to another? How can online networks and data storage methods influence new genealogies?


90°
90°
90°



Papa au travail, à l'usine

Zahra's husband; Slimane and the God of Wifi



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LIVE FAST DIE FASTER

RUBA AL-SWEEL

The way posts spread is fascinating. But what's more is the way they dwindle and disappear; the way they wither into extinction. Where does a post go when it dies? A more sinister question is: where does it go when it's deliberately buried under the rubble of censorship and misinformation? More importantly, who owns the means to administer this death? Apparently, the disappearance of digital artifacts—and the larger systems that they uphold and within which they operate—are at a real risk of constantly going extinct.

So much of working with tech is working with means that don't belong to us—creators are but vibe farmers on the massive land that is techno-feudalism, owned by business magnates and investors. The shifting tides of politics and economics—and at times, just personal feuds between tech lords—determine the future of being online. Take, for example, the shifting tides of Twitter, now named X: it was acquired by Elon Musk who instated new policies that altered what artist Lil Internet calls 'The Physics of Social Media'. At this time, X felt (regardless of validity) the imminent threat of extinction by the birth of Threads, a new social media platform operated by Meta. More than a simple 'rebrand', Musk says: 'The Twitter name made sense when it was just 140-character messages going back and forth – like birds tweeting – but now you can post almost anything, including several hours of video.' Musk initially put a temporary limit on the number of tweets that users can see each day, a move that sparked backlash. These real feature changes on the topography of tech land seriously influence access to and creation of data.

A more overt and perhaps grim example is invisibility of content coming from or about Palestine. More X users are becoming aware of the extent big tech would go to bury stories that are unfavorable to dominant capitalist interests. After October 7, 2023, Israel took advantage of a series of attacks by Hamas on Southern Israel to justify brute force in retaliation, resulting in massive displacement and destruction of Palestinian land and lives. After intense waves of Israeli airstrikes severed all internet and cellular communications in Gaza—a deliberate move by the Israeli government to stifle the emergence of alternative narratives from the ground by users on social media platforms like Chinese-owned TikTok—Musk alleged that SpaceX would try to help international aid groups in Gaza communicate with Starlink internet terminals. A vacant gesture, considering that just a few weeks later the tech tycoon announced that terms associated with Palestinian resistance such as 'decolonization' and 'from the river to the sea' will result in suspension from X. The machinations of narrative control and its loopholes are exposed in sharp relief to anyone who is looking. This muffling of voices ranged from shadow-bans to deploying Hasbara tactics by controlling Wikipedia entries through to literally muting audio on videos posted by Gazans. It's true that he who controls the information (in this case Musk and his milieu), controls the narrative. He who controls the narrative controls the world.

Since the 1960s, creators have been experimenting with the cutting-edge of art and technology, which develops at breakneck speed. According to Art Net writer Jo Lawson-Tancred, the struggle to keep up with dizzying developments and precarity in technology are felt at institutional levels too, as museums grapple to keep artworks functional: the rhetorical question of her essay 'Can a Digital Artwork Outlast a 19th-Century Painting?' hardly seeks answers.[1] At a recent retrospective of digital art at London's Gazelli Art House, artist Jake Elwes exhibited *Digital Whispers*, a program he created in 2016 to pick up live tweets within a two-mile radius and 'whisper' them via an attached speaker. This stopped working in April 2023, after Twitter discontinued access to its free API and removed the option to filter tweets by location. Adapting to the new circumstances, Elwes resorted to playing a recording from 2019 on loop, and retired the ongoing work by cutting off its date range at 2023. The centralization of decision-making in technology has presented new challenges to the field of preserving new media art, which has 'now become far more complex than just shopping eBay to find a working VCR to play a Nam June Paik video tape,'[2] says Lawson-Tancred. Planned Obsolescence perhaps stands as the most obvious example of 'killing' the means of creation. This involves programming an expiration date within the product such that older versions of software (e.g. Adobe Flash Player, YouTube's Android application, Apple's iOS) become unserviceable deliberately, even though they would technically, albeit not economically, be able to keep working as intended.

Posting itself has indeed died. Not once, but a thousand times. Thinking of and circulation as a brainchild of big tech dynamics dictates that the minute is birthed it is already in the process of dying. That doesn't need to be a bad thing. A ticking timebomb living by the pulse, the is a pulsating, organic being, passing through cycles of life, in constant relation to its creator and wider landscape. It's true that these dynamics have come to shape the history of the internet – this ever-moving machine that necessarily ascribes to Brazilian-Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser's logic of the '*apparatus-operator* complex' in image-making.[3] The term *apparatus* is here defined as a tool that produces technical images (internet software, platforms. . .etc) and the term *operator* here means a specialist in the handling of apparatus (the artist, image-creator, user, memelord). Flusser argues that it is just as inaccurate to assume that an operator moves according to an apparatus as that an apparatus moves according to an operator: the function is the constant relation, and both apparatus and operator are variables. In placing creator and means of creation on a level playing field, perhaps we are more likely to imagine emancipation. This disarming of the hegemony of tech lords, the big bad wolves, strips them of an all-encompassing, absolute

1 Jo Lawson-Tancred, "Can a Digital Artwork Outlast a 19th Century Painting?," Artnet, August 9, 2023, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/can-a-digital-artwork-outlast-a-19th-century-painting-the-answer-is-complicated-as-artists-dealers-and-conservators-battle-obsolescence-in-the-field-2308517.

2 Lawson-Tancred, "Can a Digital Artwork Outlast a 19th Century Painting?."

3 Vilém Flusser, *Communicology: Mutations in Human Relations?*, ed. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), 5

power. For Flusser, the issue of meaning is central to the status of an Image: as N. Katherine Hayles writes, 'the force he [Flusser] sees propelling the transition from one media epoch to another is not so much technology (for example, the invention of the printing press) as a loss of meaning in a previous epoch's modes of communication.'[4]

More recently, writer Cory Doctorow makes a case for why big tech is making the internet terrible and why Silicon Valley CEOs and grifters are working hard to keep it that way. He calls this 'the enshitification of the internet' where platforms sit squarely at the intersection between private equity and collusive practices.[5] These legal sleights of hand plunge the internet farther into loss of meaning and in this attempt, they inadvertently accelerate its demise. But if we are to take Flusser's gospel of a new world, then this perhaps does not need to be lamentable —rather, it renders the prior epoch obsolete and inaugurates the new.

Legend has it that every time an angel comes on the internet, they get cancelled. That's fair. It's no place for the faint-hearted. The angel's presence becomes a small leakage into something new, the death of an angel a symptom of a pending revolution already afoot, although its executors had little or no grasp of the nature and dynamics of what they were helping bring about. Afterall, blessed are the cancelled, the dead, the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

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4 N. Katherine Hayles, "Foreword," in *Communicology*, ed. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), ix.

5 Cory Doctorow, "Enshitternet: The Good, Old Internet Deserves a New, Good Internet," *Pluralistic: Daily Links from Corey Doctorow*, August 13, 2023, https://pluralistic.net/2023/08/13/enshitternet/.

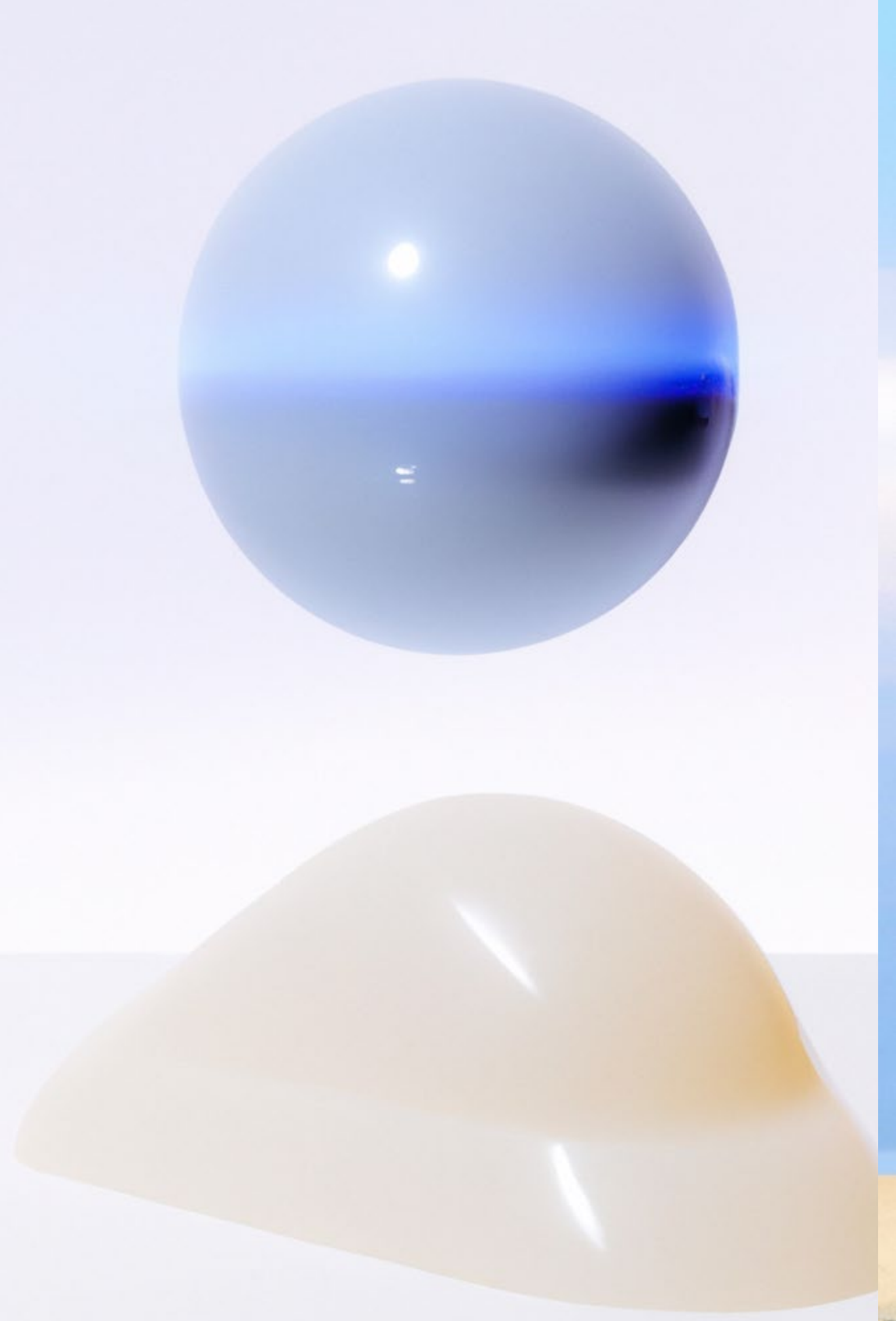
STAR MEME, UFO TO THE CENTER OF YOUR MIND

TYLER JAMES PATTERSON

Inspired by paranormal researcher John Keel's book 'Flying Saucer to the Center of Your Mind', Star Meme is a representation of the transformation and transmission of meaning without a permanent sense of form. Planets, eyes, eggs, technology, and lifeforms represent the evolution of meaning between the viewer and what is being viewed.

The implicit narrative requires your interpretation, much like a meme does, as the UFO becomes a vehicle for information, belief, and understanding. Through this narrative, objects become fixed representations of impermanent things.





















THE LAST MEME

@SIMULACRA_AND_STIMULATIONS

Hanging lamps illuminate the streets of the city, built on wooden stakes driven violently into the swamp many centuries ago, which has since sunk back into the brackish water far less violently, gently even, millimeter by millimeter. The city has become quiet since the streets became inundated, which at first attracted even more visitors, but quickly led to the end of tourism altogether. At first, people enjoyed the new calm, the sudden openness outside, but as capital retracted and hotels, restaurants and airbnbs closed down and were abandoned, it became apparent to what extent this old, world-historic city, this capital of capital, has been not only been shaped, but intimately produced by tourism — and how rapidly it fell apart once this cash flow ceased. I should make a reel.

It is night and I can hear the occasional person wading past my window, probably wearing yellow rubber boots and a black waxed jacket. The neighborhood I live in is still middle class, as they say, and so it is still quieter here than in other parts of the city. Whenever two or more people do walk past at night, however, I can hear them talking, as the windows and the rest of the street-facing side of the building are under a preservation order. Which is to say that the building has been falling apart for a long time. The people I can hear are probably going to or coming from one of the many cafés that have opened since the tourists stopped coming. The cafés are more numerous than before, and also very different in that they often only consist of a table for a counter, a large fridge, and stools or boxes to sit on. Even so, they are not uncomfortable. One can easily spend one's time there, and many people do. Whenever you walk past one of these establishments at night, chances are it's tightly packed and has people standing outside, smoking and talking loudly, gutturally.

I, however, do not often go out to drink. I prefer to do so at home, but not tonight, as I have had a headache since noon, and drinking alcohol usually makes it worse. So, I sit on the couch and try not to listen to what the people outside are saying. I wouldn't understand them anyway, but with the odd sounds I do hear through the window I inadvertently try reconstructing their conversation. This, too, makes my headache worse.

Right now, I am supposed to come up with a caption for a new meme. The image shows two mannequins: one points at the other; the second is crying. The text on top, apparently uttered by the first mannequin, says 'lmao she thought the search for the self was an end in itself and not just a part of the care for the self.' The mannequin which says it has a cutout of Michel Foucault's face pasted on top of its own. Foucault is in black and white, and grinning. I should make a reel. The text is stupid, but the mere mention of 'care for the self' will probably be recognizable for a sufficient number of people. The meme will do well in terms of likes and engagement. Perhaps I'll even get a few new followers. Foucault

always works in memes, especially if they are crude enough, containing trigger words like panopticon, discipline or, indeed, care for the self. Most people will also not recognize the mistake, that Care *of* the Self has become care *for* the self. Anyway, it's translated in both cases and the author is dead so who cares. I also doubt that many of my followers and non-followers will have read the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*. I haven't, for starters, and I get the meme. They will too. They will get it.

Foucault is the most cited scholar, at least I always say he is. I think he isn't really. But he works really well in memes. Probably because he is such a persona and immediately recognizable in images. Probably also because he died young enough for there to be no images of him as an old man. Deleuze works great too but he is also slightly gross with his long fingernails. But memes about his fingernails work well because you don't need to have read a single page of his to cringe at his fingernails. The problem with Foucault is that whenever you mention him online some people will come round and mention either that he signed that one petition or that story about Tunisian cemeteries. However, that mostly gets Americans worked up and you really can't dwell on their morality if you want to get something done in this world.

The first likes come in, popping up at the top of my screen. It always takes half a minute, maybe less, sometimes more, before people are shown a new post. I share it to my story immediately, but it always takes a bit to choose a song and cut to the right 15 second part of it. I should make a reel. I can't choose my own background if I share a post to my stories, but sometimes other people can when they share my post to their stories, and if it's a good post they always do. Often small accounts with very few followers and no posts of their own. If you then click on their profile pic you can see that their whole contribution is sharing other people's posts to their stories for virtually no one else to see. What motivates them to do so? It helps the algorithm, I think. For my own posts, that is, if many people share them. But sharing something doesn't amount to much if you have almost no followers. Do they want to be part of theorygram but can't or don't want to make posts of their own?

Anyway, I think Bourdieu might be the most cited scholar, but he is very rarely put into memes which is odd because everybody who went through an undergrad program in the humanities and social sciences (which is the same thing by the way, don't trust anyone who says it isn't) has heard plenty misrepresentations of habitus, social capital and practice theory. I practice theory. I am theorygram. And yet theorygram is not I, it is not Pierre Bourdieu but Michel Foucault. It is somewhat Jean Baudrillard but much more Gilles Deleuze. It is very Slavoj Žižek and Mark Fisher and even Nick Land but never Kodwo Eshun. When it is Karl Marx it quickly becomes politigram. It is not Husserl, Sartre, or Merleau-Ponty, but sometimes Heidegger. It does not know about Edith Stein. It is definitely not Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, but it is Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser, albeit not very much Jacques Derrida. And like I said, theorygram is MICHEL FOUCAULT.

But seriously, what motivates these micro-accounts to completely litter their stories with other people's posts if they have no one who watches them — who sees them? When I started, I was lucky to grow a follower base relatively quickly. It helped to befriend larger accounts early on: friends share friends' posts. It's strange how quickly and how strongly you can befriend someone online, especially in a niche space like theorygram, only to completely lose touch with them sooner or later. I have contact with no one with whom I had contact in the beginning. They are still there. We are often still mutuals, but we don't talk to each other anymore. It is strange, but what motivates them? And can I ask this question without running into the risk of psychoanalyzing them? What motivated me in the beginning? I didn't really know what theorygram was when I made my first post. It was a picture of Homer Simpson lying in the grass underneath a tree, but with Lacan's face instead of Homer's. I can't remember what the caption said but it was something stupid probably. I hardly knew who Lacan was at the time. In my second week as an undergrad, in a class called 'Introduction to Philosophy, Politics and Economics', the lecturer quickly went through what they called the postmoderns, ranging from Ferdinand de Saussure to Judith Butler. They also mentioned Nietzsche but only said that he was very important for them, especially for Foucault.

There he was. Foucault. He was on the title slide of the PowerPoint presentation. That one image of him sitting at his desk in front of a huge bookcase and underneath a lamp that looks like you would find it at the bargain corner at IKEA. He wears a very comfy looking knitted jacket and holds two fingers to his forehead as if he'd hold a cigarette between them. He doesn't look at the camera but at whatever is before him on the desk, a book, or sheets of paper. Even without knowing who he is, you know that he must be French because all the books behind him have white spines. France really has the best developed publishing market. Academic titles immediately come out as mass market paperbacks for € 10-15. Unthinkable anywhere else. And they are all white. It's a captivating picture with a specific 1960s/dark academia vibe to it. For us beginning philosophers, it set a tone that the academic careers that followed — or didn't follow — inevitably failed to match. I often wonder if theorygram is simply dark academia for unaesthetic people: the Instagram version of something that took place on tumblr. There is probably not much more substance to the former than there is to the latter, but the latter, dark academia, at least never pretended to be about anything more than old looking buildings, brown cardigans with grey wool pants and round, gold-rimmed spectacles.

Theorygram, on the other hand, aspires to much more. I aspired to more, at first, although I'm not sure what. Neither for me personally nor for theorygram. Memes and theory. What is that? Theory or philosophy, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter on Instagram. But theorygram indisputably is a space for itself. A virtual room of its own. An algorithmic heterotopia. And so, it is always weird to venture outside theorygram, where certain things are relatively set and defined, where a certain habitus is being cultivated. Leaving it, on your so-called explore page, for instance, means being confronted with people, so many

people, who unironically write things like ‘I want to try that scrub! I bet it smells amazing’ underneath an influencer ad, or who would not agree that 1312 or that Ryan Gosling is literally me, although neither of these things is particular to theorygram, of course.

I should make a reel.

I digress. I hear people walking past my window again. I wonder where they might be off to. I peek through the heavy curtains. It is a single person, talking to themselves. They look lonely and now *they are gone, and here must I remain*. And I don’t want to be here anymore. On theorygram, everybody always seems miserable. I put on my boots and open the door. It is raining but softly, as it often is, and I don’t want to wear a hat so I just leave. How does the algorithm work, like, is it enough for people to save and share your post for it to be shown on people’s explore pages? Is that how it works. The app only allows you to be logged into eight accounts simultaneously, or maybe seven. Sometimes I see my own memes on the explore pages of my other accounts. Instagram ought to know that they are my memes, that I have spread myself over eight accounts, but that they are all in one app, operated by me alone. They should know but they still show me my own memes. I think it should be more accepted to like one’s own memes, literally, with the account that posted them. Because why wouldn't you like it yourself? You posted it just now. I wonder if this norm would be different, wouldn’t exist, if Instagram weren't American. The protestant ethic and the spirit of never liking your own stuff or else.

The cafés are crowded again, but it is dark outside so it makes sense. What else would people do here, with the water up to their necks? Not yet, however. Only the feet are submerged in the briny soup with sodden cigarette filters floating on its surface. And leaves. The leaves and filters always stick to your boots when you get home so that you have to brush or rinse them off before you enter because you wouldn't want to drag them inside. The smell of the water outside is bad enough when it’s warm outside. But now it’s fairly cold and the summer is over anyhow. I once read that in a few years, the whole earth will be covered by a thick layer of fallen leaves, because the mass extinction of critters means that no one is left to dispose of them. These critters are called detritivores, and we have killed many of them. So, what will happen with all the leaves? This must really suck in dry places.

I walk around and frequently open my phone to see how my post is doing. A mutual commented something underneath but I don’t quite get it, so I reply with a string of random emojis.



That’ll do. I am outside discourse. Foucault said that there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say, but he was talking about silence.

He had no idea about emojis. He would've loved them. He would've loved Instagram in general. He would've loved technofeudalism although he probably wouldn't get it.

I walk far away from my house, away from the street I know, but the neighborhoods I cross look similar enough to mine. There are no differences here. Besides, the water is the same everywhere. The post already has 137 likes after just over an hour, not too bad. I have a message request. It is from a mutual who has a new account because the old one got zucced. He asks how I'm doing and if I'd be interested in coming to a panel discussion tonight. I'm not, but I am also intrigued because there are no panel discussions here. There are no panels here, at least not since the two universities, the art academy, and the business school moved to the hinterlands to avoid having their lecture halls flooded. I ask where it is and what it's about. I ask who organized it and I ask how long they think it'll go.

They don't reply so I put the phone away. My notifications are always turned off but I have a screen time of more than 7 hours so I don't really need the notifications anyway. When I open Instagram again the post has 142 likes — it's slowing down. The first wave is ebbing out. I have a new message. From my friend. It is less of a panel discussion, they write, and more of a seminar. It's organized by people they know. It's in the old humanities building in the city center. I know the building well, as I studied there, but also because I was there when it was occupied for the last time. Back then the university called the cops and they evicted the students, but now the university has left and the cops couldn't care less. The building has finally become immune to occupations: all it took was a climate catastrophe.

If I remember correctly, the last occupation was precisely about that, about the university's entanglement with the fossil-fuel industry. Ridiculous, alienating even, to think that we believed that we could change anything about that. Instead, we should have just played for time. A good fire consumes itself and then just suffocates. I wonder if we are still in the cannibal phase or if we are already suffocating. Or if that too has passed already, and these are the last spasms of the body before it becomes still completely. And what then? With all the detritivores gone.

I open my phone once more. 154 likes. One more story reshare. One new message. I reply that I'll be there in a few. Right now, I would really like to still be a smoker, but I stopped. And I should really make a reel. I open the YouTube app and I take the headphones out my pocket and put them on. Or rather, in. Google's algorithm suggests 'imogen heap - hide and seek [slowed + reverb]' and then a Slavoj Žižek video. But it seems to be an excerpt from a much longer video, a lecture. And I have seen it already. The third video YouTube offers me is called '【4K HDR】Walk in Heavy Rain at Night in Tokyo, Japan #ASMR' but that seems a bit pointless right now. I click on the fourth one, and immediately close it again. I repeat this until I no longer get an unskippable ad. It is a doomer remix of 'Where is My Mind' by the Pixies. It is seven minutes long; I'll probably listen to it at least twice before I reach the humanities building.

There is no one outside. I enter and go up to the second floor. I go into the first room on the right and it is empty. I find the others in the second lecture hall, which is a bit smaller but at least it has large windows through which light enters from outside, the fog of light that the city still pumps into the nocturnal air. There is probably a good dozen people inside. One of them, I don't recognize them, sits on the edge of the stage. It really looks like a normal lecture. I see my friend and sit down next to them. They introduce me to the others. Referring to me by my account name. They probably don't know my real name, my birth name. They are talking about direct action. About what we could do to regain control over the city. I ask who's currently in control, as the city seems pretty much autonomous already.

'They are,' my friend shouts, pointing to the back of the hall, where a large sign has been mounted above the doors. I don't recognize it— it must have been installed after I graduated.

'A construction company,' I say.

'What, no. The group they belong to, obviously. WaterCorp. The government basically gave them everything here and they bought up the rest.'

'Ok, but they don't really do anything, do they?'

'What do you mean, they control everything. How is that not doing something? They literally own the city now. They probably own your house already and you don't even know it. They gained so much from the downfall. We can't let that stand. We need to do something.'

'Exactly, and that's where you come in,' says the person sitting next to my friend, looking at me. 'You are pretty good with, like, propaganda tools, right?'

'Well, I-'

'Yeah ok, great. We wanted to infiltrate the WaterCorp campus south of the east village, and blow up their data center.' He shows me a satellite image of a small grey rectangle next to a highway. 'And we need someone to film it, edit it a bit for maximum effect, and to spread it. So we can show people what we're doing here, how we're resisting. Maybe you could make a few reels or something.'

'We'll do some Malmian praxis, *How to blow up an information pipeline*' someone else says, laughing.

Why not, I think. I know that this is not the first time that they've done something like this. The city was always plagued by explosions, even before everything. But they were usually

set off by bored teens, blowing up shops or private residences. Only later, you could sometimes hear loud booms, followed by sirens, knowing that they hit a government building or some company's headquarters. But that stopped once they all left, when there were no antagonists left. I had no idea that they didn't actually leave, that they were simply replaced by someone else, someone much more powerful, who owns the entire city, the entire infrastructure. Someone who can literally control what happens in the city, who does what, when and where. A proprietary city.

I check my phone again. 200 likes. It feels a bit stupid now. I check the story reshares. Someone is angry, and shared my post to their story with the caption that I didn't understand Foucault. That's alright. It always happens, and it counts as engagement. The algorithm doesn't care if I understood Foucault. Would anyone care to see a video of a burning data center? It is not like they are the most interesting buildings to look at. Fire probably catches the eye, but then again, it's not like people aren't already oversaturated with war imagery. And will they know that this is, in fact, here and not something we stole from a war far away?

'What does their data center do?' I ask.

'What do you mean, it's where their data is at' my friend says, sounding either surprised or annoyed with me.

'Yeah but like is it just their internal servers or is it also, you know, part of the internet? I don't know how these things really work.'

'Oh, well, we haven't really discussed that yet,' the other guy with the satellite images says.

'What if we, like, destroy the internet or something?' I continue, 'How would you want me to spread the videos then? How would people know it was us, and not just a malfunction of their system?'

'Does it matter? The bigger the better. We are the malfunction in their system.'

'When do you want to do it? Tonight?'

'Yes, we organized a car which can take us there. Not all of us, obviously, three people and you should be enough we think. If you're in, of course.'

It all seems so stupid now. Why do they think that blowing up a data center will amount to anything? What company only has one data center anyway. This is probably only a better server room, coordinating their coffee machines or something. And these people,

here, how are they going to infiltrate a corporate campus and set off explosives. They are all former art students. And WaterCorp probably also owns the police, or has its own private army. This is all ridiculous. I tell them that I have to go get my cameras, to film it from multiple angles. That I'll be back in half an hour. And I leave.

It's all so dumb. If only my followers knew how dumb it all is here. That a bunch of radikalinskis think they can change the world by blowing up something. I decide that I won't go back. So what if this is all owned by one company? I'm doing quite alright for myself, and so is everyone I know. Everybody knows that it cannot stay like this forever, that we either have to rebuild it all ourselves (figuratively speaking) or that we'll have to leave. I should make a reel, before it's too late.

I am walking through the streets again, circling around the old national ballet and opera house. My feet are dry but freezing cold from the water. My headache is still there, and spread to my neck now. I must have tensed up without realizing. I want to call my friend, to tell him what I think about their whole thing. That surely somebody else can do the filming. That it is really not that hard to share something on the internet. But I also don't want to call him, to confront him and the others, even over the phone. I am cold and the rain has picked up; the streets are completely deserted now. Not even the smokers in front of the cafés are still there. They probably smoke inside now. Every night, at some point, the smokers and café dwellers of this city collectively decide that it's fine to smoke inside. Usually around the early hours of the morning. It is not that late yet, but like I said, it's raining more now. I should have put on my hat after all.

I decide to go to a café, no matter which one. I no longer want to be outside, hoping that the presence of strangers will feel like company. I find an Irish Pub and I wonder if it is a third-stage sign, which masks the absence of the reality it reflects, as Ireland as such no longer exists. Or, if it has always been a pure simulacrum, with no relation to any reality whatsoever, as the Ireland of the Irish pubs has never existed. I order a beer before I can find an answer. It is not too crowded. It's strange that these places become fuller the further away you go from the city center. The center did not hold and it was the first part to become deserted. Maybe things always rot from the inside out and not the other way around. I go on my phone.

I have gotten more likes and also several comments. I read through them. Two people are arguing about Foucault. Not about the text, but about the correct interpretation of the petition he signed. I delete the top comment. My page is not a place for discussion. I go through the stories of the people I follow, which I don't often do. None of them have reshared my post. Which is ok. My followers and followees don't overlap too much. Besides, it is already late. The likes probably came from the Americas or East Asia, where people are still awake or just got up. Perhaps also Australians, who knows.

It's been three quarters of an hour since I left my friend and his comrades. I wonder if they've left by now. I don't want to check my message inbox. Maybe they figured that I wouldn't come back. The people here, who are sitting in front of their beers, have probably not wondered what order of the image the Irish Pub is. Or maybe they have. Maybe they have the exact same thoughts as me. Who knows. This used to be a university city after all.

I open Instagram again. Nothing's changed. More likes. I open YouTube and look for a clip from The Sopranos. I have an idea for a reel. Making reels takes a bit of time, and I'm not too familiar with the video editing app. I know it will be a good one. People will once again complain that I misunderstand this or that. Which means that the reel will do well. I screen record the scene on YouTube. I cut it and upload it into the editing app. Tony Soprano is arguing with one of his henchmen. Tony punches him. I remove the background. I put text on it, referring to the infamous Foucault and Chomsky debate, which took place not too far from here. It is probably still dry there, I don't know. I don't often leave the city. I finish my beer and go to the restroom. When I come out again, I order another one. I sit back down. Drink.

I couldn't hear it, but the power went out. The single bulb inside went dark, as did the lamps outside. I checked my phone. My battery was half full. The signal was gone. I opened Instagram, but of course it failed to load. I finished my beer and went outside. It would still be many hours before the sun rises again. Everything is dark outside. I cannot hear a sound apart from my own steps through the water. The signal is still gone by the time I reach my house. But I don't go inside. I keep on walking westwards. I'm half frozen as I reach the outskirts of the city. The black is slowly greying. Still no power, no signal. Maybe they did it. My phone battery is running low. It doesn't like the cold. Neither do I, but I keep walking westwards. Maybe I'll find the sea.

BIOGRAPHIES

Enzo Aït Kaci

Enzo Aït Kaci is a visual artist and writer in fashion practices, media theory and textile research. He holds a B.A. in Graphic design and digital communication from Ecole Estienne (Paris) and a B.A. in Fine Art and Fashion Design from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie (Amsterdam). As a person of French-Kabyle upbringing who grew up in Paris suburbs with little access to culture, the Internet represented the first cultural space he had access to. Since then, this digital sphere, where information and pictures are easily reproduced and copied, has become his primary source of inspiration. He sees the Internet as a cultural space of high-jacking, where new meanings are added to already existing sources. Enzo's practices have been supported by several Dutch funds, such as the Berlage, the S.S.V.O.S. and the BekkerLaBastide Funds. The Dutch National Stimulerings Fund Talent Development currently supports him. He works freelance as a guest curator for FashionClash exhibitions at Bureau Europa in Maastricht and has given lectures and readings at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie (Amsterdam), Enter Enter (Amsterdam) and The Basket Weaving Workshop (Budapest). He recently participated in the graphic design research program F.A.Q. with Large Studio (Paris) and Galery 47.2 (Cosne-sur-Loire).

Gabrielle K. Aguilar

Gabrielle K. Aguilar is a researcher, educator, and creative. She owes her firm handshake to her Texas roots and currently calls Amsterdam home. Her recent work under the department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam focused on elements of religion and spirituality within algorithmic imagining on TikTok. Previously, Gabrielle has also conducted research with the Network for New Media, Religion and Digital Culture where she observed memes in the context of Digital Religion. She now dedicates her time and energy to training and development initiatives at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

Hugo Almeida

Hugo Almeida (MA and BA in Communication Sciences) is an independent scholar interested in Philosophy of Communication, Art and Literature, Political Communication, Technology and New Media. Recent publication: "Environment as its own movie director: anti-representationalism as more-than-human-cinema" (2024) [accepted for publication] In: The Wild: Image, Industry, and Technology (Eds.) Moscato, D. & Duncan, P. Lexington Books. His Master's thesis, titled "The Society of Screens: between seeing and being seen", supervised by Fernando Ilharco, and delivered to the Portuguese Catholic University (UCP) reflects his early interest in topics such as hyperreality, control societies and digital technologies. This close articulation between communication studies, technology and philosophy has been shaping his research ever since. He is a published book author ("O Cortejo" and "A Boa Vítima") and communication professional focusing on social media and digital technologies since 2013.

Ruba Al-Sweel

Ruba Al-Sweel is a multidisciplinary creative with a practice rooted in writing and research focused on online movements and digital communications. She produces text-based video works that reference pop culture. Layering written and visual symbols, she parodies mass media by exaggerating certain aspects of contemporary society. She has published in journals, magazines and books on digital humanities with a focus on the Middle East; her work has appeared in the Brooklyn Rail, Art Asia Pacific, VICE, DoNotResearch among others. She is the co-editor of 'POSTPOSTPOST: Reflections on a New Avant-Garde', a publication of cultural critique featured on Dazed, Flash Art Magazine and others. She holds a master's degree in media and creative industries from SciencesPo, Paris.

Rosana Ardila

Rosana Ardila is from Colombia and lives in Paris. Originally a sociologist trained in Berlin, she has worked with open source communities and AI technologies for years. Her professional and creative interests include critical engagement and ethical concerns in digital experiences.

Chloë Arkenbout

Chloë Arkenbout works as a researcher at the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam and co-edited the third Critical Meme Reader with İdil Galip. She has a background in both media studies and philosophy and is interested in the tactics marginalized people use to challenge oppressive discourses in the digital public sphere - from social media comment wars to memes. They also co-edited the first two Critical Meme Readers INC published in 2021 and 2022. In addition, she works at the Communication & Multimedia Design program at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences where she mainly teaches social design and is a member of the university's Research Ethics Committee.

Morgane Billuart

Morgane Billuart (1997) is a French writer and visual artist. She completed her studies at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam and also pursued education at the Cooper Union in New York. Currently, she holds a research position at the Institute of Network Cultures and is enrolled in the MA Cross-Disciplinary Strategies programme in Vienna. In an era dominated by digital culture, the enthusiasm for DIY internet philosophies, and the proliferation of self-help seminars, her distinctive approach seeks to shed light on the contemporary dynamics of faith and belief formation. Her work consistently grapples with these profound themes, intricately intertwined with her identity as a woman, prompting contemplation on the roles of bodies in reshaping our comprehension of the technocratic and digital landscapes that encompass us.

Will Boase

Will Boase a reformed photojournalist interested in the digital distribution of photography. After spending a decade covering news stories from across East Africa for the international press, in 2020 he enrolled in the MA Photography and Society at the KABK in The Hague. He is presently employed there as a postgraduate researcher, where he and Dr. Andrea Stultiens run the Networked Audience research program. He also teaches, and is an editor at Dead Pixels, the official journal of screen-mediated reality.

Marijn Bril

Marijn Bril is a media art curator and researcher. With an interest in digital culture's complexity and absurdity, she explores topics such as networked image culture, expanded internet art, and technocratic productivity values. She has curated programs for IMPAKT Centre for Media Culture, CIVA Festival, and The Wrong Biennale and has published essays with Mister Motley, VIEW Journal, and the Institute of Network Cultures. Marijn graduated from the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's degree in Media Arts Cultures at the University for Continuing Education Krems (AT), Aalborg University (DK), and the University of Łódź (PL).

Viktor Chagas

Viktor Chagas is associate professor at the Department of Media and Cultural Studies and a researcher at the Communication Graduate Program at the Fluminense Federal University, Brazil. He is also an associate member of the Brazilian National Institute of Science and Technology for Digital Democracy (INCT.DD). He has a Productivity Fellowship from the Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development and a Young Scholar Fellowship from Carlos Chagas Filho Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Faperj). He holds a PhD in History, Politics, and Cultural Assets from the Getulio Vargas Foundation. He is the editor of the collection "A cultura dos memes" (The culture of memes) and the founder of #MUSEUdeMEMES (#MEMEmuseum) project. For the past ten years he has been dedicated to investigating the relationship between humor and politics, particularly through the lens of Internet memes. More on: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1806-6062

Ray Dolitsay

Ray Dolitsay is a multidisciplinary digital artist and researcher. Currently they are doing their Research Master's in Media Studies at University of Amsterdam. In their work, they investigate post-internet mythologies and radical queer embodiment in virtual spaces, that undermine capitalist gender architecture on/offline. Through their practice, they look into ways in which digital 3D imaginaries can queer the landscape of contemporary platforms, by often employing sound and immersive 3D environments.

Adalberto Fernandes

Adalberto Fernandes (PhD in Philosophy, MA in Communication and Bioethics, BA in Communication) is a researcher at the Institute of Contemporary History – NOVA University Lisbon. He has authored or co-authored 16 articles and chapters and delivered 19 presentations on science communication, health communication, political communication, risk, biopolitics, bioethics, censorship, and mental health. Recent publications: "Has the concept of censorship gone astray?" (2024, Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies)"; "Designing (the) politics of participation" (2023, Journal of Science communication); "The Appeal of Extreme Right-Wing Pandemic Politics" (2023, Javnost – the Public); "Science Communication as Soft Power" (2023, The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power, 2nd Edition); "The Problematic Scientificity of Psychology in the Media: How Mental Illness Coverage Could Lead to Criminality Prejudice" (2022, Tripodos). He has also published social-science fiction in the online Zine SoFiZine.

İdil Galip

Dr İdil Galip is a lecturer in new media and digital culture at the University of Amsterdam and co-edited the third Critical Meme Reader with Chloë Arkenbout. Her work investigates the conditions of cultural production on digital platforms through ethnographic and theoretical interventions. She is particularly interested in exploring how internet memes are made, shared and monetised and wrote her PhD thesis on this topic. Her monograph based on this work and titled "Beyond Virality: The Art of Internet Memes" will be published by Intellect Books in 2024. She is the founder of Meme Studies Research Network. Her writing has been published in a variety of academic journals, literary publications and magazines, and has been translated into German and Italian. She holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Edinburgh and an MSc in Political Sociology from the London School of Economics.

Marloes Geboers

Marloes Geboers is a postdoctoral researcher Platform (Sub)Cultures in the Humane AI and Global Digital Cultures research areas at the University of Amsterdam. She is also affiliated to the Digital Methods Initiative, UvA. Her research blends traditional visual methods with digital methods and automated analyses, in order to arrive at novel ways to study social media images. Her dissertation centred around social platforms and how they shape socio-technically constructed regimes of visibility.

Gustavo Gómez-Mejía

Gustavo Gómez-Mejía is a media studies scholar and a creative research practitioner. His interests include digital cultures and semiology – topics to which he has devoted a series of academic articles. He was born in Colombia and he currently lives and works in France as an Associate Professor at the Prim research unit of the University of Tours.

Seong-Young Her

Seong-Young Her is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. He specialises in the philosophy of biology and cultural evolution, and has a background in public health, bioethics, and game design. He operates MemeStudies.Org, a digital research infrastructure for meme studies scholars, and The Philosopher's Meme, a research blog and community of practice about philosophy and cyberculture.

Alexis E. Hunter

Alexis E. Hunter is a doctoral student in the Educational Foundations, Policy & Practice, and Human Development & Learning Sciences programs at the University of Colorado-Boulder. As a striving scholar-activist, her work seeks to honor how Black youth pursue healing alongside their unwavering commitment to collective liberation. At the intersections of youth activism, healing, and technology, her scholarship lovingly explores how Black youth conceptualize healing and leverage technological advances (ex. social media) that systems of power have deemed as purely entertainment to dream, prioritize collective wellness, and advocate

Manuel Hunziker

Manuel Hunziker aka Stewia is an artist and writer based in Switzerland. He is co-founder of Slap Me Baby, a Basel-based collective documenting and exploring the intersections of contemporary street stickers and online meme culture.

Zas Iehulee

Zas Iehulee is a visual artist and independent researcher based in France. Their work revolves around memetics, quantum physics in particular, light as a physical phenomenon. They like to present their research in different immersive formats because they aim to make complex concepts accessible. And to communicate an almost intuitive understanding of these. From collages to abstract art, internet memes, and workshops, their creations mix education with introspection. Their goal is to shed light on the human condition in modern times, highlight our traumas, and motivate a movement of profound healing through cultural change.

Jasmin Leech

Jasmin Leech is a lecturer in Film, TV and Cross-Media Culture at the University of Amsterdam. Based theoretically between platform, film and critical media studies and with a Research Master's degree in Media Studies and a Bachelor in Media Studies and Philosophy, Jasmin's research interests are varied but always come back to core questions regarding the image, post-colonialism and morality.

Alia Leonardi

Alia Leonardi is a Belgian multi-disciplinary artist based in The Netherlands and a student at the Royal Academy of the Arts, The Hague. Her background in conflict studies pushes her to constantly explore the intersections of art and contemporary society. She is currently working on performativity and social media, as well as internet culture.Alia Leonardi is just a girl. IG: @liaouioui

Alina Lupu

Alina Lupu was born and raised in Romania and works as a writer and post-conceptual artist in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. She is a student of the Master Photography and Society at the Royal Academy of the Arts, the Hague, and a graduate of the Fine Arts department of the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam. In her works, she looks at the role of the image and of performative actions when it comes to standing in solidarity through protest against capitalist hegemony and precarity. Website: https://theofficeofalinalupu.com/ / IG: @theofficeofalinalupu

Charlotte Marie

Charlotte Marie is an artist and researcher interested in the evolving relationship between objecthood and memory in the digital era. She holds a BA in Fine Arts (photography) and Art History from Columbia University and is currently pursuing an MA in Heritage and Memory Studies at the University of Amsterdam. The current focus of her research is how our increased reliance on video and image platforms influences the formation of individual and collective memories.

Tyler James Patterson

Tyler James Patterson (b.1989) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA where he's the Founder and CEO of Residency (residencyapparel.com), a social enterprise that makes custom, sustainable merchandise to support women transitioning into permanent housing. Alongside his work with Residency, Tyler is a multi-disciplinary artist working in visual art, music/sound, design, photography, and mindset. Tyler is most interested in what he calls Earth Magic, or the natural magic of creation, life, and the unknown. He likes to follow the ideas that feel most important and exciting to him personally.

Elena Pilipets

Elena Pilipets is a postdoctoral researcher in Digital Media and Methods at the Department of Media Studies, University of Siegen (Ph.D. in Media Studies, University of Klagenfurt). Her work focuses on the processes of image circulation, with particular attention to the study of platforms through combinations of visual and digital methods. This includes online-grounded empirical investigations of Internet memes, platform subcultures, and

social bots, the latter being studied in the context of a working group funded by the Center of Advanced Internet Studies (CAIS) in Bochum.

Sophie Publig

Sophie works as a researcher and lecturer at the Peter Weibel Institute for Digital Cultures in Vienna and at the Critical Media Lab in Basel. She completed her doctorate at the University of Applied Arts Vienna in 2023 with the thesis The Sympoietic Life of Internet Memes. Building on her background in art history, philosophy, and ethnology, Sophie is deeply engaged in the vital materialism of online ecosystems. At the moment, she's studying the hybrid creatures known as internet memes, delving into the construction of online identities, and exploring the realms of network spirituality.

Gabriele de Seta

Gabriele de Seta is, technically, a sociologist. He holds a PhD from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica in Taipei. Gabriele is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Bergen, where he is part of the ERC-funded project "Machine Vision in Everyday Life". His research work, grounded on ethnographic engagement across multiple sites, focuses on digital media practices, sociotechnical entanglements and vernacular creativity in the Chinese-speaking world. He is also interested in experimental music, internet art, and collaborative intersections between anthropology and art practice.

@simulacra_and_stimulations

Enter the portal of @simulacra_and_stimulations, a mystical world on Instagram where aesthetics and politics meet in the Anthropocene era. The wizards of this realm, inspired by the wise teachings of Jean Baudrillard, Mark Fisher, and Slavoj Zizek, weave their magic to unravel the mysteries of perception and question the authenticity of media. With their bewitching collages and manipulations, they expose the pitfalls of capitalism's obsession with images, conjuring illusions that melt the boundaries between reality and imagination. Their mission? To reveal the contradictions of dominant ideologies and invite all who dare to explore the mystical realm of theorygram. The enchantments that you'll find here challenge boundaries and invite you to engage in critical reflection but also don't.

Ivana Emily Škoro

Ivana Emily Škoro is finishing her studies at Aalborg University, researching blockchain technologies and NFTs. She works for a Croatian record label and specializes in digital ownership and copyright. She has curated an exhibition for the Wrong Biennale and published articles for multiple publications, including the Critical Meme Reader.

Socrates Stamatatos

Socrates Stamatatos is an independent curator and transdisciplinary artist based in Athens, Greece. Through his work, he engages both theoretically and artistically with the Queer experience, as well as with the philosophy of caring. By exploring queer digitality and connectivity, he is interested in discovering how digital technologies can be used as tools for empowerment and community building for marginalized communities.

Eero Talo

Eero Talo is a writer and artist based in Queens, New York. Their work has appeared in The Reservoir, EOAGH, and the machinesseekingconnections blog. Their influences include: Samuel Delany, La'Shaunae Steward, and Britney Spears. Their favorite meme page is butterflylips1111.

Tiera Tanksley

Tiera Tanksley is an Assistant Professor of Education and Critical Race Technology Studies. In 2016, she began theorizing critical race technology theory (CRTT) in education - a framework that exposes the centrality of algorithmic racism in school-based technologies. Her work is interdisciplinary and leverages Black studies, women and gender studies, digital humanities (DH), information studies (IS), computer science (CS), and education to examine the socio-technical experiences of Black students. Her projects include projects in computer science, artificial intelligence, robotics, engineering, and platform technologies (e.g. social media).

Aidan Walker

Aidan Walker is a writer and researcher who has been published in Know Your Meme, Do Not Research, and other outlets. He is possibly the world's leading authority on the Distracted Boyfriend meme, a niche topic on which he has written a hundred-page Master's thesis. Read his Substrack at https://howtodothingswithmemes.substack.com/ or reach him at aidan.mw.walker@gmail.com if you have any questions, comments, or just want to talk about memes and stuff.

Phil Wilkinson

Dr Phil Wilkinson is a computer scientist turned social scientist who now undertakes interdisciplinary research across a range of fields. He investigates a wide range of subjects, depending on what happens to capture his (neuro)divergent interest, but primarily focuses on emergent digital cultures and pedagogies. Currently he is working as a 'researcher-in-residence' at a community centre where he is investigating and addressing the impact of the 'digital divide' on disadvantaged communities.

Liam Voice

Liam Voice is a writer and researcher interested in thinking critically about the language and metaphors used in digital discourse. He received his PhD in Media and Communications from the University of Leeds. Adopting a posthuman and interdisciplinary approach, he is aims to critique the language used to explain aspects of digital culture, such memes and algorithmic filtering. He then proposes alternative models, often invoking animals and ecological thinking, to change the way we talk about and, thus, the way we think about what it means to engage with digital culture and with digital technologies.