

Das sympoietische Leben der Internet Memes

The Sympoietic Life of Internet Memes

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Betreuer: Univ.-Prof. MMag. Dr. Clemens Apprich
Fach: Medientheorie

Beurteiler: Univ.-Prof. MMag. Dr. Clemens Apprich
Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien
Fach: Medientheorie

Beurteiler: Jamie Allen, PhD
Critical Media Lab, Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Basel FHNW
Fach: Medienwissenschaft

vorgelegt von Sophie Publig, MA

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Ich erkläre hiermit, dass ich die Dissertation entsprechend den Grundsätzen guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe, sowie dass diese Dissertation bisher weder im In- noch im Ausland in irgendeiner Form zur Beurteilung vorgelegt wurde.

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Note to the reader

Due to the topics covered in this work, this thesis contains direct and indirect quotes of racist, sexist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, ableist, queerphobic, transphobic, and fatphobic content. It covers topics such as cyberbullying, violence against marginalized groups, child abuse, sexual assault and harassment, discussions of mental health, particularly depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, and multiple accounts of suicide, murder, genocide, and rampages. None of this reflects the author's views in any way. In addition, strategies of self-censorship are employed to keep hate speech from spreading: slurs and endonyms are written in brackets with spaced-out hyphens, like this [f - - -]. I place a high value on situated writing and have compiled this work to the best of my knowledge. In order to do better, I welcome any feedback on discrimination-sensitive writing especially in academia via sophiepublig@gmail.com.

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In memoriam Peter Weibel
(1944-2023)

1. Introduction

A movie poster for the film *Barbie* shows the protagonist in a white and pink plaid dress from behind, waving good morning to the other Barbies in her *Barbie* World, while in the background a pink mushroom cloud indexically refers to an atomic explosion. [1] The poster is captioned “*Barbie - The Destroyer of Worlds*”. This and similar images made their rounds on social media in the early summer of 2023. They allude to the meme *Barbenheimer* that emerged due to the simultaneous theatrical release on July 21 of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, a live-action film about the iconic doll, and Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, a biopic about one of the co-inventors of the atomic bomb. In the midst of this, fans humorously processed the seemingly irreconcilable contrast of the two films with each other, with many even watching both films in a double feature. But while *Barbenheimer* is causing laughter, especially in the United States and Europe, users in Japan receive it very differently: where the actual atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki 78 years ago and hundreds of thousands died as a result, *Barbenheimer* is met with keen disapproval. In Japan, where *Oppenheimer* has not yet received a release date and may not even be shown in cinemas, the interweaving of the two films is interpreted as a trivialization and ridicule of the devastating catastrophe. When *Barbie* Japan's official Twitter account reposted a *Barbenheimer* meme to the film, the Japanese branch of distributor Warner Bros. took a stand via a letter of apology in which they disapproved of the “*Barbenheimer Craze*.¹ As a result, new mutations of the *Barbenheimer* meme emerged: on August 1, @Seihy posts a photo of 9/11 on Twitter, the clouds of smoke from the Twin Towers

colored pink with the caption “YO, how do you think? Go fuq ya self. #NoBarbenheimer.” [2] But how can a meme, commonly (mis)understood as an amusing image on the Internet, trigger such extreme reactions?

This dissertation builds upon the insight that the worst thing one can believe is just that: that memes are harmless little funnies primarily used for a cheap laugh. Such an understanding fails to acknowledge the deep entanglements memes enter with human and non-human agents: from the viral infection of our minds to the ecological cost of sharing their data, from their undeniable impact on our everyday language to the long-lasting political consequences they can contribute to. In this



Fig. 1: Fan-made poster for *Barbenheimer*.

¹ See @BarbieMovie_jp, Twitter: https://twitter.com/BarbieMovie_jp/status/1685944607539159040.

regard, Internet memes are understood as co-inhabitants of digital eco-systems. Over the last 30 years, memes have led to re-evaluations of our understanding of art and aesthetics, gave birth to activist movements, became popular marketing tools, and have become psychological coping mechanisms for many chronically online people. In order to approach these intricate rhizomatic connections, this thesis profiles

Internet memes as living beings part of a symiotic process hinging on cooperation akin to an organism subjected to *sympoiesis*.² Depending on scale, this perspective may grasp a ‘single’ meme, a genealogy of memes, or an entire online community as a living being.



Fig. 2: @Seihy's #NoBarbenheimer fan art.

Thesis Statement and Research Questions

This thesis considers Internet memes from a media-ecological perspective in order live up to the eco-systems of digital cultures where memes emerge, mutate, and thrive. [3] In this framing, memes need to be understood in relation to the users, platforms, media, infrastructure, and references that create and circulate them. This requires a media archaeological examination of the Internet platforms mainly used for the sharing of memes. Each platform has their own specific characteristics leading up to different habitats of Internet memes, for example, some are more heavily moderated while others don't have any regulations for posting. Moreover, understanding the habitat of memes as systemic shifts the focus to its dynamics over static and linear narratives. A critical posthuman perspective building upon the monism of vital materialism as well as process philosophy aims to deconstruct the Western philosophical tradition of subject-object-dichotomy in favor of an ethico-onto-epistemology³ understanding all beings—animate and inanimate—as living. From this point of view, the force of life traverses all beings needs to be understood as a Spinozian *conatus*⁴ vitalizing all matter. In contrast to a form of flat ontology, critical posthumanism acknowledges the differences in agency across beings and emphasizes the embodiment of life. It is easier to imagine life not as an attribute to acquire (being alive or not), but a verb in its doing—life becomes living. In this regard, life is mediated through living beings that come together in a distinct body for the duration of their lifespan. The same is true for memes: on the Internet, life is remediated through memes. A meme emerges

² Sympoiesis is Haraway's ongoing development of unfurling the notion of autopoiesis under the evolutionary theory of endosymbiosis. Haraway 2016, 58.

³ The neologism ethico-onto-epistemology was coined by Barad to highlight the inseparability of the areas of ethics, ontology, and epistemology in order to make sense of the world. Barad 2007, 90.

⁴ The *conatus* has been described by Spinoza as an inherent endeavor to continue to exist. Ethics III, prop. 6.

Memes are those funny pictures right?	
Memes reflect the state of society	
Memes are a reflection of the creator's subconscious	
Memes are a reflection of the collective human subconscious	
Memes are a mental virus	
Realizing memes are a living entity that exist within and between human collective consciousness and memetic data transmission over social media. Swaying global politics and brings as many eyes upon itself to spread as far and wide as possible, guiding events towards an optimal future path it has predicted for itself and even this meme is part of the process.	

Fig. 3: Galaxy Brain template on definitions of memes.

when previously unrelated sympoietic agents, such as an image and a line of text, come together. The logic of memetic processes such as object labeling, image manipulation or copypastas expose the underlying sympoietic mechanisms as cooperative, growing, and contingent. An agential understanding of memes also allows for an understanding of the history of digital cultures, where memes can take on the role of communicators facilitating the exchange of online communities. Often likened to an Internet language,⁵ memes give structure and vocabulary to communication while simultaneously restricting the flows of exchange, for example, through the creation of in-and-out-groups excluding certain communities. Finally, understanding memes in relation to users and platforms as a whole shines a light on how global phenomena are processed online. This thesis circulates around the following research questions:

- What notions of subjectivity are postulated in critical posthumanism?
- How can Internet memes be defined on posthuman terms?
- How do Internet memes proliferate and mutate?
- What are memetic techniques?
- What is the life span of a meme?
- What were memes before the Internet?
- What are the characteristics of Internet humor?
- When and how did memes become commodified?
- In what ways did memes shape practices of online activism?
- What are the intersections of meme culture and the alt-right movement?

⁵ See Kien 2019.

- Can the left learn how to meme?
- What are post-ironic memes?
- Where are Internet memes heading in the next couple of years?

Problems

The declaration of the Anthropocene more than 20 years ago has led to prolific contributions across diverse disciplines on the contemporary posthuman condition. This re-evaluation has led primarily to an understanding of the interconnectedness of nature and culture and the associated critique of narratives of purity and originality, especially in regard to practices of extractivism and neo-colonialism. This has been imperative, particularly in media studies and especially in relation to the Internet, which after all accounts for 4% of global greenhouse emissions: transhumanist fantasies of uploading one's consciousness into the equally dematerialized notion of a cloud still haunt many writings. Post-anthropocentric philosophies demonstrate the materialistic embedding of digital technologies in the geology of our earth through non-renewable resources and the impact of our constant online existence on the earth. The most important factor here is collective, responsible stewardship *with* the planet: as briefly outlined above, one approach often taken is a radical re-evaluation of the concept of subjectivity based on vital materialism and the agency of matter. Nonetheless, the statement "memes are alive" is regularly met with incomprehension, including from colleagues in my own field. Why, after 20 years of intensive Anthropocene research, is it still radical to claim that more than just mammals are alive? This is not a drill: how are we supposed to take responsibility for technological developments if we keep on *othering* them? Or worse, secretly hoping that AI will eventually overtake and subjugate us? The worst thing about Anthropocene discourse is the creeping joyous sensation of awaiting the arrival of extinction. Truth be told, that is a lame way of admitting to failure before even trying. In this respect, this dissertation is also a meditation on the differences that enrich us and determine the dynamics of living.

In meme studies, there are two sides: the ones adhering to evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' original meaning of the word meme and those primarily observing memes as a means of communication on the Internet as propagated by Limor Shifman. Ironically, the dichotomy of nature and culture is inscribed in this disparateness: Dakwins' biological or 'natural' understanding of memes is confronted with Shifman's definition of memes as 'cultural units'. This thesis seeks to prevent the further spreading of the binary opposition of nature and culture by offering another way rooted in the philosophy of critical posthumanism. Although memes have been around as long as the Internet and can be traced to humorist offline practices such as pranks and the mythology of trickster gods, they are terribly under-researched. If they are the object of research, more often than not, they are analyzed from an empirical, an educational-sensationalist or an artistic perspective. However, just because meme studies are not an established field by now, residing somewhere between the fields of pop

culture studies and infrastructural media studies, does not mean that we need to leave behind academic standards. The amount of papers building up on the same mistakes made by authors before them⁶ as well as a multitude of examinations devoid of any context suggest that some authors may have never opened up an app. This ignorance is further demonstrated in opaque and unreasonable quotations of sources as if a meme was not posted on a specific day on a distinct platform by a traceable user.⁷ On the one hand, since memes largely grow in reference to one another, this leads to a lack of knowledge becoming bigger and bigger as well as a general misunderstanding of Internet humor—a thoroughly intentional conception of ambivalent humor. On the other hand, a lot of meme research is characterized by the influence of technopessimism, nihilism, and cultural pessimism that usually nip the subversive potential of memes in the bud. This is especially common in theories adhering to strict interpretations of critical theory that fail to undergo meaningful reflections on contemporary societies' online embodiment in favor of condemning all digital developments as diabolic. Another example of bad practice is abstracting the meme by taking it out of the digital community where it thrives in: this practice often used in art historical and art-related analyses fails to take the dynamics of Internet exchange into consideration. In the same vein, researchers refusing to place Internet memes in a genealogy predating the Internet fail to show up the continuities of the medium.

Finally, as is the case for all Internet studies, doing research on living communities means that they are subject to change: websites, accounts, and links disappear, posts are deleted or banned, and even entire platforms are altered beyond recognition. For example, over the course of writing this thesis, the platform Twitter was famously acquired by Elon Musk who renamed it to X. Nevertheless, I am sticking to the old name, partly to simplify the traceability and partly because there is still some hope left that the rebranding will not work out. Similarly, the prehistoric rock known as Reddit underwent its biggest, platform-wide strike in June 2023 to protest the impending changes on the sudden charging for API third-party-apps by promoting black-outs, making resources unavailable for two weeks or longer.⁸ In this regard, this dissertation is also archiving an historical moment where large parts of the Internet are already privatized, but a lot of content is still freely available (for the price of your personal information, of course).

⁶ For example, I cannot count how often I encountered wrong spellings of Wojak as 'Wojack', a mistake easy to avoid when tracing Wojak's emergence to the Polish word *wojak* (eng. *soldier*).

⁷ Of course, many popular memes tend take on a life of their own and become untraceable. However, my critique is pointed toward the common practice of not quoting the sources of images and posts at all.

⁸ In this context, a black-out refers to making subreddits private so only members of the board may participate. This means that walk-ins (from Google searches etc.) became impossible.

Importance of Research

By 2023, Internet memes are tightly bound to the main forms of online communication. They are made by users of every age and every background, creating infinite niche communities using memes to strengthen bonds while excluding outsiders. In this regard, memes are one of the main boundary-makers of Internet culture and have been interpreted as an Internet language. Moreover, memes have been exploited as marketing tools and commodities, resulting in corporate memeing and masses of merchandising to meet consumerist demands. I believe that the omnipresence of memes can help us to re-think ‘the human’ via their relation to technology. This means that memetic processes are deposited in the human and vice versa. In other words, the study of Internet memes can help to grasp technology, nature, and culture as intrinsically connected and made of, as Rosi Braidotti would say, the very same ‘stuff of the world’.

This thesis is therefore an exercise in eco-systemic thinking that focuses on the relations between the different agents in their doing. This is also important for understanding other aspects of digital cultures, such as the nuances in Internet culture, humor, and slang. Systemic thinking also leads to a deeper apprehension of in-and-out-groups, the structural subgroups of the Internet. In addition, analyzing memes on the basis of the platforms they are shared is especially relevant to understand the trajectories of the ongoing commercialization of the Internet. While in the 1990s, there were still non-commercial online spaces, these have more or less completely disappeared in favor of membership services, paywalls, and, of course, the boundless collection of data. This, in turn, has long-lasting effects for the forming of digital communities as well as Internet humor.

Methodology

Although this dissertation is officially subject to the field of philosophy, it is ultimately caught in the middle of media theory, critical posthumanism, visual studies, digital cultures, intersectional feminist theory, the philosophy of biology, and post-anthropocentric studies. This thesis uses a media-ecological⁹ approach that focuses on the relations between memes and their natural habitat, online platforms. Internet memes are not abstracted, i.e. taken out of their environment, but interpreted in regard to the events generating them and the communities circulating and creating mutations of them. This is necessary due to the great emphasis on intertextuality in memes: considering their proliferation over the past 30 years, memes have emerged mainly in reference to one another and continuously refer to other memes and memetic practices. This is the second methodological focus of this thesis: using a media-archaeological method, memes are seen as direct continuations of distinct, age-old forms of humor such as mythological

⁹ A media ecology understands the environment of living and non-living beings as mediated and focuses on the relations between different agents.

tricksters and specific forms of rhetorics. These genealogies adhere to Grusin and Bolter's theory of remediation that, hinging on Marshall McLuhan's analysis of the content of every medium being another medium, observes that especially digital media "import earlier media into digital space in order to critique and refashion them."¹⁰ In this regard, practices of humor, remixes, sharing, and media reveals¹¹ are interpreted as direct continuations of pre-Internet media.

The theoretical foundation for the notion of life compiled in this dissertation is the critical posthumanism of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway. A close reading of their main works enables the theorizing of posthuman subjectivity that is then demonstrated through Internet memes. Barad's theory of agential realism builds upon quantum mechanics in order to foreground the processual meeting of agents creating phenomena, while Braidotti's reflections on the posthuman condition provides the movement with the politics of zoe-egalitarianism and affirmative ethics. Lastly, Haraway's materialist-feminist writings spanning four decades have been promoting the embodiment of making-science while providing many prolific practices such as situated knowledge and story-telling.

The contributions to meme studies have been very diverse in approach as well as in content: while building up on the original notion of memes by Dawkins, the further developments in the field of memetics as well as Shifman's seminal analysis *Memes in Digital Cultures*, this dissertation undertakes a decidedly different turn in ontology away from solely biology or communication studies as outlined above. The steering toward the dynamics of Internet communities is in the focus of the different works by Whitney Phillips: *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* focuses on the practice of trolling while the two books written in conjunction with Ryan M. Milner—*The Ambivalent Internet* and *You Are Here*—are concerned with the situated oddities of Internet language and humor. Additionally, Mike Watson's works *Can the Left Learn to Meme?* and *The Memeing of Mark Fisher* are important milestones to locate memes in contemporary critical theory. In general, the meme encyclopedia Know Your Meme has proven to be an invaluable resource for the history of memes, although the platform shows a distinct bias toward trolling and associated memes. The satiric encyclopedia of Internet culture, Encyclopedia Dramatica, surpasses this bias by far. Both resources, although widely helpful, need to be taken with a grain of salt.

However, any theoretical foundation is incomplete without an extensive media ethnography. As a digital native, I have been in touch with memes since I have been fooling around with our dial-up modem at home at the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, I have been an active participant in meme culture especially on Instagram, TikTok, Discord, and Reddit, but have been immersed in the customs of 4chan, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube for the purpose

¹⁰ Grusin, Bolter 2000, 53.

¹¹ See Allen 2020.

of this thesis. In order to compile a historic genealogy of Internet memes, I have created an archive of over 300 memes classified according to their emergence, platform embedment, and predecessors that has been a valuable resource to stay on top of things. While my empirical knowledge acquired over the years has been an advantage in reading memes through the lines, it can also backfire in situations when I am too immersed in digital surroundings leading to untraceable conclusions. For the sake of this thesis, I am moving slowly toward in-jokes and digital customs in order to be as inclusive as possible toward readers.

As an educated, middle-European woman privileged enough to write this dissertation with enough funding and support from home, I recognize the responsibility that comes with writing on topics like hate speech, structural racism, and sexism under a post-truth paradigm. This thesis deals to a great extent with racist and sexist language. In order not to replicate hurtful and damaging words, my writing circumvents certain slurs and censors them in direct quotes, where it is not possible to substitute. Far from a form of revisionism, this attitude—that is also often employed in meme communities moving beyond frantic calls for ‘free speech’—stems from a deep dive into discrimination-sensible writing on hate speech. Anyone who has ever been on social media can confirm that slurs and hate speech are incredibly common, a development that will not be made reversible but can be kept at bay. The same goes for dangerous narrative framings of certain memes and meme-plexes like the *Great Meme War* of 2016 that claims to have memed Donald Trump into the presidential office: considering that this framing has mostly been propelled by right-wingers and Trump supporters, the narrative is critically investigated in this thesis and not simply taken for granted (as is the case for a lot of meme research). Similarly, a lot of memes begin as hoaxes with the goal to spread misinformation online—while I did my best to double- and triple-check sources, I cannot guarantee that I have seen through every hoax. But this is doing research under the post-truth condition: considering that there is not a single trustworthy source on memes and most of the time, there are no other resources than the original source, the evaluation of the content of a meme underlies my assessment. This is also why the immersion in meme culture is so important: a lot of the customs only become traceable after a while of wasting time online.

Limitations

While the scope of this thesis is great, it also comes with limitations. At some points throughout the work, I would have loved to dive deeper into some aspects but were unable to do so without submitting many more pages. An elephant in the room is the question of authorship which is only touched upon a couple of times but deserves whole books devoted to it. While I understand memes as self-sufficient agents, they tend to have a traceable origin. Users ‘birthing’ memes are not to be mistaken for authors: due to the general anonymity online, the singular author is not really relevant here. Instead, memes can update their meaning at any given point through mutation. However, the author does play a bigger role when it comes to the

circulation of content: the reposting of original content through commercial accounts or the monetization of memes through merchandising still present a big problem for content creators that will only be regulated through laws and policies that are, however, still in the making.¹²

Ontologically, this thesis uses a critical posthumanist approach to technology. I condemn other approaches such as transhumanism or object-oriented ontology due to their re-evaluating of the human's position in this world from an always decidedly unsituated anthropocentric lens. Moreover, this thesis adheres to a qualitative approach stemming from media theory and therefore largely disregards empirical analyses such as data modeling. A lot of meme research loosely tied to far right and extremism studies tends to take on an overtly educational approach—this is also no aim for this thesis since it builds upon a media-critical understanding of Internet memes instead of advising readers what to think. Approaches from art and visual history are ignored due to their tendency to separate memes from its context similar to abstracting the art from the artist. In my opinion, neither approach is particularly promising. As a very last note, this dissertation does not and never did attempt to archive all memes in existence—this is an impossible task to do and far from the lived reality of Internet cultures.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into four main sections with three to five subchapters in each. Beginning with a treatise on concepts of life in critical posthumanism in order to derive a theory for the memetic subject, the remaining three parts are chronologically following the emergence of digital cultures and their specific memes. The first part, *Internet Memes as Posthuman Subjects*, begins with a chapter summarizing the main pillars of critical posthuman theory in order to arrive at a notion of life through transversal reading. It begins with a critique of the Anthropocene and technoscience through Haraway's figure of the cyborg and Braidotti's concept of the zoe-geo-techno-assemblage before re-evaluating Spinoza's description of the conatus. A special focus is put on Lynn Margulis' endosymbiotic theory and Haraway's subsequent notion of sympoiesis. In conjunction with Barad's theory of agential realism, a posthuman notion of life is derived. In the next chapter, this is applied to meme theory in order to sketch out a theory of the memetic subject. Through very short case studies, overall characteristics of memeing are outlined to demonstrate their adherence to sympoiesis. These sympoietic agents constitute memetic holobionts akin to the roughly 35 billion bacteria constituting a human body while allowing for their rapid mutation and circulation. In the final chapter of the first part, the theory of remediation is used to show up continuities of memeing from Ancient Greece to the street art and graffiti scene. At the end of the chapter, the most common sympoietic agents and memetic techniques are introduced in order to set a solid foundation for the rest of the thesis.

¹² For example, in the EU, memes have been classified as pastiches. See Kreutzer, Reda 2023.

The second part, *The Evolution of Classic Internet Memes*, starts out with early Internet memes beginning with the eternal September or the opening of the Internet to private users. The memes of the 1990s already set the tone for the coming years of memeing and are characterized by media constraints of web 1.0. At the same time, the first digital communities substantially shape the form of memes: in the subchapter on Internet humor, I trace a philosophical genealogy of rhetorics and jokes that can be seen as precursor to the practice of trolling that was popularized by message boards such as 4chan and Something Awful. The subchapter closes with a discussion of hacktivist collective Anonymous that paved the way for subsequent online activism. Following this, I am tracing the emergence of what I like to call ‘the classical era of Internet memes’: image macros such as Advice Animals, memetic characters from Rage Comics, and early viral videos. These are each embedded in a trajectory of art and visual history as well as media studies.

The third part *A Memes to an End: Strategies of Mutation, Appropriation, and Hijacking* examines how digital cultures emerge on different platforms. I am starting out with a critique of the commodification of Internet memes in the early 2010s that can be traced to the acquirement of specific platforms, the emergence of merchandise, and the celebrity culture around popular characters portrayed in memes. In the second subchapter, three main online communities are introduced from Tumblr, Twitter, and Twitch and the specific differences of their content is analyzed. The influential practice of online activism, which originated on Black Twitter, is examined as well as the cultural shift in its importance. This is also connected to a prevailing narrative of Tumblr as a refuge for ‘social justice posting’, a prejudice that is critically inspected, as well as the online controversy of #GamerGate. In *The Story of Pepe the Frog*, the tumultuous life of the green frog meme from stoner comic character to official hate symbol and back is demonstrated. The chapter focuses on 4chan’s /pol/ and /r9k/ boards that have been recurrently linked to the emergence of the alt-right movement as well as the incel subculture. In the last subchapter, the shift in humor from easy-to-read image macros to highly ironic content is examined and traced back to the digital cultures of Weird Twitter, Weird Facebook, and Leftbook.

Finally, the fourth part of this thesis is called *The Memeing of Life* and investigates the complete dissolution of Internet memes into offline cultures under the post-truth paradigm. Beginning with the case study of the death of silverback gorilla Harambe in 2016, it is shown how practices of ironic postings, spamming, and the ‘spreading of misinformation on the Internet’ has become the default reaction online to (global) events. Some of the most popular meme templates of the second part of the 2010s are introduced and interpreted in regard to their graphic constitutions such as charts, graphs, and diagrams. In the subchapter on ironic memeing, the notions of irony and also post-irony are traced in regard to epistemic breaks in media theory such as Guy Debord’s notion of the spectacle and Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. The following subchapter focuses on the figure of the meme page admin, who

enjoys a status as a niche Internet celebrity, and introduces some content creators focusing on queer-feminist memes. Their work is interpreted in regard to specific struggles like online harassment and making money with online content in the age of influencing. Following this, I take a look at memeing during the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on fluffy Wholesome Memes, mass events of memeing like the WallStreetBets GameStop Short Squeeze, and the rise of TikTok. The last chapter of this part focuses on AI-generated memes and their implications for the future of memeing.

2. Internet Memes as Posthuman Subjects

2.1. On Posthuman Ontologies

The first insight into the posthuman subject is that the posthuman subject does not exist. Theories of posthumanism and New Materialism criticize hegemonic binary subject-object oppositions and are characterized by ontological monism and an affirmation of process philosophy. In this respect, what is traditionally called a ‘subject’ in Western philosophy is an assemblage of the most diverse agents that constitute a living being at a given point in time, for example, over the course of a lifespan. On top of that, critical posthumanism makes no ontological distinction between the material of which a mammal, a protozoon or a silicon chip is made. This does not mean that all these agents are the same in the sense of a flat ontology¹³—on the contrary, the agents consolidated by different material processes are diverse and constantly evolving and mutating. In all posthuman theories, then, we must assume that the human being in the sense of the *anthropos*¹⁴ is an outdated philosophical model. Posthuman philosophy, understood primarily as a materialist critique of the heritage of post-structuralist theories strongly tied to linguistic philosophy, also forms strong links with postcolonial studies, feminist movements, and critical philosophies of technology. A further distinction is made by Janina Loh between transhumanism, technological posthumanism, and critical posthumanism.¹⁵ Over the following pages, I summarize theories of subjectivity and philosophies of life of the most important representatives of critical posthumanism, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway, in order to obtain a framework for a theory of the memetic subject.

One possible starting point for a posthuman subject is Haraway’s trailblazing essay *A Cyborg Manifesto* from 1985, a postulate, a wake up-call, and a critique of thinking in binary

¹³ A ‘flat ontology’ postulates no inherent hierarchy of existence and instead refers to all agents—subjects, objects, concepts, and so on—on equal ontological footing without any further stratification in their being. The term can be traced back to Manuel DeLanda’s reading of Deleuze’s philosophy and is used by Graham Harman and Ian Bogost as well as other proponents of object-oriented ontologies and actor-network-theory. Although it may sound like a promising attempt to overcome Cartesian dichotomies, flat ontologies often suffer from a lack of differentiation, a reduction of complexity as well as accounting for change. Therefore, this dissertation aligns with critical posthuman concepts of symposiosis building on a process ontology. See DeLanda 2002, Latour 2005, Bogost 2012.

¹⁴ ‘ἄνθρωπος’ (‘ánthropos’, eng. humanity or the man) has been used as a prefix in the naming of disciplines as well as a generalization of humanity. Debates of post-colonial studies and on the Anthropocene have shown that this caused a false sense of universality that sell a specific human being (mostly male, European, cis, able-bodied) as an abstract identification figure for people of any gender and ethnicity. This led, for example, to many structural problems and lack of knowledge in medicine and technology.

¹⁵ Loh’s distinction regards transhumanism as a practice of optimization and enhancement that arrives *through* (lat. trans) the human ‘as is’ at the human x.0. Technological posthumanism seeks to overcome the human with the means of technology to create a ‘super human’. Finally, critical posthumanism abolishes the human as a category in order to derive new understandings of all living beings. In this regard, only critical posthumanism engages in criticism on contemporary technology while transhumanism and technological posthumanism are inherently techno-positive. Loh 2018, 11-14.

categories as well as the borders separating them. The cyborg appears in conjunction with the feminist approach of situated knowledges, the conviction that facts are never individual, objective or abstract but always embodied and embedded.¹⁶ Haraway uses the method of situated knowledge to criticize the patriarchy, colonialism, educational institutions, late Capitalism, technoscientific corporations, extractivist processes, and so on, while her main focus lies on the destruction of outdated modes of thinking in Cartesian dualisms such as nature/culture, male/female, and biological/technological. The cyborg serves as a figure demonstrating the entanglement of being which is situated in the mediation between alleged opposites:

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of “Western” science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war. The stakes in the border war have been the territories of production, reproduction, and imagination.¹⁷

These words have something prophetic about them: now, in 2023, every person sitting next to me in the library is simultaneously pushing the keyboards of their laptops while being hooked up to the electromagnetic waves coming together as music in their headphones. However, the figure of the cyborg is about much more than our heavy dependence on technology: it is about artificial lights illuminating the night cityscape, the genetically engineered organisms and fertilizing chemicals we rely on for food supply, the microplastics consumed with every meal, the tools needed to predict tomorrow's weather accordingly, the natural and plastic fabrics mixed to produce the clothing we wear, the vacuum robot cleaning your floor, the fruit preserve grown and harvested in Argentina, packed in Thailand and sold in a supermarket in the United Kingdom. [4] What is at stake here is the worn-



Fig. 4: “capitalism is efficient” by @zei_squirrel: Fruit preserve with pears grown in Argentina, packed in Thailand, and sold in the UK.

¹⁶ Haraway 1988, 581.

¹⁷ Haraway 2016a, 7.

out notion of ‘purity’: nothing adheres to the logic of either/or, everything is both (and more), as Haraway concludes: “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.”¹⁸ Haraway argues that this specific way of thinking, that is, dualistic thinking, massively contributed to our anthropocentric self-conception hollowing out any form of responsible living in this world. The cyborg acts as a metaphor to handle these things in relation to their past and future trajectories without resorting to a Modernist imaginary of a *tabula rasa*. There is no point of origin, just lines of flight¹⁹ we are tracing as we follow along. At the same time, the cyborg reminds us of the intertwined, intricate, complex entanglements that we have been so keen on abstracting. I like to imagine the cyborg as a companion who never had to adhere to the illusion of an opposition of nature and culture in the first place.

Just like any other creature, the cyborg is a product of its environment, in this case, the technoscientific spaces of laboratories, server farms, social media platforms, and research facilities: “Finally, technoscience is more, less, and other than what Althusser meant by ideology; technoscience is a form of life, a practice, a culture, a generative matrix.”²⁰ In general, technoscience refers to the way humans addressed scientific problems beginning with the period of Enlightenment. Perpetrators of rationalism postulated an increasingly inseparable amalgam of technology and science that ultimately gave birth to the Great Acceleration, an exponential surge in human activity in the middle of the 20th century that will soon officially mark the beginning of the geological era of the Anthropocene.²¹ There is no ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’ way of doing (techno)science—too substantial are the dependencies on political structures such as state and private funding, military interests, public discourse, technocapitalist innovations, religious constraints, and structural discriminations of intersectional scope. There are always power relations at play that will support agents and methods upholding the current status quo while simultaneously make it harder for anyone and anything not fitting into its matrix. One sadly prevailing example could be the discourse on abortions: the global rise of conservatism and the right resulted in an avalanche of legislations and policies mostly targeting women’s rights. Despite being a perfectly safe medical procedure, clerical and far-right agents continuously proclaim bans on the access to safe abortions, a stalking-horse for the policing of women’s bodies. The power play at work is not just a ban on the ability to make free choices for their bodies, but to control the bio-political monopoly of reproduction.

The emergence of the cyborg from a technoscientific world is discussed extensively by Rosi Braidotti throughout her work. According to her, the formation of posthuman subjects is

¹⁸ Haraway 2016a, 67

¹⁹ Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 9.

²⁰ Haraway 1997, 50

²¹ Witze 2023.

only possible at this specific time and point in space deemed the posthuman convergence, or “the convergence of posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other, within an economy of advanced capitalism.”²² The posthuman convergence unites the challenges faced by contemporary subjects caused by the adherence to thinking in binary categories in the tradition of Cartesian dualism. However, this does not mean a mere agglomeration of all the ecological, political, and technological problems we face nowadays, but denotes a distinct shift in thinking about ‘nature’ itself. The smallest common denominator of the posthuman condition is defined by “the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself.”²³ This is highly relevant to understanding life from Braidotti’s perspective: the posthuman convergence does not simply refer to a change in the objects (or subjects) we analyze and critique, e.g., to new forms of media like social networks, but marks an epistemological shift in *how* we look at them and how we perceive ourselves during this act. Similarly to Haraway’s philosophy, this approach seeks to put an end to the social-constructivist developments after the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ of philosophy. While these are both Braidotti’s greatest influences and objects of critique, other critical references include the feminist movements of the 1970s and 80s, doctrines of subjectivity in the tradition of Eurocentric humanism, and psychoanalytic theories. The posthuman convergence corresponds to the proclamation of the Anthropocene as a new form of self-realization for the human: Braidotti’s main goal in her establishment of post-humanist theory is to find “adequate theoretical and imaginary representations for our lived conditions”²⁴ while thinking-creating a new form of subjectivity, namely, the posthuman subject. This also ties in with posthumanism’s critique of anthropocentrism as evident in the discourse surrounding the Anthropocene: the imaginary *anthropos* used as a standard measurement, most famously exemplified in Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man* (that is also referenced on the book cover of *The Posthuman*), is not universal, but a subject materializing distinct sociopolitical categories—in the anthropocentric case, mostly being cis-gendered, male, heterosexual, European respectively White, well-educated, and able-bodied. Since these attributes make up the alleged standard subject, everyone not identifying with these categories is automatically negated due to their differences. However, the standard subject did not fall from the sky as God’s creation, but was in fact fabricated by men and veiled by the ideologies of the patriarchy and colonialism. The posthuman convergence thus enables us to criticize similar claims in relation to technology: for example, the ongoing speediness of technological development makes it harder and harder to draw a line between science fiction and objective research. In contrast to many theories of transhumanism, the posthuman convergence seeks to emphasize the fact that processes such as cell cloning or automated

²² Braidotti 2019, 11.

²³ Braidotti 2013, 2.

²⁴ Braidotti 2013, 187.

warfare are not mere fictions, but already part of the very reality we live in. But for Braidotti, the posthuman convergence is not just a distinct point in time and space, but also bears the possibility of actively moulding the future: “[...] firstly, that the posthuman convergence is already upon us. Secondly that, far from being a terminal crisis, it is productive, dynamic and inter-relational. In my view the posthuman subject is a neo-materialist, grounded thinker of dynamic and complex social and discursive processes, but with a keen eye for issues of social and political justice and a commitment to affirmative ethics.”²⁵

Starting from the object of her critique—Cartesian dualism—and her suggestion of non-dualistic understandings of nature-culture interactions, Braidotti proposes a monistic philosophy “which rejects dualism, especially the opposition nature-culture and stresses instead the self-organizing (or auto-poietic) force of living matter.”²⁶ This critique is directed toward René Descartes’ writings *Discourse on the Method* from 1637 and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* from 1641 and their two key postulations: first, the categorization of substances, namely, that subjects are composed of a material substance like the body and an immaterial substance known as spirit or mind, and second, the localization of the rational mind or *cogito* in the spirit which is then prioritized over the body.²⁷ Descartes further contributed to an Ancient tradition establishing a hierarchical system of privileging mind over matter that later became the basis of modern philosophy—a development now backfiring at us: the ongoing practices of extractivism (the exploitation of resources from and concomitant destruction of the environment) present themselves as the legacy of hundreds of years of denying agency to matter. In the posthuman convergence, this unreflected belief is now criticized not only because of the apparent damage it has caused to our planet, but also thanks to post-colonial and indigenous studies criticizing the self-proclaimed singularity of Western European thought. As uttered by indigenous scholars for a long time,²⁸ the environmental problems the Northern Hemisphere is experiencing now—habitat loss, natural disasters, solastalgia,²⁹ loss of biodiversity, invasive alien species etc.—have been the lived reality of the Global South for centuries. Far from a call to ‘return to nature’, this is materially reflected in the so-called Orbis spike of 1610, a point in time when colonial warfare became so monstrous and lethal that the killing of approximately 50

²⁵ Braidotti 2019, 47.

²⁶ Braidotti 2013, 3.

²⁷ “But I see now that, without realizing it, I have ended up back where I wanted to be. For since I have now learned that bodies themselves are perceived not, strictly speaking, by the senses or by the imaginative faculty, but by the intellect alone, and that they are not perceived because they are touched or seen, but only because they are understood, I clearly realize [cognosco] that nothing can be perceived by me more easily or more clearly than my own mind.” Descartes 2008, 24.

²⁸ See Davis, Todd 2017 and Whyte 2018.

²⁹ Solastalgia refers to “a feeling of homesickness caused by environmental damage in the places people live, and particularly in the ways literature and visual culture have documented the ecological effects of the loss of place.” Gladwin 2018, 5.

million Native people in the Americas became readable in the layers of the Earth.³⁰ To be clear, Cartesian mind-body-dualism is a specific kind of framework that had been quite influential, but it definitely has not been the only episteme to think-with.³¹ The biggest critique of mind-body-dualism had already been uttered during Descartes's lifetime: Baruch de Spinoza's spiritual pantheism of his main work *Ethics* proposed a nuanced understanding of substance known as *deus sive natura*.³² Instead of fundamentally differentiating between the material, corporeal substance and the spiritual, intellectual soul, Spinoza argues that they are the same thing and consolidate the essence of God with that of nature.³³ Spinoza argues that there is only one substance that truly exists, which is God, while all the different forms of reality—objects, animals, humans, and so on—are simply attributes respectively modes of this substance. Therefore, Spinoza's God is immanent to everyone and everything.³⁴ This way of thinking thus operates without any form of hierarchy in the form of a new *scala naturae* including Cartesian mind-body-dualism. For Spinoza, everything is made up of the infinite substance of God that he identifies with nature. Sometimes called *conatus*, we can imagine this substance as an endless stream of energy that ultimately constitutes our perceivable universe.³⁵ In order to attain a specific object or figure, we have to subtract or carve it out of the endless substance. This process is called negation by Spinoza, because it necessarily negates the infinity of God in order to imagine a closed-off entity.³⁶ To define something requires to extract it from everything, thus, every thing is negated. We can trace this thought easily with an analogy of an infinite amount of cookie dough: suppose the unformed dough represents Spinoza's God, or the infinite substance. If we were to name and define a figure out of the dough by using a cookie cutter, our intervention with the eternal substance would lead to its negation. After the process of cutting out the biscuits, our cookie would have a discrete form and surface but it also remains

³⁰ Davis, Todd 2017, 764.

³¹ In fact, most indigenous cosmologies do not rely on a separation of the body and the soul but instead view them as one. See Viveiros de Castro 2014.

³² The equalization of God with nature is also called *natura naturans*. *Ethics* I, prop. 29.

³³ *Ethics* IV, prop. 4.

³⁴ *Ethics* I, def. 6.

³⁵ The term *conatus* is taken from the Latin original most often translated an 'endeavor' or 'striving' of the following proposition: "Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being." *Ethics* III, prop. 6.

³⁶ This process is known as 'omnis determinatio est negatio' (eng. every determination is a negation). It is only the non-determinated which is substantial, all the determinations constructed by negation are simply attributes of God's essence. In a letter to his friend Jarig Jelles from 1674, Spinoza refines this argument: "As for shape being a negation, and not something positive, it's manifest that matter as a whole, considered without limitation, can have no shape, and that shape pertains only to finite and determinate bodies. [...] Therefore, because the shape is nothing but a determination, and a determination is a negation, as they say, it can't be anything but a negation." Spinoza, Curley [ed.] 2016, 406-407.

within the quality of dough, while the remaining cookie dough stays indefinite and infinite (at least in our thought experiment).

This is the perhaps most interesting part of Spinoza's idea of the world as God: even though there is a subtraction of the infinite, the infinite does not get any smaller. Instead, after determining something as form, we are left with both the infinite substance as well as a new, carved out entity that yet still belongs to the whole. This suggests that every form is simply a remoulding of the immanent substance that has been here before and will again give rise to other forms. The process is therefore productive or positive, because even though we take away something from the eternal essence, it stays the same while birthing new permutations. Just like evolution is constantly growing and mutating new species, immanence puts an emphasis on growth. Here, we can also see another reason why Spinoza is so important for Braidotti's philosophy: adhering to ontological monism not only carries the rejection of negativity with it, but understands that "matter is one, driven by the desire for self-expression and ontologically free."³⁷ This leads up to the following definition of a posthuman subject:

The posthuman nomadic subject is materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded – it is firmly located somewhere, according to the radical immanence of the 'politics of location' that I have stressed throughout this book. It is a multifaceted and relational subject, conceptualized within a monistic ontology, through the lenses of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari, plus feminist and post-colonial theories. It is a subject actualized by the relational vitality and elemental complexity that mark posthuman thought itself.³⁸

Understanding matter as immanently vitalist traces back to Deleuze's reading of Henri Bergson and means that the 'stuff of the world' can be actualized into almost any thing and any form.³⁹ The decaying body of a mammal had its actualization in form of a fox, for example, but transitions into something else once microbes and fungi begin to dismantle and degrade it. These agents might produce soil or humus that then again becomes the living environment for plants and fungi. Again, these will serve as food sources for other animals in the area, thus the fox is finally actualized as a resource. Stressing the embodiment of subjects means that they exist materially and are never lost in the ether, similarly to Haraway's concept of situated knowledges. The multifaceted relational ontology is given by the figure of the holobiont:⁴⁰ I am composed of 30 million different microbes, bacteria, viruses, and fungi of the different organs adding up and protected by my skin to form a border to the outside. However, my body is porous, permeable, it devours and releases elements and is susceptible to change not only from the outside, but the inside, too. To be aware of these multidirectional processes going on

³⁷ Braidotti 2013, 55.

³⁸ Braidotti 2013, 188

³⁹ Deleuze 2001, 29.

⁴⁰ The holobiont suggests a radically new understanding of an individual and is defined as "an organism plus its persistent communities of symbionts." Gilbert 2017, M73.

constantly is what constitutes, according to Braidotti, the posthuman subject. Further emphasis on processes and mutations also require elaborate understandings of temporalities: from the postulate of ‘pantha rei’ attributed to Heraclitus to processes of deterritorialization of desiring-machines⁴¹ as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari, process philosophy takes center stage in ontological monism. This is all the more important in regard to the posthuman convergence: as is further exemplified in the very structure of the Internet, the dictate of time has become blazingly fast, and it perhaps uncovers the fact that instead of separate, secluded points in time and space following one another, we are experiencing a constant stream of passing from which we extract specific events from. These hold not, however, any individual significance, but resort to random turning points historiography marks to present a history of events rather than a history of convoluted, overlapping developments. At first glance, it might seem impossible to navigate through such a web of indefinite arrows of time going in many more directions than just past or future. Indeed, another reason for the uncertainty caused by the posthuman convergence lies in the ethical acknowledgment of the rhizomatic entanglements for the production of, for example, a take-away cup of coffee: if you fetch a coffee to go, you are not only relating to the shop in the city where you are buying from and the taxes paid to the country you’re in, but to the whole journey the water needs to travel, from its source over the water purification through the infrastructure of water pipes to the coffee shop you’re at; you’re committing to the plastic and paper used for your one-way cup that has been growing somewhere on this planet before being chopped down and mixed with further chemicals to produce a waterproof material that is then produced in a factory—presumably in East or South Asia—and transported via trucks, ships or planes to your coffee shop; and, of course, you are now part of the fields growing coffee beans and the ecological and legislative struggles their owners are part of, the hands that sowed, trimmed, and harvested them before they too were packed and shipped off to wherever you are buying from. Admittedly, that is a lot, but it urges us to keep in mind that the hypothetical cup of coffee is not a stable object solely made for your consumption, but an assemblage of the most different processes of nature, culture, and technology. Braidotti writes:

Becoming-posthuman is at the heart of a process of redefining one’s sense of attachment and connection to a common and shared world, a territorial space: urban, social, psychic, ecological, planetary as it may be. It is a sort of becoming-world. This grounded perspective accounts for multiple ecologies of belonging.⁴²

In this way, everyone can become posthuman and it is not some event destined and desired to come in the far future as suggested by many transhumanists. The future is now, and tied to this obligation is a call for an ethics appropriate to deal with the posthuman convergence.

⁴¹ Deleuze, Guattari 1983, 130-139.

⁴² Braidotti 2013, 157-158.

A loosely related approach can also be found in the work of Karen Barad who radically progresses the subject-object-dichotomy through their theory of agential realism. In the book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* from 2007, quantum physics or, more precisely, the so-called Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics ascribed to Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg from the 1920s, play a major role in turning philosophy of science on its head. A key notion is that of intra-action: replacing the inter (lat. *among*) with intra (lat. *from within*) emphasizes the co-dependency of the action happening between two or more agents. In intra-action, agents are not just lingering around in the same space, but they are mutually constituting one another—but this is not merely a cosmetic procedure or a semantic play, indeed, phenomena (or what used to be called *objects*) can only be produced through entangled intra-action; or rather, phenomena emerge through intra-action. For example, in the preface of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad states “it is not so much that I have written this book, as that it has written me. Or rather, ‘we’ have ‘intra-actively’ written each other (‘intra-actively’ rather than the usual ‘interactively’ since writing is not a unidirectional practice of creation that flows from author to page, but rather the practice of writing is an iterative and mutually constitutive working out, and reworking, of ‘book’ and ‘author’)” and concludes that “entanglements are not isolated productions as the example of an author-book pair might suggest.”⁴³ From this quote, it becomes clear that Barad is not interested in a form of object-oriented ontology⁴⁴ but in the myriad of connections drawing agents together. In the example of the author and the book, this includes not just all the references and ideas that the author wishes to write down, not just the computer or pen and paper needed to do so, but every telephone call with every literary agent and publisher, the food nourishing the writer, the trees needed to make paper, the printing factories, every revision and announcement of the upcoming book, all the reviews and reiterations of the work, and so on—in short, before intra-action, there is no phenomenon.⁴⁵ The process of intra-action is described as following:

Since individually determinate entities do not exist, measurements do not entail an interaction between separate entities; rather, determinate entities emerge from their intra-action. I introduce the term “intra-action” in recognition of their ontological inseparability, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which relies on a metaphysics of individualism (in particular, the prior existence of separately determinate entities). A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an “object” and the

⁴³ Barad 2007, x.

⁴⁴ Many object-oriented philosophies privilege the permanence of objects over subjects and subsequently end up in sophistry, which is due to a fundamental lack of agency and relationality: if the object was there first, how and where did it come from? Did it create itself? The preference of the object over the subject (as opposed to their deconstruction) results in a flat ontology that ultimately makes all participants equal and renders the question of life redundant.

⁴⁵ While actor-network-theory can be understood as a dynamic network, intra-action is more radical ontologically; what essentially differentiates them is intra-action’s constitution through emergence in comparison to actor-network-theory’s structuralist description of systems.

"measuring agencies"; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them. Crucially, then, we should understand phenomena not as objects-in-them selves, or as perceived objects (in the Kantian or phenomenological sense), but as specific intra-actions. Because the basis of this ontology is a fundamental inseparability, it cuts across any Kantian noumena-phenomena distinction: there are no determinately bounded or propertyed entities existing "behind" or as the causes of phenomena. Not only is this ontological understanding of phenomena consistent with Bohr's insights; it is also consistent with recent experimental and theoretical developments in quantum physics.⁴⁶

Barad asserts that individualism, that is, the ontological disconnectedness of objects and subjects, is a false assumption, since even though it cannot be proven using logics, there is no justification for adhering to a subject-object-dichotomy in the first sense. Therefore, Barad reasons that subjects and objects—that are referred to as phenomena and are indistinguishable from one another—emerge through intra-acting with another phenomena,⁴⁷ or rather, intra-action takes the inseparability of phenomena as a starting point: once different entities meet, they become part of a phenomenon through intra-action. Barad urges not to equate a phenomenon with a Kantian thing-in-itself, which would be an intelligible object or idea, but simply as an intra-action. Since reality does not precede, but emerge from the meeting of different agents, further dividing into Kantian noumena and phenomena—the former approximating reality or the thing-of-itself, the latter being how it appears to an observer—is not needed. Another Damocles sword made obsolete by agential realism is objectivity. Since there is no stable, pre-existing reality before intra-action, there can also be no observer of intra-action. Instead, just like in Bohr's Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, the observer is always already a part of the system and actively influences it. In cybernetic theory, this is also known as second-order cybernetics as theorized by Heinz von Förster.⁴⁸ The ont-epistemology of agential realism builds on action, dynamics, and heterogenous entanglements that also make it lively:

There is a vitality to intra-activity, a liveliness, not in the sense of a new form of vitalism, but rather in terms of a new sense of aliveness. The world's effervescence, its exuberant creativeness can never be contained or suspended. Agency never ends; it can never 'run out.' The notion of intra actions reformulates the traditional notions of causality and agency in an ongoing reconfiguring of both the real and the possible.⁴⁹

Again, liveliness is not simply attached to an organism as an attribute but vital phenomena themselves emerge through intra-action, a line of thinking also embodied by Jane Bennett's vital materialism.⁵⁰ Since agency is by definition infinite, the focus on action and development can be

⁴⁶ Barad 2007, 128.

⁴⁷ The particular word choice may seem distracting and easily confused with philosophical field of phenomenology, but is taken directly from Niels Bohr.

⁴⁸ See Förster 2003.

⁴⁹ Barad 2007, 177.

⁵⁰ See Bennett 2010.

interpreted as a form of creativity or *conatus*. As long as there are phenomena, there will be intra-action. On top of that, since Barad is working with a definition of reality derived from quantum mechanics, they do not need a posthuman critique of this notion. For example, Braidotti, following Deleuze, takes up the notions of immanence and virtuality to criticize the idea of an independent, inexorable reality as suggested in the pre-Newtonian association of the ether. Since quantum mechanics does not recognize such a form of stable reality, but hinges on the emergence and implementation of a new form of reality with every interaction, Barad follows the permanent reconfiguration of what is real and possible. Accordingly, writing theory is also a vital act:

Doing theory requires being open to the world's aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder. Theories are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority. Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world. The world theorises as well as experiments with itself. Figuring, reconfiguring. Animate and (so-called) inanimate creatures do not merely embody mathematical theories; they do mathematics. [...] Thought experiments are material matters.⁵¹

When Barad calls theories the “living reconfigurings of the world”, we can see how these are not regarded as mere descriptions of something, but as actively interfering with and thus shaping our vital world.

So far, we have identified the urge for posthuman subjectivity at the precise moment of our existence when technology, culture, and nature are collapsing into each other and confronting us with ever more profound crises. But what is this world made of anyway and what is the matter of materialism? According to Braidotti, we are part of a zoe-geo-techno-assemblage:⁵² in reference to Giorgio Agamben's analysis of 'bios' (political life) and 'zoe' (bare life) as separating factors of public life according to Nicomachean ethics, Braidotti overrules this dichotomy to put it into a positive perspective: “Zoe as the organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality.”⁵³ In this perspective, zoe takes center stage as the substance all life is derived from. Bios, on the other hand, is thrown over along with the universal man of anthropocentrism. This has, of course, ethical implications: since zoe is the monistic substance everything is made of, influenced by the processes of evolution and mineralization, we are really all made up from the same material. In the long run, the atoms and molecules constructing our body will be part of something totally different; perhaps a limestone mountain, a house cat or a red wood tree. It is a question of situated composition and not a question of fundamental

⁵¹ Barad 2015, 154.

⁵² We might be tempted to ask why Braidotti would choose such a slightly inconvenient wording. I think there are a couple of reasons: first, wordings like living beings are imprecise (Who is a living being? Where lies the border to non-living beings?), secondly, the word choice traces back to her rejection of negation (otherwise she would be stuck to expand Agamben's notion of the bios or even use some negation like non-bios). Using the addition of zoe-geo-techno, Braidotti refers to the interconnectedness of these realms.

⁵³ Braidotti 2013, 60.

substance. The same goes for the realms of geology and technology, which are also seen as inscribed into the subject: “Posthuman subjectivity is an ensemble composed by zoe-logical, geological and technological organisms – it is a zoe/geo/techno assemblage.”⁵⁴ By understanding living beings as zoe-geo-techno-assemblages, we can fully focus on their agency and are not distracted by their taxonomy as a species or family. At the same time, the neologism also clearly refers to its technological mediation, implying that the stuff of the world can be understood as networks of different scales. Again, this does not automatically equalize all agents, quite on the contrary, as subjects are interpreted only by their agency and not their constitution. Theoretically, all beings could actualize to behave in the same way, thus have the same agency, but realistically—due to the different, partly millions of years long processes at work—we are all different from one another. This is accounted for quite literally by Braidotti in her expression “‘we’ are in *this* together, but we are not one and the same”.⁵⁵ Instead of agonizing over our differences, we should put them into play and make them work for our ethical goals. Moreover, thinking-with zoe-geo-techno-assemblages also extends and differentiates our understanding of living beings: for example, the virus is traditionally not seen as an alive organism due to its lack of independent metabolism.⁵⁶ However, this did not stop the tiny non-organism from wrecking havoc and killing millions of living beings since 2019. The virus related to human and animal hosts, it took a hold of public life and education, it inspired researchers and software developers; it created new words, jobs, and standards, and probably still affects our life to a great extent. Of course, we can refrain in the old ways and negate its vitality but this also prevents us from thinking-with it and ultimately learning from it.⁵⁷ As has become visible throughout the different stages of the pandemic, methods of seclusion, defense, and immunity are only feasible for some time but do not represent a long-term solution. Viewing viruses as zoe-geo-techno-assemblages makes it possible for us to relate to them, not turn against them, and understand how they are relating to others.

Appropriately, Braidotti proposes a system of governance managing the power relations over life and death called zoe-egalitarianism:

Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Braidotti 2019, 91.

⁵⁵ Braidotti 2020, 469.

⁵⁶ Forterre 2010, 156.

⁵⁷ Preciado 2020.

⁵⁸ Braidotti 2013, 60.

In the tradition of Foucault, this form of governmentality⁵⁹ is not only limited to humans, but all forms of life controlled by technoscientific agents of late Capitalism, whether carbon- or silicon-based. Nowadays, our reality is even more mediated in terms of surveillance thanks to exhaustive CCTV, personalized recommendation algorithms, ad tracking, smart living, and so on. But these mechanisms are not only directed at humans, but all of the zoe-geo-techno-assemblage: livestock being fed targeted nutritions full of hormones on the clock to ensure growth, breeding of animals for research purposes and plants to maximize crops, massive daily deforestation, ocean acidification and extractivist practices destroying whole eco-systems, and ongoing use of fossil fuels on a huge scale, but it also includes the devastating amounts of electronic waste, the building of server farms in secluded caves, the ever-accelerating cycles of consumerist trends, and the battle for attention led by social media and news outlets. Zoe-egalitarianism is a practice that allows for transversal thinking between these very different yet closely related agents in order to resist the commodification of 'Life itself', and instead privileges the acknowledgment of the conatus or the flow of life encompassing all creatures.

'Life itself' refers to the abstraction of life from living beings as enforced by the discipline of biology over the centuries, most prominently, in the branches of genetics and evolutionary biology.⁶⁰ For example, the fetishization of DNA resulting from the Human Genome Project in the 1990s gave hope that once we decode all the genomes, we would also know what life is.⁶¹ Since life has become an object for scientific observation, it becomes detached from the bodies and creatures inhabiting but is nevertheless referred to as Life. This is an affirmation of Alfred North Whitehead's fallacy of misplaced concreteness denoting reification which is defined as "mistaking the abstract for the concrete."⁶² Moreover, this is also exactly the problem with asking the question 'what is life?': abstracting the experiences, possibilities, conditions, and imaginations of life in a single definition relying on the reductionist language of modern natural sciences is just not sensible; something will always get lost on the way, resulting in a watered-down definition ultimately not signifying anything. This is exemplified by two images often cited in posthumanist analyses, the photograph of the *Blue Marble* and the image of the foetus. Both become symbols, icons even, of Life and, although on a completely different scale, transmit the same beliefs about Life itself. The *Blue Marble* photograph, taken by the Apollo 17 crew approximately 33,000 km away from the planet and famously adorning the cover of National Geographic in 1969, counts as the first image of Earth in its entirety. [5] As a photo taken by a machine from an outer space, the image serves as a technological abstraction of the planet;

⁵⁹ Governmentality is understood as the art of government and, in the broadest sense, as methods of control over others and oneself. Foucault 1991, 102-103.

⁶⁰ Haraway 1991, 45.

⁶¹ Reichle 2009, 16-17.

⁶² Whitehead 1948, 52.

cutting off all the ties between symopoietic agents and freezing the dynamics of living in time in favor of a full-screen representation of our home: “The act of viewing Earth from space echoes that of a baby glimpsing, and really seeing, itself in a mirror for the first time. The astronaut gazes upon the body of life as a whole.”⁶³ Photographs of a fetus, on the other hand, are pure simulacra of growing organisms inside a pregnant person. Since it is technically not possible to take such photographs, the images ironically often reproduced by pro-lifers on protest signs are actually dead fetuses in artificial surroundings meant to look like they have been taken inside the body. These images suggest that life can be extrapolated and objectified, that it is “a system to be managed.”⁶⁴ Haraway states that “error inheres in the literalness of ‘life itself’ rather than in the unapologetic swerving of liveliness and worldly bodies-in-the-making. Life itself is the psychic, cognitive, and material terrain of fetishism. By contrast, liveliness is open to the possibility of situated knowledges, including technoscientific knowledges.”⁶⁵ Moreover, conceiving of life itself is a deeply anthropocentric way of thinking because it degrades the limitless flows of the living to an object fit for stand-alone scientific observation. Braidotti arrives at a similar conclusion:

Advanced capitalism and its bio-genetic technologies engender a perverse form of the posthuman. At its core there is a radical disruption of the human-animal interaction, but all living species are caught in the spinning machine of the global economy. The genetic code of living matter ‘Life itself’ (Rose, 2007) – is the main capital. Globalization means the commercialization of planet Earth in all its forms, through a series of inter-related modes of appropriation.⁶⁶

Given the possibilities of cloning, extending, mutating, and other interferences with life we are employing on a daily basis, life itself has become a commodity in the form of in-vitro fertilization, the cloning of pets and racing horses, halting aging processes, and even preventing death using cryonics. These are no longer just gimmicks for a few bored privileged people who like to push the limits of biotechnology, but everyday practices, even if they are extremely expensive. But not only the beginning of life, also the ending of life can be technologically mediated: “Can the digital



Fig. 5: Blue Marble, photograph taken by the Apollo crew on December 7, 1972.

⁶³ Margulis, Sagan 2000, 11.

⁶⁴ Haraway 1997, 174

⁶⁵ Haraway 1997, 137

⁶⁶ Braidotti 2013, 7.

operator that flew the American Predator Drone from a computer room in Las Vegas be considered a ‘pilot’?”⁶⁷ While the drone is piloted remotely, a global network of surveillance, secret information, human and non-human soldiers, strategic warfare, and all kinds of military equipment are needed to perform lethal missions. On the other hand, there are vast numbers of living creatures that are exploited and die every day for our health. Haraway extensively writes about OncoMouse™, a transgenic organism created at Harvard University for experimental use only. The insertion of an activated oncogene, that is, a gene potentially causing the outbreak of cancer, into the mouse’s DNA makes her especially susceptible to the disease. Although OncoMouse™ was not the first transgenic organism,⁶⁸ it is the first living being under patent. This is also reflected in the context of its emergence: while the scientist working with OncoMouse™ was employed at Harvard University, his salary was paid for by DuPont, one of the largest chemical corporations in the world.⁶⁹ DuPont secured their rights on the mice until 2005, thus turning a living being into a licensing business. This is not only a tale of technoscientific greed, but caused long-lasting problems for research using lab mice around the world since scientists were no longer able to freely share their mouse populations as before. On another level, the trade with life itself always tries to put ethical dimensions into the background: after all, OncoMouse™ is a living being enduring pain, sickness, and death for oncologic research. Without resorting too deep into an ethical discussion on laboratory animals, the treatment of OncoMouse™ is absolutely unworthy and their liveliness is disturbingly detached. *Becoming-zoe* is an ethical undertaking urging us to relate to each other’s pain. In one of the most mourning passages of her oeuvre, Haraway writes: “OncoMouse is my sibling, and more properly, male or female, s/he is my sister. [...] Whether I agree to her existence and use or not, s/he suffers, physically, repeatedly, and profoundly, that I and my sisters may live.”⁷⁰

The considerations of vital materialism and the understanding of life as living instead of life itself leave one more question open: if everything is alive, what role does death play for the posthuman subject? Once again, death is not fetishized as a totalizing finitude, but the boundary between life and death is deconstructed in favor of processual mutations of the zoe-geo-techno-assemblage. Barad discusses the intra-actions of lightning and refers to living and dying as metaphorically two sides of the same coin: “If lightning enlivens the boundary between life and death, if it exists on the razor’s edge between animate and inanimate, does it not seem

⁶⁷ Braidotti 2013, 9.

⁶⁸ The first transgenic organism was created by Stanley Cohen and Herbert Boyer in 1973. They inserted plasmid DNA into *Escherichia coli* bacteria. See Cohen, Chang, Boyer et al. 1973.

⁶⁹ Haraway 1997, 80.

⁷⁰ Haraway 1997, 79

to dip sometimes here and sometimes there on either side of the divide?”⁷¹ Taking into account agential realism’s foundation of quantum mechanics, this approach rests on the indeterminability of complementary properties such as location similar to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle: accordingly, an observer can only ever know one property such as the exact location of a particle or its speed, but never both at the same time. Most classical theories of life in Western philosophy, from Aristotle’s great chain of being⁷² to the contemporary systemic definition including astrobiological organisms by NASA, rest upon a clear demarcation between life and death. However, as per agential realism, life as well as death need some form of intra-active entanglement to even come into existence. Therefore, whenever a person dies, their body continues to stay alive in the form of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms; although the person changes, their liveliness is not gone—in the same way that agency can never run out. Instead, a transformation takes place, taking their body from a symbiosis of organisms concerned with keeping the person alive to splitting it up into different elements and particles. Referring to the quote on lighting, Barad questions what kind of intra-actions mediate between life and death. We know from tests like the Miller-Urey experiment that lightning might have played a major role in the emergence of life on Earth.⁷³ While at first glance, lightning represents a kind of danger to most organisms, it also serves as a kickstart to the mingling of particles—not unlike plugging in an electronic device. In this regard, electricity could be an agent involved in life as well as death, thus producing living as well as dying phenomena depending on its entanglements. This situated differentiation is the foundation for understanding Barad’s and other posthumanists’ contributions to the theory of life. In contrast to thinkers like Braidotti,

⁷¹ Barad 2011, 35.

⁷² In *De anima*, Aristotle proclaims an inherent hierarchy of creatures in the model of the great chain of being (in Medieval philosophy also referred to as *scala naturae*): organisms were organized according to their apparent complexity often symbolized by the ladder with minerals and crystals at the bottom that were awarded some complexity but were mostly considered inanimate. Just above are beings with a *vegetative psyche* such as plants and fungi. They were considered necessary due to their providing of food and, in the case of flowers, beauty, but were not acknowledged anything more than a mere existence due to their inability to move. This is different just a step above, where we find lesser animals such as mussels and starfish, which were already considered to have an *animate psyche*, even though they were seen as less complex than invertebrates such as insects or cold-blooded vertebrates such as reptiles and fish. Above them, Aristotle classified warm-blooded vertebrates and mammals as fully implementing the characteristics of the *animate psyche*. Only one mammal made it to the very top and obtained the highest of all the soul forms due to their ability to think, the *rational psyche*: humans. *De anima* II, 413b 1-8, and see also Campbell, Hodos 1991.

⁷³ Stanley L. Miller and Harold Urey conducted an experiment in 1953 simulating the environment of the primordial soup using flasks filled with gases of the Earth’s atmosphere (hydrogen, water vapor, ammonia, and methane) and sterilized water that was continuously bombarded with electrical discharge. After roughly a week, alanine and glycine appeared, two chemical compounds essential for the formation of proteins. This suggests that life emerges and organizes itself autonomously under specific conditions. In this regard, the experiment follows an approach similar to Luigi Galvani’s famous experiments with electric currents ‘reviving’ dead frogs, which served as an inspiration for the first-ever science fiction novel, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Benton 2008, 24, and Margulis, Sagan 2000, 72-74.

Barad understands life as an emergent property instead of an immanent force or conatus. They also clearly refuse a definition of life as a set of rules living beings need to obey:

But life, whether organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate, is not an unfolding algorithm. Electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees stray from all calculable paths, making leaps here and there, or rather, making here and there from leaps, shifting familiarly patterned practices, testing the waters of what might yet be/have been/could still have been, doing thought experiments with their very being.⁷⁴

Barad thus dissents algorithmic approaches to life like Stephen Wolfram's cellular automaton also known as Rule 30.⁷⁵ In agential realism, intra-actions are emergent, which means that they do not operate on patters, algorithms, schemes or categories since this would deny the vitality, creativity, and indeterminism of its quantum theoretical foundations. Moreover, an algorithm hinges on an origin or creator, an anthropocentric conception to begin with. Instead, according to Barad, the void births and swallows particles, a process called the indeterminacy of time-being in analogy to the uncertainty principle:

Particles are born out of the void, go through transformations, die, return to the void, and are reborn, all the while being inseparable from the wild material imaginings of the void. At the core is the *indeterminacy of time-being* (i.e., the reciprocally related indeterminacy of time and energy/matter/being), and this gives rise to the fact that nothingness is not empty but flush with *virtuality—the indeterminate play of the non/presence of non/existence*. As a result of a primary ontological indeterminacy, the void is not nothing but a desiring orientation toward being/becoming, flush with yearning and innumerable imaginings of what could be/might yet have been. Nothingness is a material presence, belying any insinuation of emptiness—an indeterminate movement, an intra-active self-touching of no-thingness. It is a matter of time-being itself that is at stake in the play of indeterminacy, where an event is not one and living and dying are inseparable (though not the same): the dying is within the living within the dying.⁷⁶

Particles can emerge or come into being even in a vacuum (the lowest energy state possible, not mere nothingness) when entangled with the right amount of energy for intra-action. At the very origin and the very end, there is only the void. This is where everything comes from and where everything will end up, too. But the void is not empty, it is a space of virtuality—recalling Deleuze's understanding of the virtual,⁷⁷ we can imagine it as a place where all potentialities are 'stored'. In quantum field theory, virtual particles pop in and out of existence, for example, when two or more waves interfere. According to classical physics, particles with the same charge repel each other, while particles with different charges attract each other. Since quantum field theory knows no empty space, the whole meeting becomes a bit more complicated: due to its electromagnetic field, the whole universe is traversed by waves, even inside a vacuum. Again, quantum field theory does not work with particles, but fields, which we can imagine

⁷⁴ Barad 2015, 154.

⁷⁵ See Wolfram 1986.

⁷⁶ Barad 2017, G112.

⁷⁷ "What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality." Deleuze 2001, 31.

metaphorically as areal sets of waves. Recalling the double-slit experiment, we also know that photons, although technically they are particles, may also behave like waves, depending on the observer's position. In the electromagnetic field, and even in the vacuum, a photon can split up into different pairs of particles when meeting other waves. These are the virtual particles Barad is mentioning: for different reasons, for example, the specific atom the electron approximates, the photon may disintegrate into sub-particles for a short while before coming back together again as a photon. These are then referred to as virtual particles since they usually transform quickly back into a wave and don't persevere in their particular state of existence very long. Their ontological transformation into a particle is nevertheless possible all the time, hence the notion of virtuality.

Particles may also decay since processes of intra-action also influence their transformations. A very simple example on a larger scale than quanta would be the burning of a piece of wood: usually, wood consists mostly of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen and, in very small traces, nitrogen and other elements like calcium and potassium. After combustion, depending on the specific type of wood, its ash consists mostly of carbon and calcium, with traces of potassium, magnesium, phosphorus and other elements. The burning is the process of intra-action, where some of the elements are released into the environment due to their high reaction, namely, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen. These elements are not exactly dead, they are just transformed from their original composition.⁷⁸ In this regard, life, death, and rebirth belong together and constitute one another: the burning of a wildfire results in the formation of nutritious soil, so the outlook on this process also hinges on perspective.

A somewhat different approach is demonstrated in Braidotti's zoe-egalitarianism: there is no moral judgment of the doing of life, zoe can be threatening force, as in a tsunami or typhoon, but it can also be generative, for example, at the birth of healthy offspring.⁷⁹ The apparent positivity of life, more often than not viewed through an anthropocentric lens, is at stake here. On a cellular level, there is little difference between the rapid growth of cancer cells in a human host and stem cells growing in an embryo. The most important aspect of Braidotti's philosophy of life and death is thus the blurring of these apparent exclusive oppositions:

Let us start again from the basic insight that the new practices of bio-political management of 'life' mobilize not only generative forces, but also new and subtler degrees of death and extinction. My argument is that a focus on the vital and self-organizing powers of Life/zoe undoes any clear-cut distinctions between living and dying. It composes the notion of zoe as a posthuman yet affirmative life-force. This vitalist materialism rests solidly on a neo-Spinozist political ontology of monism and

⁷⁸ In quantum field theory, which serves as a broader framework of quantum mechanics, instead of a specific element, physicists work with the quantum field of particles respectively their representational functions. As Barad states, this is a necessary step to undertake if physics wants to describe the processes of life and death respectively their entanglements.

⁷⁹ Braidotti 2013, 112.

radical immanence, engendering a transversal relational ethics to counteract the inhuman(e) aspects of the posthuman predicament.⁸⁰

At first, it is tough to imagine the undoing of clear-cut distinctions between living and dying—quite frankly, once somebody dies, they're gone, unless one of the next crises in the posthuman convergence involves a form of zombie apocalypse. Braidotti continues:

One's view on death depends on one's assumptions about Life. In my vitalist materialist view, Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: zoe in all its powers. This does not mean that zoe, or life as absolute vitality, is not above negativity, because it can hurt. Zoe is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that constitutes single subjects. The human is a step down for pure intensity, or the force of the virtual. It is a constant challenge for us to rise to the occasion, to be 'worthy of our times', while resisting them, and thus to practise *amor fati* affirmatively. It is quite demanding to catch the wave of life's intensities in a secular manner and ride on it, exposing the boundaries or limits as we transgress them. No wonder that most of us, as George Eliot astutely observed, turn our back on that roar of cosmic energy. We often crack in the process of facing life and just cannot take it anymore. Death is the ultimate transposition, though it is not final, as zoe carries on, relentlessly.⁸¹

Braidotti's ontology of life and death sounds fairly poetic and inverts the assumption that life is whatever death is not: since zoe is defined as a power, processually expanding and becoming more complex, death is a process, too. Frequently, Braidotti states that "we all are 'have beens': the spectacle of our death is written obliquely into the script of our temporality, not as a barrier, but as a condition of possibility."⁸² In other words, death is an event that already happened. Once we are born, we also start dying: there is no finality of death, no salvation at the end, just a constant process of decay. When Braidotti states that we are always have-beens, she also refers to our synchronization with death: "death is the same thing as the time of our living, in so far as we all live on borrowed time."⁸³ The key point here is the notion of borrowed time, on the one hand, in regard to apparent individualism and, on the other, the illusion of ownership over 'our' bodies. This refers to the understanding of all the atoms, molecules, synapses, cells, and microbiomes coming together to create the phenomenon of your body. However, your body falls apart once their relations change. For example, once a mammal dies, the process of autolysis begins, where certain organs like the stomach and the liver will begin to break down cells into smaller particles. Proteins, carbohydrates, and fats are broken down into their elements like sugars and phosphates, which then again act as nutrition for and thus creation of other organisms. Here, we have arrived at the epistemological implications of the life-death-continuum in contrast to traditional models of the life-death-dichotomy: while thinking life and death as a binary opposition puts and emphasis on this world (as well as the infinity in the world to come

⁸⁰ Braidotti 2013, 115.

⁸¹ Braidotti 2013, 131.

⁸² Braidotti 2013, 132.

⁸³ Braidotti 2013, 133.

as propagated by many religions) and privileges the linearity of a life span, thinking life and death as processes on the same continuum opens up the possibility of circularity. The processes of life and death bleed into one another and spread freely through individuals. No death is ever an ending point, but really just another beginning. Most importantly, nothing gets lost on the way; everything is just constantly built, destroyed, and re-built. It is obvious why Braidotti would put such a model at the heart of the posthuman convergence: If eco-systems can be understood as loops constantly cycling and re-cycling without producing any form of waste. Instead of basing our most profound understandings of what we are and what we do in the context of abstraction, exploitation, and reduction that only contribute to unsustainable ways of living, we need to turn toward a cyclical model of living—not only because it is the more accurate description of the processes of life, but because as foundational ethics, it can change our behavior for the better.

But let us return to our question on posthuman death in Braidotti's work: "Life being desire which essentially aims at extinguishing itself, i.e. reaching its aim and then dissolving, the wish to die is another way to express the desire to live."⁸⁴ Admittedly, this may sound nihilistic at first— why should we look forward to our death as a means to live? Why should life's, the great creator, biggest wish be its own destruction? As mentioned before, we are looking at a cyclical model without a *real* ending. When we die, we just live on in another form. Sure, Sophie, the author, might not be anymore, but my cells, my bacteria, my breath alters and becomes something else. This is also referred to as the impersonality of death.⁸⁵ Far from being a kind of suicidal ideation or pessimism, longing for death in a posthuman sense is actually longing to live on and rejoin the undefined mass of zoe.

2.2. Memes as Sympoietic Agents: The Memetic Subject

This chapter builds on the critical posthumanist ontology demonstrated in the previous one and defines Internet memes as sympoietic subjects, that is, as heterogeneous agents of nature, culture, and technology engaging in intra-actions producing memes. My main objective for doing so lies in the formation of a theory of a memetic subject deconstructing the previous definitions of Internet memes that have adhered to either the biological or the cultural realm. Instead, I propose how memes need to be seen as posthuman subjects abiding to the same logics as entangled living beings using a systemic approach.

Up until now, Internet memes have been defined as 'cultural units' according to Richard Dawkins' theory of *The Selfish Gene* from 1976 and as shareable 'digital items' in Limor Shifman's *Memes as Digital Cultures* from 2014, which is not only one of the first, but also one of the most influential analyses of Internet memes. Both writings are also linked to the traditions

⁸⁴ Braidotti 2013, 248.

⁸⁵ Braidotti 2013, 234.

of memetics, a field of study set forth after Dawkins' book. There, he defined memes as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation"⁸⁶ in analogy to the biological units of genes. This initiated an academic discussion on cultural evolution adhering to the same factors as genetic evolution, which would then grow into the field of memetics. Memetics was characterized by a strictly Darwinian understanding of natural selection and therefore implemented the theory that culture must have grown in the same way, but instead of passing on genes containing genetic material, humans act as vessels carrying memes consisting of cultural information.⁸⁷ Dawkins' ultra-rationalist approach needs to be situated in the specific context of US-American research, where opposing Darwinism in the field of evolutionary biology meant endorsing Christian creationist myths of intelligent design.⁸⁸ At that time, biologists did not yet have a nuanced understanding of genetics and the elemental role of DNA nor a fetishizing attitude towards genes. Strictly speaking, we are talking about the pre-molecular-biological and pre-transgenic era, when the exact workings of evolution were largely as unclear as in 1859, when Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was first published. We must therefore interpret *The Selfish Gene* as Dawkins' attempt to prove not only the evolution of culture, but above all the transmission of genes themselves. Of course, this does not make Dawkins' endeavor to separate nature from culture any less problematic against the backdrop of the Anthropocene. As stated in the



Fig. 6: Disaster Girl became a popular meme format thanks to Zoe's smirk in front of catastrophe often making her the pyromanic protagonist of the image's narrative.

⁸⁶ Dawkins 1990, 176.

⁸⁷ Dawkins 1990, 172.

⁸⁸ Haraway 1997, 133.

previous chapter, many agents in contemporary philosophy see the Cartesian legacy of the mind-body problem legitimatizing the opposition of nature and culture as one of the strongest pillars of extractivism and colonialism. This is exactly the reason why the definition of memes is rethought in this thesis.

Strangely, the field of memetics disappeared more or less at the same time when Internet memes became popular in the mainstream. Often stated with the discontinuation of the *Journal of Memetics* in 2005, this corresponds roughly to the advent of memes into the mainstream. The photograph used in the image macro known as *Disaster Girl* showing four-year-old Zoe Roth turning her head and smirking in front of a burning house was taken in the same year and continues to be one of the most well-known memes of all time. [6] Another product of 2005 is the viral remix of a scene from the 2002 movie *The Lord of the Rings: Two Towers* featuring a hardstyle track mixed with the line 'They're taking the hobbits to Isengard!'.⁸⁹ The video has been clicked on YouTube more than 37 million times and remixed countless times. Although these phenomena have taken the Internet world by storm, it took almost another decade before one of the most significant theoretical engagements with memes appeared. In a thorough analysis of pre-Internet and early Internet memes, the field of memetics, and what determines the viral success of a meme, Shifman's analysis put memes again in the centre of academic discourse. One of the factors for Shifman's ongoing relevance is the shift from situating memes in the field of evolutionary biology to discussing them against the backdrop of media and communication studies. This allowed for a more specific engagement with the dynamics of Internet culture such as sharing and remixing as well as the media-specific implications of Internet memes. Of course, the field of Internet memes is already much, much smaller than the memeticists' aspiration to offer an explanation for cultural evolution. Shifman's definition of Internet memes goes as follows:

- (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which
- (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.⁹⁰

The main characteristic of Internet memes is their similarity in appearance, for example, in the classic triad of the image macro consisting of image, text, and layout that is mostly designed with top and bottom texts using the Impact font, as well as their often humorous and relatable content. Moreover, being able to understand an Internet meme requires a form of media literacy that mainly rests on the knowledge of other memes and the references made. Just like a canon of art history, over the years, memes have established their own canon of better and lesser known examples as well as 'families' of variations of a meme, for example, the Wojak line drawing showing the head of balding man wrinkling his forehead. [7] Over the years, Wojak has

⁸⁹ Aaron Hardbarger 2006.

⁹⁰ Shifman 2014, 7-8.

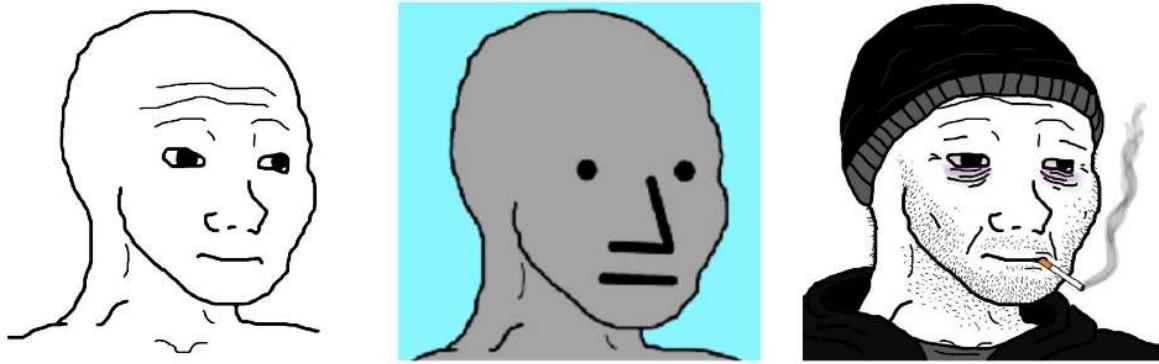


Fig. 7: Wojak, the original character drawing. Fig. 8: The NPC and fig. 9: Doomer are mutations using the same outlines that actualize the meaning of Wojak.

been remixed into variations such as the grey-skinned The NPC⁹¹ with his simplistic features of two dots as eyes, a straight line for a mouth, and a two-side triangle for a nose, [8] generally used to represent people not thinking for themselves and just doing what others do, or the nihilistic Doomer (short for doomsday prepper, somebody who is preparing for the end of the world) which adds a black hoodie and cap, a smoking cigarette, a three-day beard, and dark circles under the eyes to Wojak [9] in order to signify someone who has no further zest for life. We will turn towards Wojaks in more detail in chapter 4.4. Lastly, in order to classify as an Internet meme, the object of analysis had to be accessed via the Internet as well as been circulated by many Internet users, not just one author.

It seems that Shifman was extra careful not to use biological vocabulary for her definition of Internet memes, which accounts for her greatest contribution to meme studies being their recontextualization in the social and cultural sciences. Although this made it much easier for researchers to engage with Internet memes on a determinate and specific level, it also reinforces the binary opposition of nature and culture by situating memes as purely cultural products. In a post-anthropocentric reading, Shifman's approach is an inversion of Dawkins' *The Selfish Gene*: While the latter tried to copy and paste the logic of evolution from evolutionary biology to cultural studies, the former tries to define memes as cultural products avoiding any resemblance to biological models. This is very apparent in her discussion of two common understandings of memes, the meme-as-virus and the meme-as-gene. Terms like 'viral videos' suggest a kind of epidemiological approach to memes and refer to them as infectious germs in the meme-as-virus metaphor, but instead of causing a viral disease, the memetic virus nests in the Internet's immune system. However, Shifman criticizes this approach for mistaking Internet users as incapable of acting and agrees with Henry Jenkins that "this metaphor has been used

⁹¹ The abbreviation NPC stands for non-playable character and denotes the characters in a video game that cannot be controlled by the player. Often times, their animations loop endlessly and they may only utter the same sentence over and over again. On the Internet, the term is used for people acting subservient or 'sheep-like', while it has been used first by users on the right-wing spectrum to insult more progressive users, by 2023, it has become a common insult used across all communities.



Fig. 10: *Doge* became a beloved meme character thanks to this photo where the Shiba Inu looks partially surprised yet somewhat concerned. The image has unfixed captions in the unpopular Comic Sans font type.

exposed to a popular TikTok sound will probably agree—is very similar to a viral infection, as are some of the memes that took the Internet by storm and have become so widespread like the sassy Shiba Inu known as *Doge*. [10] Since its first appearance in 2013, *Doge* has not only produced a whole taxonomy of *Doge* meme remixes including the neologisms doggo, doggerino, and pupper, but entered our use of language and even inspired a form of cryptocurrency, Dogecoin. So, while the imaginary of a helpless and passive person being overrun by viruses might not be the best metaphor, there are some behaviors akin to viruses that somewhat acknowledge this theory. The meme-as-gene allegory, on the other hand, is taken over by Shifman directly from Dawkins. Shifman's critique is directed at the abundant, sometimes arbitrary adopting of biological mechanisms as memetic metaphors. She argues that not only do memes act quite differently than genes, but a reductionist approach toward culture narrows the complexity of it. Finally, Shifman states 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."⁹³ While I completely agree with Shifman's stance on the reductionist analogy of the meme-as-gene approach, I do not comply with her statement that biological metaphors for Internet memes are completely unjustified. As shown above, Dawkins did have another motivation than Shifman when writing *The Selfish Gene*. However, Shifman also tries to circumvent the usage of biological metaphors out of preference. In her case, it is due to the fact of establishing a theory of memes from a sociocultural perspective. In my opinion, this might not account for a thorough understanding of the phenomena of mutation and adaption. In fact, memes behave a lot like biological agents—

in a problematic way, conceptualizing people as helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination of meaningless media 'snacks' that infect their minds."⁹² While I agree to an extent that users are way more involved in the emergence, circulation, and mutation of Internet memes than the meme-as-virus analogy suggests, I cannot deny that memes do act viral as well. For example, not being able to resist once you get a catchy song stuck in your head—anybody who has ever been

⁹² Shifman 2014, 11.

⁹³ Shifman 2014, 12.

maybe not like genes or viruses, but syopoietic organisms undergoing evolution. They are constantly popping up, mingle with one another, cross-breed into symbiotic relations, spontaneously mutate, and produce virtually unlimited offspring. Moreover, self-limiting to one field only is not an appropriate strategy to cover phenomena rooted in between disciplines. Memes are not only cultural or only biological; instead, memes should be understood as the hybrid agents of biology, technology, and culture that they are. This means that we should not define memes as media or as pure phenomena, but as self-sufficient subjects that emerge and mutate. Instead of opposing biological and cultural or technological evolution, I understand them as living beings mediating between the alleged contradictions. This is why I am interested in the onto-ethical theories of living of critical posthumanism: I understand them as a model for analyzing the ways in which beings relate to one another. The proponents of critical posthumanism stand out due to their reconciliation with matter, a direct critique of the disembodied theories of social constructivism, especially in a feminist and postcolonial context. In the introduction to the volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, editors Diana Coole and Samantha Frost state:

Our existence depends from one moment to the next on myriad micro-organisms and diverse higher species, on our own hazily understood bodily and cellular reactions and on pitiless cosmic motions, on the material artifacts and natural stuff that populate our environment, as well as on socioeconomic structures that produce and reproduce the conditions of our everyday lives.⁹⁴

The field of New Materialism is characterized primarily by interdisciplinarity across all fields, heterogeneity of agents, and process-oriented and systemic thinking. As we have seen before, many posthuman theories are concerned with an ontological definition of subjects, and, in further respect, the definition of life. Remember also, although many of the theories overlap and complement each other, there is no officially recognized theory of living in critical posthumanism. When talking about life in New Materialism, we 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 basis of inclusion and exclusion that is exhausted rather quickly: Many creatures that only partly succumb to these requirements are not considered alive, like viruses, while there is also the possibility to lose or having never been born with the possibility to procreate—are these beings therefore not alive? In summary, the definition of living in critical posthumanism corresponds to a systemic process of heterogenous agents that create a livable habitat or co-dependent eco-system, as extensively demonstrated by Braidotti: “Life is 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

⁹⁴ Coole, Frost 2010, 1.

understanding.”⁹⁵ In critical posthumanism, biological definitions of life (or surviving) more often than not coincide with the ethical implications for living. In my understanding, this concourse of circumstances is intentional: On the one hand, posthumanism seeks to reposition the human as part of their environment, which itself is an ethical undertaking; on the other hand, because of the agency-oriented premises of many of these philosophies, there is simply no way around ethics when taking action. According to thinkers like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, a great deal of the 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, but also as the basic reference for the development of pharmaceuticals—we have to take into account the intricate and multiple perspectives of non-humans 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 a species with varying levels of liability, agency and privileges, are recursively creating. This is especially regarded 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.”⁹⁶ Since technology has become such a huge and explicit part of our daily life, it heavily influences our understanding of life itself. 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, I observe this in a kind of hopelessness towards the development of art and culture, especially with due regard of artificial intelligence, the degeneration of artistic skills, 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 the Silicon Valley, downright perfectly exemplified by the advertised cage fight between Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, may advocate blanket surveillance, personalized advertising algorithms, technology-based warfare, and the general rejection of any humanistic and physical values in favor of uploading one’s consciousness into the matrix. I am a strong advocate of another direction calling for a critical attitude towards new technologies. I think the total abolition of social media or assistive technologies is unrealistic and undesirable, instead, we need more critical reflections of their creation, biases, and exploration, and a timely regulation instead of aimless bans. Over the following pages, I will return to the theories of the posthuman subject in order to derive an ontology of the memetic subject or Internet memes. Considering the

⁹⁵ Braidotti 2019, 45.

⁹⁶ Braidotti 2013, 58.

processual understanding of these subjects, this will mostly concentrate on their doing which is the forming of sympoietic bonds.

Historically, the turning point in evolutionary biology most important for this thesis is marked by Lynn Margulis' endosymbiosis theory (from here on abbreviated as SET). For good reasons, many theories of critical posthumanism take this as a foundation, a tradition I would like to endorse herewith. Generally, endosymbiosis understands collaboration across different species as the driving force behind evolution—in contrast to a lot of interpretations of Darwin's theory of natural selection, which are based on competition. Many Darwinists, including Richard Dawkins and his syndicate known as 'The Four Horsemen of Atheism', interpret survival as a struggle that made enemies of all involved. When Charles Darwin first published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he suggested that life behaves according to the principles of natural selection.⁹⁷ 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, a 19th century economist, who had a formative influence on the idea of 'survival of the fittest'. Malthus postulated that population grows in a geometrical way while food production grows in an arithmetic fashion, which will lead to insufficient resources in the long run leading to famine and poverty, ultimately dictating the struggle for survival.⁹⁸ Although never introduced by Darwin as a competitive imperative, the insufficient receptions of evolution boiled it down to the idea of 'survival of the fittest', where 'fittest' became synonymous with the strongest or most dominant. This is problematic due the need for metaphors in biology: in conjunction with dominant relations of power, this interpretation of 'survival of the fittest' legitimates individualist desires resulting in dog-eat-dog societies, thus reciting narratives that block out the coming-together of different species.⁹⁹ 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 were bred out of the research on racism in the 19th century abused for political purposes that ultimately resulted in the most horrible deeds of humanity.

The 'survival of the fittest' therefore does not mean that only the fittest will survive, but is relationally bound to the habitat of living beings: Those that are well adapted to their environment are more likely to survive and thus pass on their genes. This is famously explained with the thirteen different species of the so-called Darwin Galapagos finches:¹⁰⁰ During his big

⁹⁷ Darwin 1859, 126-127.

⁹⁸ See Malthus 1989.

⁹⁹ Many feminist analyses of the history of medicine see the logic of 'the survival of the fittest' as clearly intertwined with patriarchal conceptions of the 'universal' man. See Hossein 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Darwin 1859, 397-398 and Darwin 1845, 380.

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 respectively lose traits according to their habitat while the birds spread across the archipelago. For example, let's imagine the finches set first on the first island: Here, they tend to feed on seeds from the ground, which makes it especially handy to have a short but strong beak. All the finches with such formed beaks will be well-fed and healthy, therefore more likely to reproduce. The finches with weak or narrow beaks on the other hand won't have an easy time to feed and therefore have less offspring. Thus, the traits that are most adapted to the environment will be handed down and soon determine the appearance of the whole species—over a very long period of time, of course. Perhaps at a later point, some finches decide to explore the neighboring islands. To their astonishment, the new island does not offer enough seeds on the ground—but instead is home to some delicious cacti! However, these cacti come with a durable peel, requiring a long, pointy beak in order to pierce these fruits. Therefore, the genetic lottery rolls again: The finches with the most practical beaks are able to gather more food and have more offspring, therefore, the most important trait for this second island is different from the first one. This is how Darwin described the process of natural selection: The better you suit your environment, the more dominant your traits become. This also draws a contingent relation between an organism and its environment, a premise that will become fundamental to ecological theory. Nevertheless, this definition of natural selection does not imply anything really except for a co-dependent relation between organism and environment. Is novelty in evolution always connected to the habitat? Is competition—in the finches' case, competing over food sources—the only motivation behind change? A situated reading of *On the Origin of Species* and Darwin's life uncovers all kinds of oddities: For instance, that his field of study (after an attempt at medical school) 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 legacy of the French Revolution, Enlightenment philosophy, and the onset of industrialization—in short, during Early Modernism. This is also the time of flourishing Capitalism, new technological innovations patented every other day, the beginning of automatization, and the forming of separate scientific disciplines. In this regard, Charles 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.¹⁰¹ Therefore, Darwin's theories on natural selection are not objective, but heavily influenced by early Capitalism, improvement through competition and the conviction that humans are able to 'discover' all the big secrets of nature and finally draft a theory of everything, as well as typical anxieties of this time such as overpopulation, the limitedness of resources, and the primitive-civilized binary opposition.

In *The Selfish Gene*, on the other hand, Dawkins walks into the trap of abstracting life from living beings: He postulates that life is nothing more than the hereditary transfer of genes throughout bodies which is why he calls them 'selfish'. But if genes only actualize the teleology of Life itself, is this not yet another projection of anthropocentrism? Additionally, 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 criticizes:

My point of view—or pov—in this examination of perspective technologies is that of the chief actor and point of origin in the drama of life itself—the gene. The pov of the gene gives me a curious vertigo that I blame on the god-like perspective of my autotelic entity. Recursive autocontemplation of the self-same could be responsible for more than dizziness. The gene is the subject of the portraits and maps of life itself in the terminal narrative technology proper to the end of the Second Millennium. Sociobiologist Richard Dawkins, another source of inspiration for the Maxis? game-makers, explained that the body is merely the gene's way to make more copies of itself, in a sense, to contemplate its own image. If that is not only slightly heretical Christian theology, I am not genetically Catholic. "Evolution is the external and visible manifestation of the differential survival of alternative replicators. Genes are replicators; organisms and groups of organisms ... are vehicles in which replicators travel about" (Dawkins 1982:82) Mere living flesh is derivate; the gene is the alpha and omega of the secular salvation drama of life itself. This is barely secular Christian Platonism. As always, ensconced in a generically less than mature, if aging, marked body, I am consumed with curiosity about the regions where the lively subject becomes the undead thing.¹⁰²

Haraway identifies the paradox uttered by Dawkins to view genes as something other than part of oneself; after all, genes are a part of the body. Thus, it seems absurd to claim with the very body Dawkins's is speaking from—that is, his body including his genes—would work against himself respectively have their own plan of salvation. In fact, as Haraway argues, this point of view resembles a form of Christian eschatology: Thanks to the developments of technoscience, the gene becomes an immaterial symbol for Life itself, *using* the body to create more life. Dawkins' firm dualism draws an transhumanist understanding of a disposable body merely necessary to be located in this world and the inexhaustible source of life promising to recreate itself indefinitely across all material processes of decay. As remarked by Haraway, this is

¹⁰¹ For example, in *The Descent of Man*, 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." Darwin 1871, 35.

¹⁰² Haraway 1997, 133.

Platonian respectively Christian dogmatics all over again, with the body once again becoming a devalued object necessary to overcome while the genes are viewed as transcendental and unattainable for the dirty body 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—what a saddening view! What a neglect of all the joyous, surprising, queer ways of life situated outside the genetic code! If life's only purpose is, as Dawkins claims, really to just pass on genes, where does evolution happen? It's hard to imagine any form of alterity with the selfish gene—which is absurd, since creativity and cooperation are behind the complex relations of all life forms.

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.

In contrast to the ‘selfish’ gene, Margulis’ understanding of life knows no boundaries and pours out sometimes here and sometimes there, but always on the base of cooperative processes. Much later, Haraway creates from this the term of *sympoiesis*: “*Sympoiesis* is about making-with, becoming-with, rather than self-making through appropriation of everything as resource.”¹⁰³ The theory of endosymbiosis proposes that evolution hinges upon the mergence and collaboration of individual organisms to become more complex. In general, *sympoiesis* rests on the trajectory established by symbiosis, or “the system in which members of different species live in physical contact”¹⁰⁴. Margulis demonstrated the theory using the evolution of eukaryotic cells: ‘Regular’ theories of evolution state how the cell has evolved into a more complicated being by developing certain features. We can imagine them as organs with a specific task: 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. In general, classic evolutionary theory traces a hierarchical approach, starting with something simple that produces more complex combinations over time. In SET, however, the idea is a bit different:¹⁰⁵ Margulis argues for a horizontal approach where organisms don’t evolve hierarchically, but mix and mingle every here and there to create new species. Her groundbreaking work on the cell argues that the different parts of the cell were actually individual protozoans that came together to form a new superorganism. What sounds reminiscent of science fiction tropes is actually a gathering and

¹⁰³ Haraway 2018, 68.

¹⁰⁴ Margulis 1998, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Margulis, Sagan 2000, 57-113.

joining of different species of bacteria and protozoans. In the case of the eukaryotic cell, it all started with an archaeabacterium, a protozoon fond of sulphur 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 happily inside the other. They get on really well and procreate a lot, and when they do so, they pass on both their genes, thus creating a new form of cell: the common ancestor of all animals, plants, and fungi. Equipped with an engulfing membrane, a nucleus containing DNA, an endoplasmic reticulum necessary for moving, and the mitochondrion, this ancient protist could not do much more than eating and swimming. It definitely could not leave the water since oxygen proved to be poisonous for it—a trait telling us about the very different conditions of living on this planet such a long time ago. Some of these protists found another bacterium that is actually able to breathe oxygen. It joins the protist party and suddenly makes a whole new environment accessible to the cell. In the next evolutionary step, they continue to reproduce insanely but struggle to digest photosensitive bacteria. By now, you should have an idea what happens next: Invite the cyanobacteria to the protist and create a whole new set of species, swimming algae! This final DNA merger makes the protist so successful that it still hangs out all over the planet—and is the common ancestor of all plants.¹⁰⁶ In fact, all cells, that is, all complex living beings can be linked to this last universal common ancestor (also known as LUCA) in a tree diagram. This highlights how our very own evolution is more of a result of queer bacterial sex instead of a logical sequence getting more and more complex. If we fast forward to the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, we are not looking at an individual, but a super complicated network of more than 39 trillion organisms in every single human being. Margulis therefore refers to us as “symbionts” instead of individuals. The term symbiogenesis refers to creation of a new species through merging. In her book *Symbiotic Planet*, she writes: “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.”¹⁰⁷

Here, we can already see some similarities to the behavior of memes: Just like early single-celled organisms, memes live by circulating on the Internet and mutating at every possible point. So-called cross-over memes are not uncommon: known memes or meme characters simply appear or are 'fed' into new memes. [11] The result is like a mix of popular and new formats that form new relations with one another. In other cases, different variations of the same 'original' meme emerge and evolve differently, ultimately blurring the lines between the meme and its habitat. This is the tragic story of Pepe the Frog, for example: Originally created

¹⁰⁶ Margulis, Sagan 2000, 98.

¹⁰⁷ Margulis 1998, 33.

as part of a comic strip, the green frog with the goggly eyes quickly became a darling of the Internet. [12] Numerous variations from crying Pepe to smirking Pepe could be found on every corner of the Internet. Although Pepe originally came from a California stoner comic by Matt Furie, his success has also led to great popularity in the politically opposed US-American Alt Right community.¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, it didn't take long for there to be numerous racist, white supremacist, and anti-semitic mutations of Pepe including a version modeled after Donald Trump with a yellow lard curl. [13] In 2016, Pepe was ultimately added to the Anti Defamation League's list of hate symbols, but as of today, most of the Internet reconciled with the frog meme. The discussion of Pepe's evolution from meme to hate symbol and back will be elaborated in chapter 4.4., for now, I am illustrating how multiple, contradictory versions of the same original meme can co-exist simultaneously. In this case, Pepe from the comic was the LUCA and all his subsequent iterations were mutations of it.

As mentioned before, 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:



Fig. 11: Example of a cross-over meme including the templates *Are Ya Winning Son?* and *Always Has Been* and the characters of *Hide the Pain Harold*, *Jake the Dog*, and *Yes Chad*, among others.

¹⁰⁸ See Jones 2020.



Fig. 12: Sad Pepe version, Fig. 13: alt-right version of Smug Pepe with former U.S. president Trump's characteristics.

Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means “making-with.” Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer “world game,” earthlings are never alone. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis. Sympoiesis is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.¹⁰⁹

First of all, sympoiesis is a mutation of autopoiesis, a term coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela in the 1970s to describe living beings as systems. SET is closely related to the concept of autopoiesis, which translates to self-production, and is characterized by the hypothesis that the producer and the product are in-exchangeable: “The being and doing of an autopoietic unity are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization.”¹¹⁰ Instead of a list of attributes an organism needs to fulfill in order to be deemed alive, the dynamic model of autopoiesis makes its doing the subject of its existence. Quite literally, *life becomes living*. 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.¹¹¹

As mentioned before, there is a great emphasis on living respectively doing in the idea of sympoiesis. Haraway states that she took the term from M. Beth Dempster where it is used “for ‘collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries. Information and control are distributed among components. The systems are evolutionary and

¹⁰⁹ Haraway 2016, 58.

¹¹⁰ Maturana, Varela 1987, 49.

¹¹¹ Margulis, Sagan 2000, 14.

have the potential for surprising change.' By contrast, autopoietic systems are 'self-producing' autonomous units 'with self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries that tend to be centrally controlled, homeostatic, and predictable."¹¹² This means that an autopoietic unit is clearly demarcated from its environment, which does not leave enough space to account for mutation. The dynamics are easier to comprehend from a sympoietic perspective: "Dempster argued that many systems are mistaken for autopoietic that are really sympoietic. I think this point is important for thinking about rehabilitation (making livable again) and sustainability amid the porous tissues and open edges of damaged but still ongoing living worlds, like the planet earth and its denizens in current times being called the Anthropocene. If it is true that neither biology nor philosophy any longer supports the notion of independent organisms in environments, that is, interacting units plus contexts/rules, then sympoiesis is the name of the game in spades."¹¹³ First of all, the dynamic definition of sympoiesis makes it easier to describe singular events in the processual flow of being since static definitions are of no use here. Secondly, these systems may appear autonomous, but that is only the case if you take on the role of the observer. The agents in a sympoietic system all depend on one another in ways that are not predictable. Thirdly, in contrast to autopoiesis, sympoiesis accounts for evolutionary alterations. Due to new combinations, sudden shocks or happy accidents, sympoietic units are able to change at any time. This is not necessarily the case for autopoietic units that cannot account for structural change due to their seclusion.

Such systemic models tracing back to models of a cybernetic feedback loop that have the advantage of dissolving the border between inside and outside due to the necessary requirement of constant input. Instead of demarcating certain points in time and space, they privilege the endless process of transformations by feeding every output back into the system. This exchange is at the very heart of ecological thinking as well as machine learning. In a stunning scene in the movie *Symbiotic Earth*, Margulis visits a beach at Delta de Ebro, Spain, to show off bacterial mats.¹¹⁴ These micro-eco-systems are made up of cyanobacteria which Margulis calls the highest level of evolution because they solely live off sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide. They live in symbiosis with purple sulphur bacteria, feeding on what the other species produces in waste. They demonstrate the circular model perfectly: a system that neither requires unnecessary resources nor produces any form of waste. However, they depend on homoeostasis or self-regulation, which means that there is only a certain threshold of activity that can be tolerated without the system collapsing. Since species might seem to stay constant from a human's perspective with a life span of approximately 70-100 years, we tend to believe that life is static. This becomes problematic when shifting to a geological perspective or deep

¹¹² Haraway 2016, 33.

¹¹³ Haraway 2016, 33.

¹¹⁴ See Feldman 2017.

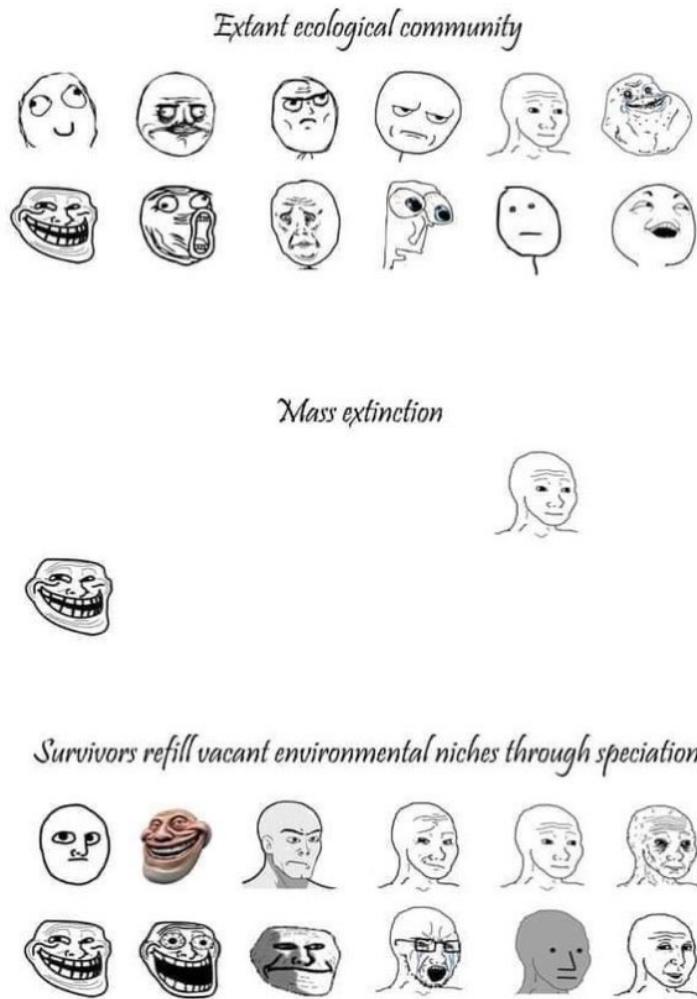


Fig. 14: Meme on extinction. The top shows the biodiversity of rage comics in the early 2000s, with many of them falling into oblivion and only Wojak and Trollface surviving. These gave birth to a new generation referred to as Wojak variations. Although Wojak was created around the same time as rage comics, they technically have never met in memes or comics but are two separated families. Since the late 2010s, Wojak variations have taken over the niches left by rage comics.

time, where the first forms of life have appeared around 4 billion years ago: how to understand the big jumps in evolution mostly propelled by mass extinctions when the system of life is supposed to stay in balance? Since species are constantly evolving, mutating and exchanging with environmental circumstances, we need an understanding of life that is more dynamic than a ‘classic’ cybernetic feedback loop. This is also what we can observe in the rapid development of machine learning and digital technology as well as in memes. In fact, memes also undergo extinction: The aforementioned Wojak meme appeared around 2010, roughly the same time of rage comics, very popular character doodles with distinct properties. Since Wojak only really rose to popularity in the mid-2010s, the meme evolved in conjunction with rage comics. Over the years, Wojak comics devoured and substituted the other characters that slowly disappeared from daily usage. [14] Due to their intertwinement with living beings and the environment, our

systems are cyborgs by default. Understanding life as a system ultimately abolishes binary concepts and dichotomies such as nature and culture, or the natural and the artificial, human and non-human through their mutual entanglements: instead of either/or, the operating logic is additive, multiple and non-hierarchical. Instead of opposing biological life to virtual life, we need to stop differentiating between them and refer to them as one, or on-life, so to speak. As stated by Margulis, landscape and computers are made of the very same materials—how else would they come into existence on our planet? Just because there has been so much effort by technoscientific companies to promote digital technologies like clouds as ‘clean’ and ‘safe’ and ‘immaterial’ does not mean that we have to buy into this concealment. We know that server farms are inhabiting caverns and glacial caves together with other plants, animals, and fungi. We know that ‘the Internet’ is not a cloud up in the sky, but materialized in glass fibre cables buried on the ocean ground and regularly attacked by fish and other critters. Closing our eyes in front of these inter-connections won’t make them go away, it will just make it harder to face the problems that technology (co-)causes.

So far, we have seen that sympoiesis does not know of the dichotomy of inside and outside or, to put it more precisely, has no static understanding of these extremes. Because it is always possible to engulf or merge with something else, boundaries are generally porous and situational. This is in stark contrast to the theory of autopoiesis, which hinges on the differentiation of inside and outside and, therefore, on a premise of individualism. This is exactly why Haraway is so fond of Margulis’ theory: It gives us a framework to think and narrate the story of life from a different perspective. When in the past, individual unfolding at any cost was the desired turn, we now need 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.” The etymological proximity to holism—a long-runner of ecological theory—should not be understood as an egalitarian interpretation of we-are-all-one. Instead, Haraway clarifies:

Rather, in polytemporal, polyspatial knottings, holobionts hold together contingently and dynamically, engaging other holobionts in complex patternings. Critters do not precede their relatings; they make each other through semiotic material involution, out of the beings of previous such entanglements. [...] Like Margulis, I use holobiont to mean symbiotic assemblages, at whatever scale of space or time, which are more like knots of diverse intra-active relatings in dynamic complex systems, than like the entities of a biology made up of preexisting bounded units (genes, cells, organisms, etc.) in interactions that can only be conceived as competitive or cooperative.¹¹⁵

Holobionts act as the knots in a knitted pullover with perhaps different species holding each other to create new patterns. Like autopoietic units, they are autonomous, self-created, without

¹¹⁵ Haraway 2016, 60.

pulling a God trick¹¹⁶ to explain their origins. They escape a clear definition as subjects or objects through never-ending alterations in their constitution. The only thing holding them together is their symbiotic relation—without it, we would all be dispersed across time and space and never able to form anything more complex or meaningful than a protozoon. Recalling the meaning of symbiosis itself, as there have been some confusions over the value of such relations, symbiosis simply means ‘living-with’ and does not imply a win-win relation. The same goes for parasitism, a neologism of Medieval Europe referring to the Greek expression ‘parasitos’ meaning ‘one who eats at the table from another’. Colloquially, we use the word symbiotic for a relationship with mutual benefits and parasitism for a situation where one triumphs over the other. But sympoiesis does not know this differentiation—which seems very logical concerning that a judgment of a situation always requires a ‘rational’ subject in the first place. We can take the wind out of symbiosis’ sails by stating that first, we are talking about relations, secondly, we can refer to them as good or bad ones. Instead of judging, Haraway urges us to practice thinking-with:

To think-with is to stay with the naturalcultural multispecies trouble on earth. There are no guarantees, no arrow of time, no Law of History or Science or Nature in such struggles. There is only the relentlessly contingent SF worlding of living and dying, of becoming-with and unbecoming-with, of sympoiesis, and so, just possibly, of multispecies flourishing on earth.¹¹⁷

Here, we can find one of the clues to Haraway’s idea of living: The titular ‘Staying with the Trouble’ refers to a form of practice with the multispecies assemblage of beings on this planet. Instead of systemizing and taxonomizing living beings, we should mingle with them, become-with them, take part in the infinite play of evolution on this planet. Behold, this does not account for some kind of ‘primitivism’ or illusionary return-to-nature! We should keep in mind that first and foremost, we are naturalcultural holobionts not superior to any other form of life. We should withstand the easiness of instructing and mobilizing others and instead make-with, learn-with, and think-with them. In a way, this is exactly what we have been doing with memes: Somebody creates a meme, puts it on the Internet where it may find its way to other people or not. If it does, other people get infected by its idea, using their technological entanglements with hardware and platforms to further spread it. Somebody might induce a spontaneous evolution, thus remixing the meme before spreading it again. The meme then continues to live on, might become an inside joke for a group of people or might become part of a series or a work of art. In any way, memes may only undergo evolution in conjunction with someone else. It does not matter at all that memes are not human, in fact, the technological mediations of people on social media are not really human either. They mingle with filters and memes and photoshop,

¹¹⁶ In earlier works, Haraway uses the notion of the God trick to refer to allegedly objective, disembodied theories that are not situated and therefore ‘float’ around like a God-like creature. See Haraway 1997, 134ff.

¹¹⁷ Haraway 2016, 40.

they have their own language and writing and manners. But this is not an invention of the Internet, it only affirms the inhuman inside that genetics has been speculating on for a while: Since the findings of the Human Genome Project, researchers have identified more and more genomes that are not ‘originally’ human, but have been obtained through horizontal gene transfer from a variety of species.¹¹⁸ This is in line with the rhizomatic writings of Deleuze and Guattari: “It is the brain that says I, but I is another.”¹¹⁹ 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. So, in addition to understanding life as a systemic process, and in order to fully address all the operational agents participating in the great assemblage of life including memes, it is crucial to adopt a relational way of thinking. This 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 buying comes from. Relational thinking emphasizes the manifold connections between agents, for example, in Karen Barad’s suggestion of intra-agency.

Recalling the materialist ontology of agential realism, phenomena emerge into existence through intra-action when different agents meet. What makes this theory so compelling is that it treats the seclusion of subjects and objects as 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 with time and space. Of course, 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 this 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 the 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.¹²⁰

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 human being ‘begins’ with birth and ‘ends’ with death, it is created from the mass of particles and will again return to it. The idea of agential cuts is also valid for historical phenomena: For example, in school, I learned that the French Revolution took place in 1789. Realistically, this is already a stark abstraction: The French Revolution has been contemplated, planned, and

¹¹⁸ See Crisp, Boschetti, Perry et al. 2015.

¹¹⁹ Deleuze, Guattari 1994, 211.

¹²⁰ Barad 2007, 333-334.



Fig. 15: Dawson Crying because of dial-up modems.

executed years before the storming of the Bastille and went on for many more years after it. But historiography likes to abstract events to a single date, which again contributes to our opaque understanding of actual historical events. The same is true for memes since most popular memes have been on the Internet for years before going viral: The image macro *Dawson Crying* is a still from the teen show Dawson's Creek showing the main character's ugly crying face. [15] The episode aired in 2000 and the still had been circulated as a meme on the Internet since 2006. Dawson Crying only gained in popularity after 2011 when the image macro was added to the website Meme Generator, thus 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.”¹²¹

Perhaps technology is also of such great interest because the evolutionary changes are most visible in their relation to biology, whether concerning transgenic organisms, robotic prostheses or in-vitro-fertilization. Additionally, technological advancements have always greatly affected living beings, for example, nationwide implementations of vaccinations or the breakthrough of aerial travel resulting in global mass tourism. I believe that memes have a big impact on our understanding of communication and entertainment, too. This contingent relation between humans and technology is also discussed by Barad:

Machines will generate new life; life will be reworked. The nanoscale is the scale of life processes, and the combination of computational nanotechnology and bio-nanotechnology foretells the possibilities of neuroelectronic interfaces that use nanodevices to join computers to the human nervous system. With one hand on a computer mouse and an eye to the future, not only do we make changes to configurations of individual atoms, but the very nature of who ‘we’ are begins to shift. Our imaginations, bodies, desires, organizational structures of research and investment, and

¹²¹ Barad 2007, 339.

much more quake with the expectation of the impending "nano-tsunami" that portends immense changes to life on earth and beyond.¹²²

Without resorting to transhumanist fantasies, I do agree with Barad that any establishment of technological tools are contingent with human evolution and therefore shape us in the same way that we shaped them. This is because with every intra-action—and especially global intra-actions affecting many people—the cards are being shuffled anew. Every intra-action influences my view on everything because with it comes a whole new set of virtualities and consequences. This line of thinking also shows why ethics plays such a big part in critical post-humanism. Let us revisit the urge for theorizing a memetic subject by reading Braidotti's demands for posthuman theories:

The first is to develop a dynamic and sustainable notion of vitalist, self-organizing materiality; the second is to enlarge the frame and scope of subjectivity along the transversal lines of post-anthropocentric relations I outlined in the previous section. The idea of subjectivity as an assemblage that includes non-human agents has a number of consequences. Firstly, it implies that subjectivity is not the exclusive prerogative of *anthropos*; secondly, that it is not linked to transcendental reason; thirdly, that it is unhinged from the dialectics of recognition; and lastly, that it is based on the immanence of relations. The challenge for critical theory is momentous: we need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole, and to do so within an understandable language.¹²³

When we think of memes as part of our living assemblage, it's not the memes that suddenly become alive, but we as people also become materialized. This amounts to an approach that was unthinkable just a few decades ago. 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 dies like us, and we experience our respective changes step by step. Our sympoietic life happens partly offline, but increasingly online. Technology is not in itself a positive or negative development, just as biological life is not good or bad. This makes it all the more important to use it responsibly and to focus less on our differences and more on our similarities. In her work on xenofeminism, Helen Hester discusses the mutuality of society and technology:

The relationship between technology and social relations is complex, mutually shaping, dynamic, and dependent upon continuous conversation. Shifts in one area will influence the evolution of the other, which in turn feedbacks into further developments, in an ongoing process of co-constitution. Technology is as social as society is technical.¹²⁴

Social responsibility is analogous to technological responsibility. Memes serve as a starting point to reflect on our common behavior, not just online, but in a Frankenstein-esque liability toward living among our own creations. This will be all the more relevant concerning the universal

¹²² Barad 2007, 363.

¹²³ Braidotti 2013, 82.

¹²⁴ Hester 2018, 10-11.

application of technological devices in education, medicine, infrastructure, mobility, and care work. Memes seem like a great example for such an analysis because of their sympoietic character which acts very similar to human behavior. As we have seen in this chapter, memes form an assemblage with the people who create and circulate them which can be seen in the references to pop culture and the news, the technocapitalistic platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok memes inhabit, the server farms saving their data, the cables under the sea transmitting them from one point to another, the satellites in the orbit receiving electromagnetic signals, the devices we use to retrieve memes including all the extracted minerals from the planet we need, our shared language, the policies and laws we enforce to control access, the cultural conventions determining our humor, the myriad of cats, corgis, and other pets posing for images, and probably many more agents employing agential cuts generating ‘one’ meme. Concerning our shared ability to emerge, mutate, reproduce, and even go extinct, memes are part of the vitalist assemblage we call life and should therefore be handled with ethics and care.

2.3. Pre-Internet Memes and Memetic Techniques

Writing the history of memes is equal to writing on the evolution of memes, or piecing-together a narrative that seeks to acquire meaning from all the emergences, mutations, and deaths that have occurred to them. This chapter discusses the practice of memeing before the Internet in order to gain a better understanding of how memes have found their way onto the internet using Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s theory of remediation. First, it is necessary to repeat what I refer to when using the term ‘meme’: a material intra-action cut by sympoietic agents prone to imitation and mutation. This can be a captioned image, a melodic catchphrase, a political movement, or something completely else. Most importantly, the meme proliferates by sharing, whether in a humorous way like an inside-joke or simply a collective experience among a community like a happening. In this regard, memes have been around for far longer than the internet, and, as discussed in the fields of memetics, have had a deep impact on our own evolution. Although I am focusing on internet memes in this thesis, memes have existed way before that as manifestations of a specific form of humor and have been remediated on the Internet. The second part of this chapter summarizes memetic techniques or the strategies employed by sympoietic agents to form a meme, for example, images, viral videos, shitposting, and so on. It is important to note that these sympoietic agents on their own do not constitute a meme; *their meetings do*.

In a systemic ontology of process, things are constantly changing. But some memes seem to never change: For example, the simple drawing consisting of 6 straight lines and 6 diagonal lines colloquially known as *Cool S* or *Stussy S* passed around by students has stayed pretty much the same since the 1970s. Its origins are unknown, although it can be traced all the

way back to a geometry textbook from 1890.¹²⁵ But even if we place its emergence in the second half of the 20th century, it quickly became popular in the graffiti scene and was also adapted by artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat. I myself remember drawing the Cool S all over my textbooks in school, although I cannot explain why—which is probably the closest definition of how a meme acts that I can give. One thing about it is definitely the simplicity to draw something with the simplest lines possible.¹²⁶ The haptic satisfaction of drawing the lines themselves, the pencil strokes brushing the paper, could also speak for its popularity. Although the Cool S might still be drawn in the same way for decades, its contextualization has changed significantly: From subcultural graphic design to high art to becoming a symbol for a meme itself. Even if the drawing stayed the same, the history and context of the Cool S altered its meaning and will continue to do so. Therefore, the most important aspect of any meme is its possibility to mutate, which is something that has become even more prominent with memes on the Internet. This lies in their specific sympoietic structure as discussed in the previous chapter: As part of a sympoietic system, the meme is inclined to change as anything else within that system changes. Since the structure of the system is relational and agential, any difference can potentially change the meme. This is due to the mutually dependent relationship between memes and their environment: The meme adapts to changes in its environment while the environment is affected by changes in the meme. This adaption of the ecological theory of niche construction ensures the ongoing exchange between the meme and its media habitat. As an example, let us take a look at the phenomenon of censorship on the platform TikTok: Just like any other social media platform, TikTok has distinct as well as opaque, not explicitly mentioned guidelines that determine what kind of content is desired and what is prohibited. These rules vary from platform to platform and are meant to live up to current social norms and expectations —whatever is not well-received in the general public will also be ostracized on the Internet. However, TikTok is quite notorious among its users for its effective and quick censorship especially concerning written text in the videos that results in deletion or bans. While this may be understandable in relation to hate speech and other invocations of violence, the automatic deletion of content due to trigger words reaches its limit in the context of mental health discussions. In fact, any videos linked with words like ‘suicide’, ‘self-harm’, ‘eating disorder’ and similar mentions of psychological vocabulary will be deleted within the blink of an eye. We can speculate whether this has to do with commercial aspects, an aversion toward talking about mental health or the simple fear of triggering reflexes in someone struggling with suicidal thoughts. In any way, TikTok made sure that its users would stop using these words, ultimately censoring their speech and writing. But did all the content on mental health therefore

¹²⁵ LEMMiNO 2019.

¹²⁶ Another example is the German *Haus vom Nikolaus*, a mathematical game to draw a simple house from one polygonal chain.

disappear? No, quite on the contrary: As if to re-validate Foucault's theory of the repressive hypothesis,¹²⁷ users just created ways of circumventing the censorships. The word 'suicide' has been replaced by a variety of more or less similar synonyms: From 's*icide' with an asterisk to the meme-worthy 'suislde' or a completely different wording such as 'unaliving oneself', users successfully implemented variations to their video tags that go undetected by the filtering algorithms. We can see the practice of niche construction in full bloom: The platform's guidelines mutated and endangered the content of it, so the content had to adapt to the new environment before thriving again. As of now, the tags mentioned above are alive and well on the platform; it is necessary to wait and see if new alterations to the censoring algorithms will be made and if yes, how users will once again mutate their content to continue posting.

One important thesis of meme studies is that memes are not an invention of the Internet, but, depending on the definition, can be traced back to the Stone Age. To be more precise, we could also turn the question of 'when did memeing begin?' on its head and ask whether there have been any relationships between humans without memeing. In their broadest sense, memes can also be understood as trends or fashions—but declaring every phenomenon a meme also passes by the urgency for a definition. In the following, we will look at some pre-Internet memes and how they may be classified into a sympoietic understanding of memes.

Often-cited examples of Internet meme predecessors are the various phallus depictions we find in prehistoric cultures, sometimes even before human settlement approximately 11,000 years ago. From the cave paintings in Lascaux to the giant phallic menhirs in Portugal, it is evident that humans (and especially men) have always been very fascinated with the male primary sex organ. But is this obsession enough to count as a sympoietic meme? Besides the fact that it is nearly impossible to analyze the social constellations of these cultures and adequately deduct the relations within, many of these art works were created for another intent than mere entertainment. Often found in conjunction with solar and lunar calendars, the paintings may have served as entities to structure a year and mark times of prosperity. Other interpretations suggest that the depiction of a male erection could also be a symbol for danger or death, perhaps due to its use in death rituals.¹²⁸ Other media, especially the life-sized phallus sculptures, are speculated to be of medicinal use as models for circumcision, while others may have served as Ancient sex toys. All these purposes imply that although the phallus has been an influential symbol for humans, they are more of a means to an end than mutating, sympoietic assemblages. However, the humorous practice of dick doodling as well as the phallus' appearance in works of art and media attest to its importance in jokes, which are often seized in memes.

¹²⁷ The repressive hypothesis states that discourses around sexuality have been characterized by repression and taboos. See Foucault 1978.

¹²⁸ Angulo 2016.

Another example of Ancient origin is a form of riddle known as the *Sator square*. [16] Further popularized by Christopher Nolan's 2020 film *Tenet*, the *Sator square* is a word matrix with the letters arranged like in a magic square: five words with five letters each arranged accordingly so they can be read horizontally, vertically, and diagonally as well as forwards and backwards. The *Sator square* combines grammatical particularities such as the palindrome displayed in two versions: the *Sator square* and the opposed *Rotas square*. Situated somewhere between wordplay and crossword puzzle, the square reveals the Latin words *SATOR*, *AREPO*, *TENET*, *OPERA*, and *ROTAS* that have been translated as "the sower Arepo holds the wheels with care."¹²⁹ In its Roman context, the earliest *Sator square* found is located in Pompeii dating to sometime before 79 AD. However, it can also be found in Byzantium, Coptic areas in north Africa as well as the Americas before gaining popularity among the Christian community during medieval times. Although heavily researched, the academic community never managed to settle on an origin narrative for the *Sator square*: Some believe it to have been a simple word puzzle in Roman times, others suggest it may have served as a prayer device similarly to rosaries. This theory was popularized during the 1920s when the anagram of the square's letters to *PATERNOSTER* was (re)discovered.¹³⁰ In other theories, the *Sator square* is interpreted as a Jewish symbol due to the cross-like form created by the middle words *TENET*, while others suggest that it may have been part of a doctrine of Stoicism and Pythagoreanism. Even though its original meaning might be lost, people have been enjoying the *Sator square* for the centuries to come, embracing it as a superstitious symbol against illness and bad luck. For example, the square has repeatedly been carved on to clay discs used to extinguish fires, perhaps as a lucky charm. Most interestingly, this suggests that the *Sator square* withstood the test of time even during the periods in history when Latin disappeared as an everyday language. In conclusion, the square has been circulated even though people might not even have understood what the words meant—which is quite absurd for a word puzzle. Perhaps this is why the *Sator square* has been deemed to be "one of the closest things the classical world had to a meme."¹³¹ Again, the heavy use of the *Sator square* in ritualistic settings suggests differently, while the continuing spreading without any apparent connection to its origin does suggest a memetic circulation.

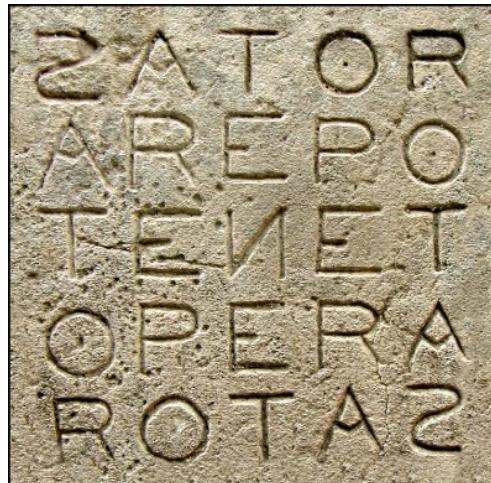


Fig. 16: *Sator square* from a medieval city wall in Oppède-le-Vieux, 14th century.

¹²⁹ Last 1952, 94.

¹³⁰ Griffiths 1971, 6.

¹³¹ Leith 2020.

Here, it would be interesting to further investigate when the Sator square declined and disappeared from the mainstream, thus nowadays qualifying as a dead meme.

The most famous example of pre-Internet memes is a little drawing known as *Kilroy Was Here*. [17] Kilroy was a graffiti left behind by soldiers during World War I and has become a kind of inside joke of the troops. It shows a simplified, cartoon-style drawing of a man with an overtly long nose peeping behind a wall, where he sometimes rests his hands on as if looking over. The drawing, accompanied by the tag line 'Kilroy was here', consists barely of a few lines making it easy to recreate while the character of Kilroy is so simplified that it could be anyone. The graffiti was often found on military ships and shipyards, vehicles, and the walls of bases and outposts of the US-American soldiers. Soon after its appearance, it gained popularity among the soldiers and gave way to a challenge to become the first person to leave behind a Kilroy graffiti in a new place. Kilroy can be seen as a form of explorer clearly marking the territory of the US military in order to demonstrate power, not unlike a dog would do. In the Encyclopaedia of American Folklore is written that Kilroy "has found his way everywhere members of the U.S. armed services travel, from Korea to Kuwait."¹³² The origins of the graffiti remain unclear, although most sources cite the ship inspector James Kilroy as author or at least muse who was hired at the Fore River Shipyard in Massachusetts to supervise the correct assembly of ships. In order to check off all the ships he already inspected and also to prove his progress to his superiors, he allegedly marked the completed sites with the slogan 'Kilroy was here'.¹³³ However, everyone not involved in ship-building did not know about James Kilroy and were thus left with the insight that whoever Kilroy was, he was already here. This is believed to have created the legendary status of the graffiti that ultimately turned it into one of the most well-known memes before the Internet. Similarly to the Sator square, the memetic potential of Kilroy Was Here did not decrease outside of the primary in-group—the soldiers—but in fact made the meme more popular due to the absurdity of Kilroy being everywhere: "He is rumored to adorn a range of places from the Statue of Liberty's torch to the surface of the Moon."¹³⁴ Despite Kilroy's military and colonial roots displaying US-American fantasies of constantly expanding territories, unbound power, and world domination, it counts as one of the only memes before the Internet

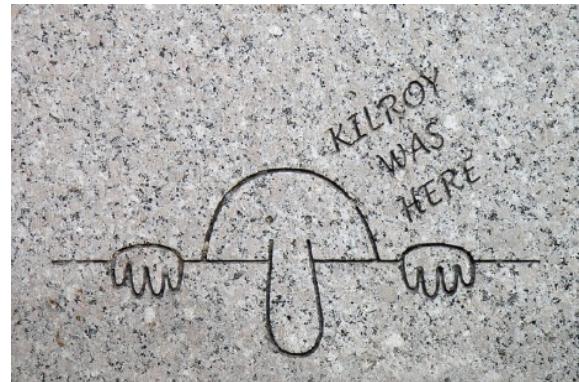


Fig. 17: Engraving of Kilroy Was Here on the National World War II Memorial in Washington, 2004.

¹³² Watts 2020, 268.

¹³³ Shifman 2014, 24.

¹³⁴ Watts 2020, 269.

adhering to the triad of the image macro, a structural relation between image, text, and layout. This means that Kilroy Was Here resembles today's Internet memes a lot more than other memetic media before, which further promotes its success. Easy legibility and simple mimicry combined with the challenge of possibly being the first to mark a 'new' space set Kilroy up to become a viral success that can still be found in cityscapes across the planet.

Another subset of memes that have been around for much longer than the Internet are challenges: Similarly to playing truth or dare, a challenge is a call to action to do something weird or extreme, in most cases. In contrast to fashions and micro trends, a challenge does not necessarily revolve around an accessory, a piece of clothing or a novice device, but can be done right on the spot respectively with everyday utensils. This immediacy is important for its spreading: The parole has to be persuasive yet easy enough that you are able to do it the second you hear about it for the first time. Another aspect is competition: The memetic incentive is not just completing the challenge posted, but doing so in an extraordinary way. In this regard, the mechanism behind memetic challenges is akin to setting up world records and the popularity of publications like the Guinness World Record books. For example, in 1959, so-called *Phone Booth Stuffing* was the latest craze. Living up to its name, the challenge was to fit as many people into one single phone booth as possible. Especially popular among college students, the challenge is believed to have started when 25 students from South Africa crammed into one phone booth.¹³⁵ Soon after, college students all over North America and Europe participated in the challenge and semi-officially documented their efforts. Some student groups also set up specific sets of rules, for example, whether it was allowed to stick out body limbs from the booth or if everything body part had to fit inside. In England, a successful completion of the phone booth challenge required participants to even make a phone call while fully crammed. Meanwhile, news outlets all over the globe reported on the phenomenon, further feeding into the hype of the challenge. But just after a couple of months—or the time when enough people had tried and collected enough bruises from doing so—the phone booth challenge ran out of steam and more or less disappeared the same year it went viral. This short life cycle is not unusual for challenges and memes in general since they are running on the immediacy of 'the moment'. This can also be observed in the viral Internet challenges of the 2000s: They tend to be short-lived because (1) it does not take long before the mainstream has heard about these challenges and the people that are interested in them have tried them out. In order to become popular, (2) the challenges need to be as simple as possible, which means that they lack a possibility for greater variety. Since successful memes hinge on their potential mutations but challenges tend to stay one-sided, people quickly become tired of them and they disappear into the history books. This is exactly what happened to the most famous challenges such as planking or the ALS ice bucket challenge. Finally, there is no point in completing the

¹³⁵ Hendricks 2018, 321.

same challenge over and over again, so people just lose interest and move onto the next new thing.

Finally, there are some other phenomena behaving similarly to memes previously to the Internet such as urban myths or legends. These mostly unwritten stories are recounted at slumber parties or campfires and often passed on by older siblings or friends to scare the youngsters. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*¹³⁶ is the most well-documented urban legend in the English-speaking world and has been subject of many analyses, including a comparative study examining 79 versions of the legend by the folklorists Richard Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey.¹³⁷ Later, it became the first urban legend classified in the Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America by Ernest Warren Baughman in 1966.¹³⁸ Jan Harold Brunvand traces the story back to the 1870s with the car being preceded by a carriage. Other sources locate the narrative in 16th-century Sweden, where a similar story about a priest and a maiden was told.¹³⁹ What all the modern-day versions have in common is a mysterious hitchhiker—more often than not a young girl—who is picked up by a car and asks to be driven to a certain address before disappearing from the car. In some cases, the girl is picked up from a bar and not the roadside, in others, the stranger has no money to compensate for the ride but offers her clairvoyant skills to the driver. In these variations, the stranger is usually prefiguring some great disaster—for example, in the versions circulated in religious communities, she hailed the Second Coming of Christ—while in the stories dating back to the early 1940s, the stranger was asked about the ending of World War II. Similarly, the story was recontextualized according to local conditions when it was imported by American soldiers to Japan and later to Korea over the course of World War II.

Urban legends, much like myths, fables, and legendary tales, stand out as scary stories that are usually told to kids and teenagers at an impressionable age. Their success hinges on their direct invoking of thrill and, in many cases, the mere possibility that this could happen to you someday. Modern examples like *Slender Man*, which we will return in this chapter's section on creepypasta, function very similarly to the narrative of The Vanishing Hitchhiker while urban

¹³⁶ The story goes as follows: "Well, this happened to one of my girlfriend's best friends and her father. They were driving along a country road on their way home from the cottage when they saw a young girl hitchhiking. They stopped and picked her up and she got in the back seat. She told the girl and her father that she just lived in the house about five miles up the road. She didn't say anything after that but just turned to watch out the window. When the father saw the house, he drove up to it and turned around to tell the girl they had arrived—but she wasn't there! Both he and his daughter were really mystified and decided to knock on the door and tell the people what had happened. They told them that they had once had a daughter who answered the description of the girl they supposedly had picked up, but she had disappeared some years ago and had last been seen hitchhiking on this very road. Today would have been her birthday." Brunvand 2003, 38-39.

¹³⁷ See Beardsley, Hankey 1942.

¹³⁸ Baughman 1966.

¹³⁹ Bennett 1998, 7.

legends like *Bloody Mary* are said to be activated by performing certain rules: In order to conjure the spirit of Bloody Mary, you need to stand in front of a bathroom mirror and call her name three (or five) times in a row. Since some of these oral traditions are primarily passed on at pre-teen girls' slumber parties and sometimes involve flushing the toilet as another activator to contact Bloody Mary, Alan Dundes suggests that the story is clearly gendered and connected to the onset of menstruation—hence the horrors of blood and the spatial environment of the bathroom.¹⁴⁰ Here, the urban myth is not simply a story, but a manual to a rite of passage inviting for participation. Although many of these stories warn before negative consequences, they also tempt listeners to try it at least once to find out what really happens afterwards. 'Verifying' urban legends is also a popular task in games like truth or dare. Insofar, these tales classify as memes through their longevity, with many of them having been passed on for decades. Scholars like Brunvand further emphasize their proximity to myths and fairy tales and claims they should be understood as a form of modern-day folklore of urbanized geographies.¹⁴¹ In this regard, they are part of a sublime imaginary reflecting on and fictionalizing real-world crimes to further spawn horror stories and films from them. Unsurprisingly, many horror movies have been modeled after an urban myth or even directly cinematized them, like *The Babadook* from 2014. Structurally, urban legends are also related to conspiracy theories and, in the age of the Internet, fake news and hoaxes. Other memetic factors of urban legends are the absence respectively anonymity of authors as well as their bottom-up circulation. Most urban legends have been around so long it is simply not possible to derive their exact beginnings or definitive authors. What probably resembles Internet memes the most is their spreading through talking or chatting online. This means that urban legends are not really canalized through one medium speaking to all, but are made up without official reglementations, thus escaping censorship. Insofar, it is no surprise that the Internet has become a herd for urban legends.

Humans love telling stories so much that some anthropologists and biologists like Donna Haraway argue that this is their most important characteristic. Creating, narrating, mixing, and sharing stories should also be seen as a form of social bonding and coming-together.

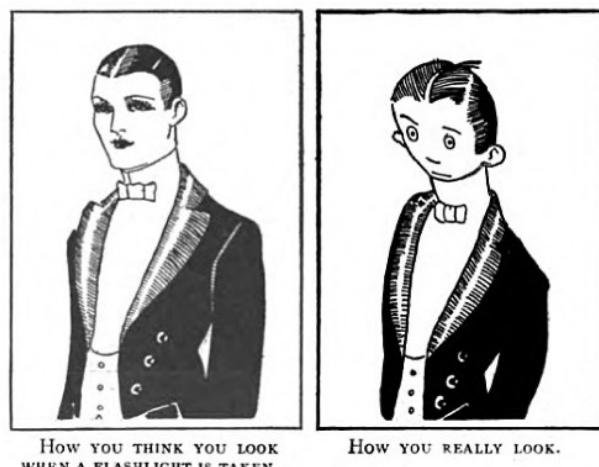


Fig. 18: Comic from humor newspaper *Judge*, 1921.

¹⁴⁰ Dundes 1998, 127.

¹⁴¹ Brunvand 2003, 17.

The last predecessor to memes discussed in this chapter is a graphic stencil known as *André the Giant Has a Posse*. Interestingly, this is one of a few visual memes that have been popular before the Internet. Next to Kilroy, there were some cartoon-based memes such as *How I Think I Look Like Having My Photo Taken*, [18] but most pre-Internet memes have been orally transmitted or action-oriented such as challenges. Of course, this may also be due to lost records of historical ephemera. Unsurprisingly, André the Giant Has a Posse is also clearly influenced by the media specificity of the stencil requiring only two materials—cardboard and spray paint—in order to be projected onto walls everywhere. The graffiti shows the outlines of André the Giant's face, a popular French body wrestler who suffered from gigantomania, and reads the subtitle 'André the Giant has a posse' as well as his body statistics, '7' 4", 520 lb' (in metric conversion, 2,24 m and 236 kg). [19] The stencil was created by US-American street artist Frank Shepard Fairey who is also known as OBEY. Fairey's later work included the 2008 democratic electoral campaign of Barack Obama known as *Hope* and the street fashion label OBEY. André the Giant Has a Posse dates back to 1989 when Fairey was still studying at the Rhode Island School of Design and wanted to teach a friend how to make stencils. Using a cut-out portrait of the wrestler found in a newspaper, Fairey went on to create the stencils and some stickers that he distributed along the sites where he and his skater friends used to hang around. It is interesting to note that skater subculture and professional wrestling have little in common which is believed to be the main reason behind the memetic success of their mergence. Additionally, the word 'posse' has been appropriated by Fairey from hip hop subcultures that become more and more popular in the late 1980s: "it was sort of appropriated from hip-hop slang—Public Enemy, N.W.A and Ice-T were all using the word—as an in-joke between friends."¹⁴² The word 'posse' is still used in contemporary hip hop, exemplified by the hip hop duo Insane Clown Posse, and refers to a gang or group of friends. Stating that 'X has a posse' can therefore be understood as a form of signifying support to someone. We can see clearly how previously unrelated ideas—graffiti spraying, skater subculture, hip hop slang, graphic design, and professional wrestling—came together to constitute a new kind of organism that spread massively across the country. At first, André the Giant Has a Posse remained an underground phenomenon—until 1994, when Fairey was sued by Titan Sports, Inc., now better known as WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) for

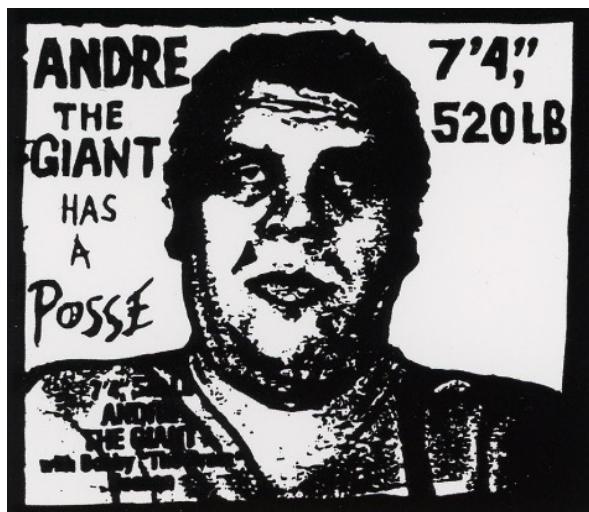


Fig. 19: Shepard Fairey, André the Giant has a Posse, 1989.

¹⁴² Annobil 2008.

using the brand name André the Giant in his graffiti. WWE, which is still the biggest wrestling entertainment group today, forced Fairey to recreate his design and replace André's face with a more stylized, minimalist version and substitute the slogan with his artist name, OBEY. This resulted in today's well-known graffiti that can be found in almost any bigger city. Additionally, André the Giant Has a Posse has also inspired many variations: For example, biologist and photographer Colin Purrington created a stencil known as Charles Darwin Has a Posse featuring the evolutionary theorist's portrait and body statistics in 2004, while rock band Tenacious D created a graphic inspired by the newer version reading 'OBEY THE D' and minimalist portraits of the two band members, Jack Black and Kyle Gass. André the Giant Has a Posse is one of the few pre-Internet memes that actually survived the digital turn and is still heavily referenced today. The aesthetics of street art and the 'cleaner' remix version after the lawsuit transported to the Internet without losing any momentum.

This outline analysis of some notable pre-internet memes shows us that memes usually become successful because of their humor and their ephemeral character. Moreover, they are made up of several parts or agents that, coming together, form the meme: In the case of Bloody Mary, it is not only the urban myth, but the transmission of it in certain contexts and the different interpretations of the text. The Sator square has also been passed on and reinterpreted in a wide variety of contexts. The collage-like structure of memes is particularly evident in André the Giant Has a Posse, in which culturally very different influences come together to be received in the form of a meme, which in turn mutates further in its circulation. On the internet, these building blocks or syopoietic agents become the basis for the techniques of remix and remediation, which Bolter and Grusin define as follows:

The word remediation is used by educators as a euphemism for the task of bringing lagging students up to an expected level of performance and by environmental engineers for 'restoring' a damaged ecosystem. The word derives ultimately from the Latin *remederi*—'to heal, to re-store to health.' We have adopted the word to express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another.¹⁴³

Remediation thus means the emergence of one medium within another and is cited by the authors as a characteristic of digital media. On the one hand, this is used to emphasize a specific continuity, e.g. the symbol of the wastepaper basket on the desktop. But it is also used to repackage a medium, as we see in Meta's Twitter clone threads, for example. On the micro level of internet memes, they also follow the logic of remediation: thus, particular agents such as funny pictures or catchy melodies appear again and again in different memes, establishing their own genealogies. I refer to the strategies of reassembling and remediating the various syopoietic agents as memetic techniques. Their basic structures, which we encounter again and again in the second part on the history of memes, are briefly outlined below.

¹⁴³ Bolter, Grusin 2000, 59.

Trolling

The influence of trolls on Internet memes cannot be overstated: Trolls (and troll-adjacent users) not only invented the first big Internet memes, but also ensured their constant development over the years with their specific trickster humor.¹⁴⁴ This unique form of humor can be best described with the German word *Schadenfreude*, or the joy of watching another person fail. Trolls like to upset the apparent balance of norms and social rules by snubbing others for their personal enjoyment. They may showcase this in a variety of ways, including condescending, aggressive, and disruptive behavior in online message boards and social media, the propagation of hoaxes and fake news as well as in organized online attacks known as raids. Trolling becomes a deliberate way to cause chaos and unrest, and to make fun at other people's expense. For the troll, this practice is a game, hence the name 'trolling' deriving from fishing bait.¹⁴⁵ Many trolls use monstrous amounts of racist, anti-semitic, islamophobic, homo- and transphobic slurs that are said to have heavily influenced the early alt-right Movement. Something Awful and 4chan have been breeding sites for trolls, but they have existed long before the Internet: Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp, for example, submitted an upside-down signed urinal as a sculpture called *Fountain* to an exhibition in 1917 and got mad when the organizers denied showcasing it. What at first seems pathetic and misanthropic becomes at least partially complicated over the course of an analysis of trolling as critique of media specularization. From a media theoretical perspective, trolls confront us with the (unforeseen) consequences of our online life and the limitless yet unfounded trust we put into it. While often resorting to inexcusable methods, trolls also show us quite plainly how easily we are seduced by punchline journalism and news coverage preying on our deepest fears and anxieties. In the habitat of the Internet, trolls take on the role of scavengers picking through the waste fabricated by content in order to generate new memes from it—or at least they used to do so. The ongoing commercialization of the Internet has also instigated the institutionalization of many trolling actions in form of satirical media outlets like The Onion or ClickHole.

Snowclones

Snowclones are paraphrased catchphrases that often serve as phrasal templates for memes. In most examples, a snowclone is a captioned image characterized by a substitution of words in each variation. In this regard, snowclones are the verbal counterparts to exploitable images. The

¹⁴⁴ Tricksters denote gods across a wide range of cosmologies who upset the divine order of the world and teach lessons through humour and wisdom. Some tricksters have helped humans, such as Prometheus, who brought fire to humans against divine command; others act as explanations for inscrutable events, such as the spider god Anansi in several West African and Caribbean cultures or Coyote in the stories of several indigenous peoples in North America. Finally, one of the best-known tricksters is the Norse god Loki, who persuades Thor, the god of thunder, to disguise himself as a bride at a wedding in order to retrieve his hammer while successfully persuading the groom that he is in fact marrying the goddess of love, Freya. See also Hyde 2010.

¹⁴⁵ Phillips 2015, 15.

term was coined by Geoffrey K. Pullum in 2003 while looking for a name for the linguistic phenomenon he described as “multi-use, customizable, instantly recognizable, time-worn, quoted or misquoted phrase or sentence that can be used in an entirely open array of different jokey variants by lazy journalists and writers.”¹⁴⁶ Some examples of these linguistic clichés are ‘to X or not to X’ derived from Shakespeare’s Hamlet or ‘X is the new Y’ as in the show title *Orange is the New Black*. Together with Glen

Whitman, Pullum settled on the name snowclone in regard to the origin of the linguistic-relativity hypothesis, the cliché that certain Inuit peoples had over 50 different words for snow.¹⁴⁷ In a way, snowclones are linguistic memes that can endlessly be exploited through remediation. They often start as simple microblogs, viral videos or as part of the classic image macro. During the mid-2010s, snowclones increasingly appear on exploitable memes where the image stays the same yet the text is crossed out and overwritten with mutated variations. I believe that their popularity can be explained with the breakthrough of apps such as Snapchat in 2013 and the onset of in-app photo editors like Instagram Stories, debuted in 2016, as they further simplified the process of taking a screenshot, editing, and reposting. A well-known example is known as *Slaps Roof a Car* and refers to tweet from 2014. The cartoon image shows a black-suited car salesman gesturing toward a silver car in the background as if selling it to a customer who looks like he is considering buying. The original image caption on the top reads “Car salesman: *slaps roof of car* this bad boy can fit so much fucking spaghetti in it”. Countless variations arose from the tweet substituting the words “fucking spaghetti” respectively the whole line of the car salesman. [20] Early on, a variation popped up on Reddit reading “Car salesman: *slaps roof of format* this bad boy can fit so many fucking effortless memes in it” leading up to flood of the meme template in 2018.



Fig. 20: *slaps roof of car* was also widely used in the collective processing of the Titan submersible implosion in June 2023.

Images and Exploitables

An exploitable is an image that is easy to meme due to its humor, silliness, shock value, or other strong emotional reaction caused by it. Most of the time, exploitables have the advantage of

¹⁴⁶ Pullum 2003.

¹⁴⁷ This is problematic since this theory has been proven wrong: in fact, some Inuit peoples have specific words for specific types of snow and ice.



Fig. 21: Variation of Is This a Pigeon? poking fun at the casting of actors and actresses much older than the characters they are portraying.

being very easy to manipulate via Photoshop or, if there is already text written on the image, to modify it. This means that all image macros are exploitables but not all exploitables take on the distinct layout of image macros. Accordingly, the sources for exploitables are diverse: From webcomics to selfies and stock images to multi-panel film stills. In this regard, they fulfill the characteristics of the poor image of deteriorating quality through extensive sharing as theorized by Hito Steyerl: "It is a ghost

of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution."¹⁴⁸ Most exploitables are already funny on their own but become marked by an in-group through the process of memeing. This, in turn, spawns a myriad of mutations if successful. Since the mid-2010s, multi-panel memes have become increasingly popular that usually demonstrate a progressive narrative and are slightly more complex than single-panel memes. They can be further divided in full-image panels captioned with texts, [Fig. 21] where parts of the texts get crossed-out and overwritten, and the double-layout juxtaposing text and image, where the whole text panel is usually substituted while the image stays the same. The process of selecting and nominating a representative object from the image is known as object labelling.

Copypasta

Copypastas are lengthy texts used to spam posts on message boards and social media. A portmanteau of the commands copy and paste, the copypasta is a phenomenon born out of the functions of the computer; it makes it possible to post long passages without typing them. Copypastas are often used to disrupt board communication or to annoy and overwhelm newbies. Essentially, they are an easy way to 'take over' posts while annoying other people into senselessness considering Some copypastas are so long, they require you to scroll for ages to arrive at the next comment or post. Although one could argue that copypastas find their beginnings in e-mail chain letters and spam mails, the latter are mostly distributed via bots while the former are exclusively shared by humans. Content-wise, almost anything can become a

¹⁴⁸ Steyerl 2009.

copypasta. The origin of the practice is unknown but traces back to either Usenet groups or the early days of 4chan. Copypastas making use of a lot of emojis instead of typed-out words are also called emoji pastas. One of the earliest instances is known as *How is Babby Formed* and refers to a Yahoo Answers post from 2006 of the same title reading: “how is babby formed? how girl get pragnent”. While the title has given way to a lot of image macros in conjunction with an ugly baby photos, the copypasta is actually the most popular comment to the original question reading:

They need to do way instain mother> who kill thier babbys, becuse these babby cant fright back?
It was on the news this mroing a mother in ar who had kill her three kids, they are taking the three
babby back to new york too lady to rest. my pary are with the father who lost his chrliden ; i am
truley sorry for your lot¹⁴⁹

The original question reads like a child's naive question about sexual intercourse, making it an ideal bait in the context of Yahoo Answers, a Q&A website that has slowly been taken over by trolls. The answer, however, surpasses the question many times over in terms of grammatical and spelling errors and is so incomprehensible that it is the perfect candidate for copypasta, a technique in which content and form could hardly drift further apart. *How is Babby Formed?* became a viral hit on Something Awful before it migrated to 4chan, where it was first used as copypasta, and inspired many YouTube remixes. Other copypastas include posting the entire script of 2006 *The Bee Movie* or an angry 4chan post from a thread discussing Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* known as *EXPLAIN DELEUZE TO ME OR I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU*.

[22]

Creepypasta

Creepypastas were coined analogous to copypastas but are primarily of horror and shocking content, for example, about ghosts, serial killers, classified governmental experiments, and so on. Although their name may suggest that creepypastas are likewise long blocks of text, they can also be images or challenges. When regarding text as their primary medium, creepypastas are direct successors of pre-Internet memes such as urban myths and scary stories. In the late 2000s, many creepypasta websites and message boards were created, including the subreddits r/Creepypasta and

>> **Anonymous** Wed Mar 22 19:12:50
2017 No.9278917
Quoted by: >>9278938 >>9279138 >>9279267
>>9280877 >>9280899

EXPLAIN DELEUZE TO
ME OR I'LL FUCKING
KILL YOU! DONT DUMB
IT DOWN INTO SOME
VAGUE SHIT! EXPLAIN
DELEUZE TO ME RIGHT
NOW OR I'LL LITERALLY
FUCKING KILL YOu!
WHAT THE FUCK IS A
BODY WITHOUT
ORGANS? WHAT THE
FUCK ARE RHIZOMES?
DON'T DUMB IT DOWN
OR I'LL FUCKING KILL
YOU

Fig. 22: Copypasta from 4chan's /l/ (literature) board.

¹⁴⁹ See How is Babby formed?, Know Your Meme: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/how-is-babby-formed>.



Fig. 23: Eric Knudsen, Slender Man, 2009. Slender Man can be seen as a slim tall figure in the back.



Fig. 24: Eric Knudsen, Slender Man, 2009.

r/NoSleep as well as the 4chan Paranormal board /x/. In contrast to copypasta, which is more appropriative and unselective in its material, creepypastas tend to have distinct authorship. Nowadays, the term has become more or less synonymous with horror short stories, some of which have become so successful that they have spawned entire fandoms including cosplay, fan art, and more fan fiction. The most notorious creepypasta is *Slender Man*, a humanoid character with long thin limbs and no facial features dressed in a black suit. Slender Man originated as a photoshopped image by Eric Knudsen on Something Awful: As part of a contest, Knudsen submitted two black-and-white photographs of children playing with a mysterious tall figure in the background. [23, 24] The images were captioned with the apparent events surrounding Slender Man, one of them reading “One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as ‘The Slender Man’. Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence. – 1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986.” Inspired by horror writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and urban legends like Mothman, Slender Man quickly attracted a lot more lore around its character that spread across the Internet. Sadly, the creepypasta become well-known in the mainstream in 2014, when two 12-year-old girls attempted to murder another girl claiming that they have done so because of Slender Man.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the figure of Slender Man continues to proliferate in popular culture, inspiring many video games, movies, and easter eggs in games like Minecraft.

Reposting, Reblogging & Retweeting

The function of reposting refers to the possibility to re-publish posts (or blogs or tweets) from other users on one’s own profile. This is used to indicate that the reposted content is from another author. Usually, reposts are graphically marked using different font color or indents. Reposts became a real problem for message boards like 4chan and Reddit that usually feature a lot of original content (OC), making it be annoying to always see the same old content. On 4chan, reposts are not to be mistaken for greentexts that are stories told from the first-person perspective written in green letters. [25] On sites like Reddit, it can also lead to disliked plagiarism if the repost generates more engagement than the original post.¹⁵¹ However, Tumblr is a social media site where reposting is encouraged making it home to entire reblogging pages that only host reblogged content. The online pinboard platform Pinterest’s entire concept is essentially reposting. Similarly, Twitter has a retweet function that also holds the possibility of

¹⁵⁰ Paybarah 2021.

¹⁵¹ Reddit uses a moral system known as karma that encourages fair use and discourages trolling and online bullying. Users are able to upvote respectively downvote postings. The aggregated sum then defines a user’s karma or reputation. Of course, the system is imperfect as users also downvote posts that do not hold up to their opinions, for example.

commenting on another tweet while retweeting it. In regard to memes, reposts refer to non-mutated memes, that is, memes that can already have a variation but are reposted without alterations. In the 2010s, many blogs from Tumblr and pages from Facebook relocated to Instagram which led to a flood of meme reposting accounts such as @pubity or @fuckjerry. Many of these pages mix memes with news and other stories and are distinctly driven by commercial interests. Some of them host entire conglomerates of meme accounts catering to different interests.

The problem with these accounts is that even though they only repost memes, they often fail to give credit to the original creators, whether they be anonymous meme accounts or established comedians. Although the action of reposting is not condemned per se, the dominance of mainstream meme repost accounts serves as a prime example of the lack of copyright policies regarding digital content.¹⁵²

Viral Videos & Audios

A viral video can be any audiovisual material uploaded to the Internet, but is usually understood as gaining at least a couple of million clicks in its first days online.¹⁵³ Of course, these numbers grew over time and are surpassed repeatedly. The content of these videos is very diverse, although most viral videos trigger an immediate emotional connection or contain very catchy sounds like a melody or catchphrase. Cats and small children are very popular as are remix videos circulated under the name YouTube Poop and, later, montage parodies. The metaphor of the virus comes less from the field of molecular biology, where viruses are understood as replicators living inside a host, and more from epidemiology, which deals with the dynamics and spread of diseases within a population. Special emphasis is placed on the resistance or susceptibility of organisms to viruses. Academic attempts theorizing how memes go viral (or not) unfortunately also contributed to what is now known as memetic marketing. Still, there is some mystery left—perhaps because memes adapt even quicker once the effect of virality is



Fig. 25: A classic greentext example telling the story of a basement dweller who shortly made it out of 4chan before ultimately returning again. Vidya is slang for video games and NSFW an acronym of not safe for work.

¹⁵² See Hu 2019 and Kreutzer, Reda 2023.

¹⁵³ Shifman 2014, 58.

imitated. These ‘forced’ viral videos are often received as cringy, for example, especially used for advertisement and marketing purposes. YouTube is the platform responsible for most viral videos, but there have been others before—in the 1990s, GIFs (often in combination with music) and single-purpose websites also known as fads were highly popular. Popular variations include *The Hampster Dance* (see chapter 3.4) and You’re the Man Now, Dog!, a website compiled of a photograph of Sean Connery pointing while a quote of him from the movie *Finding Forrester* is played in a loop. Its creator, Max Goldberg, later created the website YTMND where users could make their own single-purpose websites choosing any images and sounds they wanted. Another viral video before YouTube is called *Numa Numa* and shows vlogger Gary Brolsma dancing carefree to Moldavian one-hit-wonder O-zone’s song *Dragostea Din Tei* from 2004.¹⁵⁴ During the 2000s, a great deal of Internet culture emerged on YouTube, which evolved evermore niches to be filled with gaming, DIY content, and make-up videos but also lectures and video essays. Since the 2010s, YouTube has been competing with other platforms such as Twitch, which is mainly dedicated to gaming, Vine, a now-inactive Twitter company whose videos were limited to the length of six seconds, and TikTok. The latter evolved from the lip sync app musical.ly and is primarily designed for viral videos that do not exceed three minutes in length. TikTok also offers the option of audio templates, i.e. sounds that can be superimposed on the video and have a particularly high recognition value. These viral audios can be, for example, sped up versions of pop songs or catchphrases from other media.

Raids

In video gaming slang, especially in massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like World of Warcraft, raids refer to coordinated attacks on a target by multiple users. In Internet culture, the term also refers to users uniting to attack and spam other boards of the same platform or entirely different platforms, most prominently, the raids on Tumblr instigated by 4chan’s /pol/ board in 2014. (See chapter 4.2.) During the raid, 4chan users flooded Tumblr’s hashtags—especially those related to feminism and LGBTQ+ blogging—with shock and gore images. Raids also often take place on Twitch, where popular streamers stir up their fans to intrude other gamers’ sessions. The most extreme version of this is swatting, where a false emergency call is reported and thus a special task force (called SWAT teams in the United States) is ordered into the home of an enemy player. This can even end fatally, as in a case in Wichita in 2017. In other instances, a raid may also refer to meetings of users in real life: The *Josh Swain Fight*, for example, took place in 2021 after a Facebook user put all people with the same name into a group and sent them a message with coordinates and a date reading “we fight, whoever wins gets to keep the name, everyone else has to change their name, you have a

¹⁵⁴ Brolsma 2017.

year to prepare, good luck".¹⁵⁵ The event did take place and hundreds of people showed up with pool noodles and other 'battle equipment' before a 5-year-old was crowned 'King Josh' using a Burger King cardboard crown. Although they are technically not raids, flash mobs adhere to a similar logic: a large number of people, who have previously arranged details on the Internet, suddenly come together in busy public places and start a random action like a pillow fight. In the 2010s, so-called Facebook event raids were repeatedly in the news. These were semi-private events, such as a birthday party, that were overrun by hundreds of people due to a public event page on Facebook, much to the annoyance of any family members and authorities. Another instance is known as *Storm Area 51, They Can't Stop All of Us* which was a Facebook event scheduled for September 20, 2019: Feeding on conspiracy theories concerning UFOs and aliens, its creator suggested to invade the notorious US Air Force training ground which resulted in more than 2 million users RSVPing 'going' to the event. Authorities were concerned and tried to discourage people to visit Area 51, nevertheless, about 150 people showed up at the gates but no-one managed to actually enter.

Challenges and Photo Fads

Challenges are social games that users participate in while filming themselves and can vary greatly in cause, from charitable actions to straight-up self-harm. They often spread very fast before vanishing into thin air just as quickly. Oftentimes, such challenges take on a ritualistic function determining one's affiliation with a specific group, for example, in student unions. Viral challenges have been practiced for a very long time and are directly connected to the dynamics of mass media: Back in 1939, multiple newspapers reported on the goldfish swallowing craze at the MIT college that revolved around, well, gulping living goldfish. The Internet brought us the *ALS Ice Bucket Challenge* in 2014 that required people to pour down a bucket of ice water over themselves to raise awareness for the nervous disease ALS. Since challenges depend on user participation, their purposes are often much more mundane. In 2015, the *Kylie Jenner Lip Challenge* circulated, in which people sucked on plastic bottles to make their lips swell up due to the negative pressure. The goal was to get lips as full as Jenner's—although she later admitted to using lip filler. *The Benadryl Challenge* of 2023, in which participants ingest large doses of the allergy medication until they experience hallucinations, has repeatedly caused participants to end up in the hospital. Similar to challenges, photo fads require users to visually document their participation. An early instance is *Planking* that had participants lie face-down on the ground and was endorsed by many politicians, musicians, and athletes.

¹⁵⁵ Page 2021.

Shitposting

Shitposting became an umbrella term for creating and spreading insubstantial posts on the Internet that mainly annoy or provoke others, often accompanied by aggressive language and slurs. Shitposting may also include the creation of low-quality memes, the spreading of fake news and hoaxes, spamming and derailing discussions, nonsensical text posts, keyboard smashing, and so on. [26] In this regard, shitposting is the default mode of communication of trolls and is closely related to baiting. However, posts that are unintentionally funny or incomprehensible are also denoted as shitposts. 4chan and Reddit host entire boards dedicated to shitposting, most prominently /s4s/ (shit 4chan says) and r/Shitposting. However, another form of shitposts have emerged out of these that were further popularized by Weird Twitter and Weird Facebook in the mid-2010s: an aesthetic category of memes that are characterized by a great use of irony (sometimes labelled post-irony¹⁵⁶), disjointed agents, obscure imagery, and surreal undertones. Often likened to early Avantgarde movements like Dadaism and Surrealism, these memes use the collage-like technique of memes to produce content in which the signifier and the signified deliberately have no similarities. In order to separate them from ‘normie’ memes, they have been called dank memes or surreal memes, and we will thoroughly analyse to them in chapter 5.3. In the beginning, the boundaries between ‘real’ shitposting and dank memes were fluid and context-dependent, but by now, some shitposts became canonized due to the recurrence of certain characters like Meme Man. Another popular aesthetic uses grainy filters to emulate the degraded image quality of numerously copy-pasted images known as deep fried memes. Similar to shitposting is schizoposting, a technique of writing as if on the brink of a mental breakdown. Often appearing in conjunction with conspiracy theories, schizoposting emulates mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and its memes often depict shadowy creatures, outbursts of paranoia, and other nightmare-fueling subject matter. However, schizoposting is more than a mere appropriation of mental illness: In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s practice of schizoanalysis, the analyst “treats the unconscious as an acentered system, in other words, as a machinic network of finite automata”.¹⁵⁷ While all memes intertwine previously unrelated sympoietic agents, schizoposting exceeds this approach in terms of scale and arbitrariness.

¹⁵⁶ See chapter 5.3.

¹⁵⁷ Deleuze/Guattari 2005, 18.

4. The Evolution of Classic Internet Memes

This second part of the thesis is a genealogy of Internet memes from a media archaeological perspective. As part of the eco-systems of users, platforms, and their cultural-material conditions, memes are interpreted with regard to niche construction:¹⁵⁸ They are analyzed in relation to the platforms on which they are created. Only through an endemic view can the scope of practices like of niche construction be identified: This refers to the interacting influence between environment and organism, but also to the fact that living beings tend to build their own niches after an event starkly changes their environment. Another basic assumption of the analysis is that memes are not 'selfish' as suggested by Dawkins and the memeticists, proclaiming that they exist only for their own sake, but that social customs of a certain community, such as humor and cultural conventions, materialize in memes. For this reason, not all memes, despite aesthetic similarities, work in the same way; rather, you have to be part of the community to understand the joke. This means that each meme (and each mutation of it) draws a boundary that assigns viewers to the in-group respectively the out-group.¹⁵⁹ This boundary is of course not insurmountable—everyone can understand a meme through research—but in most communities, it is used to clearly differentiate the in-group from mainstream users, parents or a particular fandom. In accordance with the saying that too many cooks spoil the broth, most communities show an in-group bias¹⁶⁰ triggering disdain and even hate against members of the out-group. In a tradition of subcultural splitting, this stems from the desire that they do not want to share 'their' humor and insiders for numerous reasons, from the fear of killing the joke to a refusal of capitalist commercialization to the explicit exclusion of often marginalized groups. As we will see, the shifting of the boundary between in-group and out-group sets the rhythm of the dynamics of Internet memes.

Drawing on observations from art history and media archaeology, I presume that whenever a new Internet platform comes up and becomes popular, there is a change in the style and content of memes, too. In the same vein, political, economical, catastrophic, and other affective events of global scale may also alter memes indefinitely. Early Internet memes, for example, are therefore restricted in their magnitude by slow Internet connections due to dial-up modems, the minimalist infrastructure of message boards such as newsgroups, the slow forming of netiquette, and a general lack of a wide and diverse user base. Of course, major changes in as well as a boom of memes in general become apparent with the rise of social

¹⁵⁸ "Niche construction is the process whereby organisms actively modify their own and each other's evolutionary niches." Examples include beavers building dams and humans practicing agriculture. Laland, Matthews, Feldman 2016, 192.

¹⁵⁹ In-group and out-group distinction is a helpful tool coined by sociologist Henri Tajfel. The concept is widely used to describe members of a group in terms of their identification with a group. See Tajfel 1982.

¹⁶⁰ See Everett, Faber, Crockett 2015.

media (or web 2.0, as it used to be called) in the mid-2000s that foregrounds connecting with others online. In this regard, the social media buzzword of ‘sharing’ is memetic itself while the whole concept of social media has propagated memes into the mass medium it is today.

4.1. Early Internet Memes

The Internet, a portmanteau of ‘interconnected networks’, is a global network that connects multiple individual computer networks and has been growing ever since the 1960s.¹⁶¹ Originally, the Internet served as a military communication device created in the United States to send decentralized satellite signals, while research had been pushed forward during the Cold War period. Nowadays, the internet is synonymous with the World Wide Web, a global system of servers hosting websites accessible via a browser or apps. Technically, the World Wide Web is the accessible and user-friendly part of the Internet enabling browsing, streaming, eMails, and so on, while the Internet is the sum of network infrastructure facilitating these functions. Until the early 1990s, only a handful of military and academic institutions were using the Internet for communication. This changed with the planned formation of an ‘Information Superhighway’ akin to the US-American construction of Interstate highways during the 1950s, a central concern of the first Clinton period of office:¹⁶² The Internet as we know it today was made accessible in 1993 when big telecommunications providers like AOL started accepting private customers and launched the Usenet, a forum for private users to post publicly and exchange messages.¹⁶³ It consisted of several newsgroups on different topics like politics or art and can be compared to the website architecture of message boards like early Reddit or 4chan. By the end of 1993, there were approximately 2 million hosts or data centers providing power to the Internet and 623 webpages users could visit.¹⁶⁴ The scale makes clear that accessibility to the Internet was still very limited: computers were expensive, the process of accessing the Internet via dial-up connection was painstaking, complex, and prone to error. Moreover, up until 1993, there have been only two main groups active on the Internet: the hard-boiled developers, programmers, and researchers that have been early supporters and professional users of the new medium, and the freshly arriving newbies that had yet to learn about its functions and netiquette. This turning point of the Internet becoming suddenly available to the general public in September 1993 is sometimes referred to as ‘eternal September’: Before its general accessibility, when the Internet was mainly used by students and academic staff, new users were usually arriving around September in time for the new semester. But in September 1993, the influx of new users seemed to take no end and, in fact, has not stopped since. Since the opportunities for

¹⁶¹ For a detailed history of the Internet, see Blum 2012 and Tarnoff 2022.

¹⁶² Apprich 2017, 60.

¹⁶³ McCullough 2018, 23-27.

¹⁶⁴ Cohen-Almagor 2011, 54.

exchange were quite limited, most users stumbled rather awkwardly into the forums, much to the burden of established users: “Every time another set of newbies joined the network, the community had to cope with their ‘net illiteracy’ and general lack of netiquette; their behavior was in fact considered annoying and potentially dangerous for the quality of content and discussion.”¹⁶⁵ Interestingly, this attitude did not change at all but manifests in so-called meme elitism today, operating on the same logic of in-group bias and propagating pseudo-property relations. On the Internet, a place that many imagined as a virtual Wild West waiting to be conquered in the 1990s in accordance with the so-called Californian Ideology,¹⁶⁶ being affiliated to one group or taking on a pioneering stance is of great importance. Subsequently, this also might account for the importance of the constant shifting and deconstructing of boundaries defining who is ‘in’ and who is not as an aspect of online identities.

While the Internet was still in its infancy in 1993 it had already begun to grow exponentially. The WWW consisted of mostly text-based websites with very few images and simple HTML protocols before slowly taking shape in 1995, when most international communication providers started offering Internet connections to their customers, Yahoo! took up its services, and the first live stream, a baseball game, was shown. However, due to the technical limitations of short bandwidth and the high cost of being online, the media specific forms of communication were still mostly limited to text. In turn, these media constraints determined the form and the function of early Internet memes: One of the most popular digital art forms that is still being used today is so-called *ASCII art*, or the creation of text-based visuals using the symbols of ASCII code. The code defines the standard letters and punctuation in bits that can be used on all kinds of computers. Every symbol has a bit assigned that can be read by computers and is represented by a character. ASCII code is the universal language all computers use to put out letters of the Latin alphabet and also forms the base of the smiley faces known as emoticons. As it is often the case throughout art history, explorations of the limitations of a medium lead to an increase in creative undertakings:¹⁶⁷ Although ASCII art traces back to the 1980s and its predecessors can be traced back even further to visual poems or typewriting art of the 19th century, early ASCII art was often representative and sometimes also aimed to represent existing works of the canon of art history. Thanks to the lack of art-related institutions on the early Internet, ASCII artists operated independently and primarily used personal websites, web hosting services like GeoCities, and newsgroups on the Usenet to circulate their work. One of the most well-known examples is the art of Joan G. Stark (aka

¹⁶⁵ Tanni 2014, 5.

¹⁶⁶ Apprich 2017, 35.

¹⁶⁷ See also chapter 5.5.

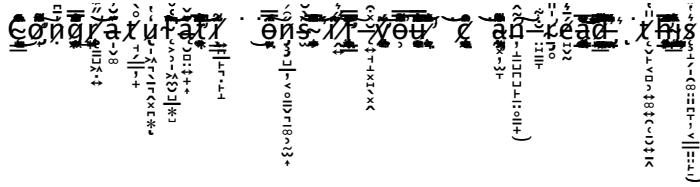
Spunk) who has created thousands of works of ASCII art until the early 2000s and archived them on her website.¹⁶⁸



The classic art historical motif of the Ancient Roman God of desire cupid is just one example of representative art created by Spunk. Perhaps learning through mimesis is the classic route to go for artists, or perhaps it was a way of mediating the aura of classic art online during primarily text-based times. In any way, it is remarkable that early stages of online art were not just focused on media-specific characteristics of the Internet but also made use of representational approaches. Today, replications of early Internet aesthetics subsumed under the notion of post-digital and Internet art have self-institutionalized to such an extent that ASCII art is now commonly understood as a form of media-specific exploration.¹⁶⁹ For example, an often-cited phenomenon in contemporary art is simplified ASCII art such as emoticons or kaomoji, the Japanese version of smiling faces: (◐◑)♡ or (^•ω•^). Since the mid-2010s, in conjunction with an ongoing wave of nostalgia for the early Internet, ASCII aesthetic is booming especially among younger Internet users, for example, in obscure and indecipherable Zalgo text.

¹⁶⁸ While Spunk's personal website on GeoCities has been deleted after the service finally went out of business in 2009, it was archived via Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20091027000724/http://geocities.com/spunk1111/>.

¹⁶⁹ See Cornell, Halter 2015 and Kholeif 2023.



Somewhat related to ASCII art yet totally different is another text-based visual phenomenon known as *leet speak* or *1337 5p34k*. Originally, leet speak is a form of encryption meant to bypass automatic data acquisition performed by computers.¹⁷⁰ The substitution of letters from a word with numbers alienates it to such an extent the computer cannot comprehend its meaning (unless it is equipped with a leet deciphering software). This made leet speak popular especially for the generation of passwords, avoidance of text filters or the exchanging of sensitive data and was popular among hackers and geeks.¹⁷¹ The word 'leet' is an abbreviation of 'elite', a self-given title of many gamers and computer lovers. Nowadays, leet speak can be found in all places connected to gaming, on the one hand, as a tradition of computer aficionados, on the other hand, due to impending censorship in online gaming: Using leet is another way of expressing swear words without actually typing them out, thus circumventing community guidelines and censorship. Moreover, leet is often used to further cement the in-and-out-group phenomenon among internet users as it tends to deter new users: "ph342 m9 1337 h4xX0r 5k! 11Zz!" looks a lot less inviting than simply stating "fear my leet hacker skills!". Leet speak became a complex internet language that is still widely recognized and used today, with many typical terms of Internet slang tracing back to it. It is characterized by intentional misspellings, typos, and a hypercontextual form of grammar used to express significant interest. For example, the often occurring typo 'teh' as well as the French article 'le' were two very popular way of spelling in memes during the early to late 2000s. The words 'owned' and the concomitant 'pwned' (notice the letters O and P next to each other on a QWERTY-keyboard destined to get mixed up when typing hastily) refer to winning against or dominating the enemy in a game, generally outspoken as "You got owned!".¹⁷² Since leet emerged from writing, there are no universal rules for its pronunciation. In regard to grammar, verbs can become nouns by adding the suffix -age: In the case of pwn, someone who just won against you and totally outperformed you could be referred to as 'having pwnage'. Another popular leet word is 'pr0n' which is still used as a means to circumvent typing the word 'porn'. Most search engine optimization tools are trained to detect unwanted buzzwords but surprisingly fail to recognize leet. This is also the reason why leet again rose to popularity in the late 2010s, a time characterized by the automatic detection of all posts on social media in order to delete forbidden words. While leet is still hardly detected by automated algorithms even if used only irregularly or by simply switching a few

¹⁷⁰ See Li, Zeng 2021.

¹⁷¹ Milburn 2018, 3.

¹⁷² Alternatively, 'pwn' might have also been derived from chess and refers to the pawn figure.

letters to numbers, forbidden words are much more quickly identified by algorithms today, which in turn urges users to constantly come up with new variant writings to bypass automatic detection. In my understanding, this is the main engine behind the rapidly changing Internet language that also has a massive influence on offline speaking and writing.

ASCII art and leet speak are two examples of text-based memes that have shaped the evolution of early Internet memes. Both forms were delimited by the heavily text-based webpages of the early Internet that put more emphasis on intertextuality and affiliation to an in-group—in the case of the early Internet, established internet users versus newbies (in leet, n00bies or n00bz). This confrontation led to many heated online arguments and sometimes strange, sometimes hateful encounters. Notoriously, most Usenet message boards required account registration with a username that provided some form of anonymity. But as the past 30 years have shown, this can lead to even more aggressive behavior shown through verbal violence, threats or denial of assistance and even splash over to the offline world in the form of doxxing.¹⁷³ Nevertheless, a computer screen and an imaginary username may be enough for some people to proclaim the worst kind of statements resulting in slurs and hate speech as well as exorbitant comparisons, for example, equating the adherence to community guidelines with the necropolitical strategies of Nazi-Germany. In the German-speaking context, this is especially problematic concerning the history of national socialism and the failure of governmental handlings of denazification.¹⁷⁴ It may appear as if comparisons to the Nazi regime have recently resurged and became an almost quotidian experience in political discussions on message boards. However, this is not a phenomenon of the recent swing to the right we experience globally since the late 2000s,¹⁷⁵ on the contrary, this was already observed back in 1990 by Mike Godwin: *Godwin's Law* states that the longer an internet discussion continues, the probability of a comparison to Nazi Germany or Adolf Hitler approaches 1:

¹⁷³ Doxxing refers to the circulation of sensitive personal data such as clear names and addresses on the Internet. See Lapidot-Lefler, Barak 2012.

¹⁷⁴ The special role of the axis powers of Germany and Austria has also been publicly discussed in the late 1980s in a debate that is now known as *Historikerstreit* (historian's dispute). The debate was kicked off by an essay by Ernst Nolte where he compared the war crimes of Nazi Germany to those of the Soviet Union, ultimately relativizing the former's horrendous crimes in relation to atrocious genocides performed by other nations throughout history. In summary, Nolte's conservative argument claimed that German people should not bear any 'special' kind of guilt in regard to the holocaust when other nations have done just as bad. In a famous response by Jürgen Habermas, Nolte's essay was criticized as apologetic and historically revisionist and the singularity of the holocaust was demonstrated. It needs to be emphasized that this debate is exemplary for and highly limited to the sluggish and insufficient engagement with the legacy of Nazi Germany in the divided post-war Germany as well as Austria, a dereliction of duty heavily protested by students during the 1980s. See Habermas 1986.

¹⁷⁵ Right-wing populism has been on the rise across almost all European countries, partly due to the 2008 global financial crisis and the inhuman handling of the EU of a greater influx of refugees in 2015, among other things. Similarly, the US saw a surge in right-wing politics since Trump's presidency, Brazil's government under the leadership of Jair Bolsonaro, and the Indian government of the Bharatiya Janata Party under Narendra Modi, among others.

In discussions about guns and the Second Amendment, for example, gun-control advocates are periodically reminded that Hitler banned personal weapons. And birth-control debates are frequently marked by pro-lifers' insistence that abortionists are engaging in mass murder, worse than that of Nazi death camps. And in any newsgroup in which censorship is discussed, someone inevitably raises the specter of Nazi book-burning.¹⁷⁶

What sounds crude at first becomes unfortunately true, whether that be on the Usenet or on contemporary Twitter. Such comments suggest a lack of historical sensibility and basic empathy as well as the realization that trolling behavior has made casual Nazi comparisons fashionable. In any case, such comparisons take on the rhetoric role of a dead-end argument, or what could one possibly reply to a comparison of censorship on Instagram to book burning? Moreover, engaging in any similar discussions always bears the potential of sinking to the level of the original poster that most people want to avoid for obvious reasons. In 2016, Reddit user CuriousGnu conducted a study in data analysis of over 4.5 million comments on different subreddits to check at what point they would mention the words 'Nazis' or 'Hitler'. CuriousGnu proceeded to exclude Reddit threads on history due to their bigger probability of using the buzzwords in a historical-discursive setting and not as a straw man's fallacy. The results were astonishing:¹⁷⁷ After 1,000 comments on one thread, the probability of someone affirming Godwin's law is at over 70%. After 4,000 comments, no matter the topic of discussion, the probability of Nazi comparisons was at almost 95%. Although CuriousGnu states that the analysis does not exactly prove Godwin's law and is only looking at the presence of the words 'Nazis' or 'Hitler' and not the specific context in which they are used, it seems safe to deduct that Internet discussions do land at historical revisionism in one way or the other—and they have done so since the early 1990s and not just since the right-wing boom of the late 2000s.

Visual memes of the time embraced the aesthetic of the early Internet and mainly consisted of vector graphics, simple GIFs, and 3D animations. An important factor in this was the humble transfer rate: Photo files, especially high resolutions, were simply too large to transmit and only became more common with the launching of social media. But I also believe that the aesthetic of digital art played an important part in the futuristic visions of the Dotcom boom in the late 1990s before the Web 2.0 made high-rate transfers easily available. Many sources cite the first meme on the Internet to be *Dancing Baby* and its most-famous version as a GIF.¹⁷⁸ [25] Dancing Baby was originally a file of a 3D-animated baby in diapers dancing a form of Cha Cha Cha and was released as a 3DS Max file in 1996 as a sample for the animation software by Autodesk.¹⁷⁹ The readily available file was then remixed by Ron Lussier, an animator working for LucasArts, with Blue Swede's song *Hooked On a Feeling* and re-released as a video

¹⁷⁶ Godwin 1994.

¹⁷⁷ CuriousGnu 2016.

¹⁷⁸ See burrough, Erickson 2015 and Kien 2019.

¹⁷⁹ Lussier 1996.

on Lussier's personal website. Soon afterwards, the *Dancing Baby* video became a main agent in yet another technical advancement: When developer John Woodell demonstrated the process of turning a video into a GIF, he chose *Dancing Baby* as a model. The GIF is a graphic format for images that has become popular for its ability to show multiple frames as a video yet has a much smaller file size and can therefore be easier transmitted on slow bandwidth. Additionally, most browsers support the rendering of GIFs which makes further plug-ins obsolete. Although GIFs tend to be technically outdated, they are still heavily used in memes today and have been implemented on social media platforms, for example, as reaction GIFs. *Dancing Baby* should therefore be understood as one of the first dynamic depictions of Internet imagery that has outlasted so long because of its absurd yet easily relatable content: There is not much more to 'get' here than a baby dancing—however, the baby's moves can be contagious. As is later affirmed with the rise of TikTok thanks to dance challenges, dancing is one of the most memetic experiences there is. However, the main factor of *Dancing Baby*'s viral success is the usage of *Hooked On a Feeling* and its famous intro vocals that have also given the meme the name *Oogachaka Baby*. The meme entered the mainstream after multiple appearances in the TV show *Ally McBeal* as part of a recurring nightmare and was later featured in the variation *Dancing Jesus* in *The Simpsons*.¹⁸⁰ In the recent rise of early Internet nostalgia, *Dancing Baby* has undergone some cosmetic treatments and was rendered to high definition by Twitter user @JArmstrongArt in 2020.¹⁸¹ Since then, it continues to pop up every now and then as a reaction GIF or subject to some form of variation, for example, performing the dance to viral hit *Gangnam Style* in 2013.

One way of sharing audiovisual memes without investing too much time and money into website building were so-called single-purpose websites: These sites hosted nothing but an image or GIF plus sound and are thus as a data-saving alternative to videos. The site ytmnd.com offered the possibility of setting up your own single-purpose website without the cumbersome purchase of URLs. One of the most popular memes of the 1990s was finally immortalized in this way: *All Your Base Are Belong to Us* is a snowclone that was incorrectly translated into English from the Japanese game *Zero Wing*. The phenomenon of bad translations is also called *Engrish* or, more derogatory, *Japanglish* and refers to frequent errors made between the grammatically very different Asian languages and



Fig. 25: Still from the Dancing Baby GIF.

¹⁸⁰ burrough, Erickson, 453.

¹⁸¹ JArmstrongArt 2020.

English. At first glance, the use of Engrish might be reminiscent of orientalist stereotypes that are exoticized by Western people due to their otherness, but Jayne Hildebrand Ikeshima argues it is the other way around: Since most variants of Engrish are applied to give something a more international or American feel, the English language is appropriated as an aesthetic by Japanese creators.¹⁸² Although *Zero Wing* was released in 1989, the catchphrase persisted and was kept alive by the message board and birthplace of many early memes, *Something Awful*. In the course of this, it also received its own YTMND.¹⁸³ Another famous single-purpose website is the intentionally misspelled *Hampster Dance*: As one of the earliest preserved single-serving sites, it showed the playback of 35 rows of different little cartoon hamsters twirling, marching, and jumping to a sped-up version of the 1973 song *Whistle Stop* of Disney's animation film *Robin Hood*.¹⁸⁴ The song re-appears from time to time in memes and captivates due to its annoyance akin to viral songs like the Europop mashup song *Crazy Frog* by Axel F. from 2003 or the Japanese pop song featured on the single-purpose website *Nyan Cat*, the onomatopoeic *Nyanyanyanyanyanya!* ('nyan' is Japanese for 'meow') performed by Vocaloid¹⁸⁵ Hatsune Miku. Originally, *Hampster Dance* was created by Deidre LaCarte as part of a challenge with friends to gain as much traffic as possible while the hamster has been chosen to pay homage to her pet with the intention to create something fun and lighthearted. The *Hampster Dance* circulated via eMails and newsgroups—the only communication platforms available at that time—and did not generate much traffic until 1999. When the *Hampster Dance* went viral after appearing on a TV commercial by Internet provider EarthLink, LaCarte was bombarded with messages and letters from all over the world sending love for the website. The sudden rise to fame came with some consequences: At first, website duplicates popped up that were no longer managed by LaCarte, thus plagiarizing her work. In July 2000, the *Hampster Dance* arrived to offline mainstream pop culture after the band Boomtang Boys released *The Hampsterdance Song* including a cartoon-style music video showing the band members as hamsters that even peaked at the top of the Canadian Singles Charts.¹⁸⁶ Since then, a mass of hamster merchandising has been produced and many more online variations came into existence, from *The Pig Dance* showing pink pigs to *The Satanic Hampster Dance*, a cursed version of the original featuring hamsters with horns and pentagram symbols while the original

¹⁸² Hildebrand Ikeshima 2006, 197.

¹⁸³ LT3 2004.

¹⁸⁴ In 2000, LaCarte's original website was registered to another domain without her knowledge which is why the original website is no longer available and all we have left are mirrors and archived versions of it. LaCarte 2000.

¹⁸⁵ Vocaloid (from vocals and android) is a software used for synthesizing voices used for virtual singers like Miku.

¹⁸⁶ Collins 2018.

music is played backwards.¹⁸⁷ A permanent note on the website details how LaCarte contacted its domain owner Doug Harroun with a cease-and-desist order in an effort to remove variations depicting Hampster Dance negatively, claiming that her site “is a childsafe page and your associating the Hampster Dance is not appreciated.”¹⁸⁸ This marks the first legal action taken against a memetic variation on the Internet or rather, regarding that The Satanic Hampster Dance is still online, the first attempted lawsuit regarding memes. As almost any artist or creator will painstakingly learn, original work can and will be appropriated and recreated once it is published. This is all the more relevant on the internet considering the technical specifications of the medium offering seductive functions such as copy & paste. In the liberal arts, most works are under copyright including intricate laws on image rights. But on the Internet—and especially back in the 1990s—there have been no preceding cases on the protection of artist’s rights.¹⁸⁹ In general, variations and alienations of the source material is usually regarded as artistic freedom and does not count as copyright infringement. In the case of The Hampster Dance, it might have been irritating to LaCarte to witness the various mutations of her website, however, considering her trademark filing for the meme and subsequent selling to merchandising company Abatis International, monetary interest seemed to have played a major role.¹⁹⁰ However, the practice of sending cease-and-desist letters has become the standard of legal battles on memes up until today while lawmakers are only slowly coming up with legal guidelines regarding online content.

4.2. On Trolling and Internet Humor

The practice of trolling is best introduced with an anecdote of the act itself. In order to do so, I have chosen two examples that demonstrates the relations between anonymous users and their influence on traditional, ‘serious’ media outlets. These stories tell about the gap between news broadcasters still rooted in a traditional understanding of audiences stemming from print journalism and digital communities that adhere to their own rules, much to the belittlement of the former. In April 2009, renowned Time magazine launched a new website featuring a voting system tool to determine the annual World’s Most Influential Person.¹⁹¹ During the voting process, the website was posted on 4chan, an anonymous image board created by Christopher Poole in 2003 that is also the breeding ground of meme culture. You can imagine where the song goes: Instead of globally influential politicians like Barack Obama or Angela

¹⁸⁷ Harroun 1998.

¹⁸⁸ Harroun 2000.

¹⁸⁹ See Kreutzer, Reda 2023.

¹⁹⁰ Collins 2018.

¹⁹¹ Not to be confused with the magazine’s Person of the Year that is determined by editors. That year, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke was selected as Person of the Year.

Merkel topping the list, a barely mature man with the ominous name ‘moot’ aka Poole won the poll. In fact, that was not the only strange thing about the final result: When read from top to bottom, the initials of the first 21 placements spelled out the phrase ‘mARBLECAKE ALSO THE GAME’. [26] ‘Marblecake’ is a slang term referencing, to put it subtly, the mixing of bodily fluids in specific sexual practices, while ‘the game’ is a mind game whose sole object is to forget about playing it. A person automatically loses when remembering its existence (which means that you, dear reader, just lost it). Moreover, moot’s average rating was more than twice as high as the second place, suggesting some kind of unorthodox intervention. Nevertheless, the result was not a hoax as further verified by moot’s attendance of the Time World’s Most Influential Person gala. So what had happened?

The trolling can be traced back to 4chan, and more precisely, to its /b/ board, the natural habitat of all the brain-rotten junk in existence. When its users heard about its founder moot being up for vote in the poll, they decided to create so-called ‘autovoters’, tiny pieces of code that automatically assigned a rating level to each vote, thus manipulating the poll.¹⁹² While this was identified and subsequently banned by the Time team rather quickly, it also motivated anonymous 4chan users to come together and get organized on a different platform, an IRC

REFRESH DATA

Rank	Name	Avg. Rating	Total Vote
1	moot	87	12,939,521
2	Anwar Ibrahim	42	1,632,411
3	Rick Warren	42	1,290,988
4	Baitullah Mehsud	40	1,281,854
5	Larry Brilliant	39	1,425,061
6	Eric Holder	38	1,215,008
7	Carlos Slim	37	1,311,525
8	Angela Merkel	37	1,069,787
9	Kobe Bryant	36	1,195,005
10	Evo Morales	34	1,045,245
11	Alexander Lebedev	34	640,115
12	Lil’ Wayne	33	637,426
13	Sheikh Ahmed bin Zayed Al Nahyan	32	622,054
14	Odell Barnes	31	621,182
15	Tina Fey	30	646,446
16	Hu Jintao	29	614,359
17	Eric Cantor	28	580,189
18	Gamal Mubarak	27	580,389
19	Ali al-Naimi	26	627,786
20	Muqtada al-Sadr	25	564,094
21	Elizabeth Warren	24	559,800
22	Manny Pacquiao	23	9,382,234
23	Dominic Raab	22	9,381,925

Fig. 26: mARBLECAKE ALSO THE GAME is spelled out by first letters of the candidates’ ranking.

¹⁹² Lamere 2009.

channel.¹⁹³ There, users were not only making fun of the visibly overwhelmed team of Time suddenly finding themselves at the center of a cyberattack, but would also exchange on further optimizations of their code. One particular user with the name Zombocom came up with a tweak that not only manipulated the first placement, but let them decide the entire rank order, stating that “it would be funny to troll Time.com and put us up as most influential, but since we are not explicitly on the list we’ll have to spell it out.”¹⁹⁴ In this regard, ‘mARBLECAKE ALSO THE GAME’ functions as the inscribing of an entire community into a medium it had no prior relation with—and definitely brought the trolls the kind of media attention they were looking for while teaching media outlets a lesson in the ethics of online polls: Never before (and never thereafter) had the critically acclaimed Time magazine found itself dealing with a couple of teenage hackers manipulating their role model onto number one.

In another example known as *Jenkem*, which is extensively featured in Whitney Phillips’ pioneering ethnographical study on Internet trolls from 2015, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, an apparent new street drug made from fermented feces in a plastic bottle incited a moral panic among parents and authorities. To be clear, Jenkem does exist and has been covered by media such as The New York Times in an article on Zambia’s long-standing battle with HIV and AIDS in 1998 as an addictive substance used by children.¹⁹⁵ The released gases are sniffed for a brief high similar to paint and glue. In 2007, Totse forum user pickwick opened a new thread to document his apparent experience with Jenkem from production to a self-trial fully illustrated with photos. When the thread found its way to 4chan, trolls bestowed the story with a set of instructions for further circulation: The first step was the forwarding of a copypasta to school authorities emulating an email of a worried parent finding out about Jenkem. In reference to a popular episode of the cartoon show South Park, the second step was titled ??? and the third and last step was named *PROFIT*.¹⁹⁶ [27] The text was meant to start ringing all alarm bells of school and government officials, mixing the abuse of serious health hazards while scapegoating ‘the Internet’ as a main perpetrator of the trend. Again, this is in line with the similarities between trolls and memes: “The mask of trolling thus establishes a clear insider/outsider distinction.”¹⁹⁷ Choosing to troll someone is an active decision only valid when the victim does not know they are being made fun of or, to put it more plainly, does not dispose of the same information as the troll. For the troll, this is a game, hence the name ‘trolling’ deriving

¹⁹³ Internet Relay Channels (IRCs) are early versions of text-based instant messaging. IRCs also allow for group communications similar to message boards as well as private messaging and file sharing.

¹⁹⁴ Lamere 2009.

¹⁹⁵ Daley 1998.

¹⁹⁶ In the episode *Gnomes* from 1998, one student heavily dependent on caffeine admits that his underpants get stolen by gnomes every night. It is later revealed that the gnomes adhere to a Capitalist business plan in three parts: Step 1: collect underpants, Step 2: ?, Step 3: Profit.

¹⁹⁷ Phillips 2015, 35.

Step 1. email this to a school principal.

I am writing you anonymously because I do not want my child to get in any trouble, but I need to alert you to something your students are doing that is potentially very dangerous. Yesterday afternoon I came home early to find my son and his friends getting high on something called "jenkem" which they say they heard about at school. This "jenkem" is the most disgusting thing I've ever heard of. They urinate and defecate in plastic bottles and leave them to ferment in the sun, then inhale the resulting gas. I know it sounds unreal but when I came home I found my son and his friends laying on the grass in the backyard and they were acting very strangely. There was a horrible, putrid smell in the air. I can't believe my son would do something like this. I looked it up on the internet and apparently this was something invented by African children that wound up online and now kids all over the world are doing it. My son says most of his friends at school have tried it.

This seems to be a new thing and I can't find any information about the health effects of jenkem - I think it is the methane and ammonia content that provides the desired high, but I don't really know. Both of those are very harmful chemicals. All sorts of diseases are spread through fecal matter. I imagine it could lead to some very serious health problems at your school. My wife and I are utterly shocked and talking about private school. We have spoken to our son about this and he says he won't do it anymore, but because it is on the internet kids all over the country are trying jenkem and they need to be educated about the health risks. It is only a matter of time before somebody dies from methane poisoning or this leads to a hepatitis outbreak. I don't know exactly what you could do about this as jenkem is legal but I needed to inform you of what some of your students are doing.

Step 2. ???

Step 3. PROFIT

pic unrelated

Fig. 27: Copypasta instructions for the Jenkem hoax on 4chan.

from fishing bait.¹⁹⁸ Misinformation or lack of information play a huge part and are usually exploited by trolls. This kind of humor underlies a general trend in participatory Internet culture that Phillips and Milner call ambivalence: “[these phenomena] are too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as *this* as opposed to *that*. Nor can they be pinned to one singular purpose. Because they are not singular; they inhabit, instead, a full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction.”¹⁹⁹

In the case of Jenkem, the drug itself is not a hoax, but the fact that teenagers in the US would use it recreationally is. As became fully materialized under the post-truth paradigm, an aggressive narrative stimulates peoples’ emotions and just becomes *true* to them, whether online or offline. So when the tipping point of parents worrying about Jenkem was transgressed, the story made it to the local news and police stations—much to the delight of Totse and 4chan users who kept each other in the loop. This led pickwick, the guy who started it all, to backtrack and admit his hoax, stating in an interview with Fox News: “I never inhaled any poop gas and got high off it.”²⁰⁰ However, this did not stop media outlets to desperately keep on reporting on Jenkem. Even after pickwick’s confession, rabble-rousing Fox News and others continued to

¹⁹⁸ Phillips 2015, 15.

¹⁹⁹ Phillips, Milner 2017, 10.

²⁰⁰ Mikkelsen 2007.

broadcast and keep on searching for any real cases of abuse—without success. At least the creators of South Park got the scent of Jenkem and honored the hoax in an episode where one of the main characters, Kenny, gets addicted to sniffing cat urine.

So what do the stories of Jenkem and the 2009 Time poll tell us about trolling? In order to analyze the intricate phenomenon of trolling humor, I turn to Sigmund Freud's essay *The Joke* from 1905. As part of establishing his psychoanalytic theories on the unconscious, Freud published the essay arguing that jokes are subject to the same mechanisms as dreams and thus originate in the unconscious. In the vast majority of cases, jokes are quite innocent and underlie the principle of economy, a kind of reduction of more complex contents to release psychic congestion. This form of bypassing releases pleasure, which Freud titles as equal in magnitude to the psychic work one would otherwise have had to do to let these emotions out. Such abstract jokes are, for example, condensations and displacements that deal directly with language. Freud gives the following mechanisms:

I. Condensation:

- (a) with formation of composite word,
- (b) with modification.

II. Multiple use of the same material:

- (c) as a whole and in parts,
- (d) in a different order,
- (e) with slight modification,
- (f) of the same words full and empty.

III. Double meaning:

- (g) meaning as a name and as a thing,
- (h) metaphorical and literal meanings,
- (i) double meaning proper (play upon words),
- (j) double entendre,
- (k) double meaning with an allusion.²⁰¹

We encounter these forms all the time in memes, often in mixed form. Their joke lies in finding meaning in nonsense. Examples of abstract jokes are the replacement of letters by numbers in leet speak or in the image macros known as *Advice Animals* in the late 2000s that are covered in the next section. However, another type that goes beyond the 'simple' pleasure of these linguistic jokes is what Freud calls the tendentious joke. This is interesting in terms of trolling, because unlike the harmless jokes, we find this form mainly in racist or obscene contexts: "tendentious jokes release inhibited energy that is morally taboo."²⁰² A classic example is a blonde joke that makes fun of the stereotype of a bimbo blonde and thus releases misogynistic tendencies. [81] These jokes show a triangular structure: "Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second

²⁰¹ Freud 1981, 41-42.

²⁰² Freud 1981, 119.

who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled.”²⁰³ While harmless jokes release the desire for nonsense in a playful manner, this is only the secondary task of the tendentious joke. Primarily, it is about releasing an inhibition that is otherwise impossible to let go without becoming unethical—for example, if I make a joke about a bimbo blonde without a punchline, then it is ultimately just a hateful comment. But if I package my negative view of this hypothetical figure in such a way that someone else releases their bottled-up prejudices toward blonde women through laughter, it becomes a cleansing joke. This is also why arguing that jokes can get away with anything is so controversial, especially concerning the humiliation of others through jokes. However, calls for ‘free speech’ and artistic freedom turn sour rather quickly when they only act as disguises for legitimating jokes at the expense of others. This does not mean that these kind of jokes cannot be funny—jokes about marginalized groups can be hilarious when uttered in a self-deprecating way by someone sharing the same identity or having an affiliation. For example, throughout the essay, which also acts as an anthology of funny tales, Freud reproduces many *Schadchenwitze* (Jewish match maker jokes), his favorite type of jokes. In line with his Jewish heritage and presumable first-hand experiences with these situations, although outdated, the jokes are funny and self-mocking. However, if I were to make such jokes as non-Jewish, non-religious woman with no further affiliation to matchmaking, the whole act becomes more questionable: what would I have to release in terms of psychic congestion to formulate such a joke? On the other hand, most of Freud's jokes about women in his essay are at best unfunny, at worst deeply misogynistic; but if I'd hear them from another woman, they could be quite amusing. In a similar vein, Freud explains that tendentious jokes are not innocent, but can also act as multipliers of prejudice and hatred:

In the case of aggressive purposes it employs the same method in order to turn the hearer, who was indifferent to begin with, into a co-hater or co-despiser, and creates for the enemy a host of opponents where at first there was only one.²⁰⁴

According to this theory, laughter equals complicity. And while in many cases this is an exaggerated conclusion—many jokes are not only abstract or tendentious, but a mixture, and therefore combine several funny elements—it is undeniable that racist stereotypes are further spread through the reproduction of racist jokes. This is also why the inflationary use of insults about Black people or trans people on 4chan is clearly problematic and does not fall under the guise of irony or demands of ‘free speech’: It perpetuates certain stereotypes that release the racist and sexist tendencies of the originators and make them acceptable while simultaneously further screwing down the disinhibition of the environment. At the same time, Freud writes “[T]he

²⁰³ Freud 1981, 100.

²⁰⁴ Freud 1981, 133.

pleasure in the case of a tendentious joke arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place.”²⁰⁵ In this respect, the jokes, while amoral and distasteful, also release congestion that could otherwise be released into explicit aggression. In this respect, the tendentious joke is always situated and its success depends on the person performing it. Since most Internet platforms offer anonymity of some sort, tendentious jokes are very common online. Thus, trolling belongs to a special form of tendentious jokes that have further spawned off memes. Many early memes were created in the course of trolling or hoaxes and were directly influenced by them. For the sake of analysis, I recommend to try and not get offended by the following contents, but on the Internet, this strategy only leads to the silencing of (potential) trolling victims. Luckily, feminist theorists have long since contemplated methods of combatting trolling without resorting to silence.²⁰⁶

First of all, trolls are motivated by exploiting the ignorance and emotions of others—this is what entertains them and gives them *the lulz*. Lulz is the pleasure derived from the suffering of others; in the case of the Time poll, conquering the editorial board of one of the largest magazines in the world, and regarding Jenkem, the tribulations of the adults. Like a narcissist feeding on narcissistic supply, the troll feeds on the naive and especially media-incompetent people on the Internet—hence the famous saying ‘don’t feed the troll!’.²⁰⁷ Admittedly, this victim-blaming piece of advice needs to be taken with a grain of salt, yet serves here to highlight the trolls’ dependency on his supply. The trolls’ preference for transgressive humor and self-referential wordplay is often misunderstood or simply disdained by non-trolling users. In a way, a troll resembles the smartass student mansplaining Nietzsche in a graduate class just as much as the 12-year-old class clown disrupting lessons—their ultimate goal is to elevate themselves by wasting your time. Trolls like to upset the apparent balance of norms and social rules by snubbing others for their personal enjoyment. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun attributes this to the transgressive hypothesis, a world view equating normative demeanor in accordance with the rules with mass manipulation and conformity to totalitarian stances as in herd behavior.²⁰⁸ In this regard, outsmarting others and ‘thinking for oneself’ became highly regarded characteristics. However, these values should not be confused with fact-checking and the comparing of different sources but have rather become a no-brainer in the age of fake news: So it has become the standard on the Internet that everyone claims to be the most informed and those who shout the loudest are usually the same whose information channels are the most one-sided.

²⁰⁵ Freud 1981, 117.

²⁰⁶ See Lumsden, Morgan 2017; Lawrence, Ringrose 2018; and Andreasen 2021 and

²⁰⁷ This piece of advice can be found on almost any message board.

²⁰⁸ Chun 2021, 76.

Keeping the transgressive hypothesis in mind as the specific framework birthing trolling, the act itself materializes in a variety of ways: Condescending, aggressive, and disruptive behavior in online message boards and social media, the propagation of hoaxes and fake news, and in organized online attacks and raids. Another popular form of trolling in the early 2000s was the RIP or memorial troll who left inappropriate and harmful comments on memorial sites for the recently deceased in a vulgar effort to criticize the public exhibition of such private and intimate tragedies.²⁰⁹ While this behavior is condemned and shunned by most—for good reasons, since many troll activities are borderline tasteless to outright racist and sexist—it becomes more tricky from a media theoretical perspective: Trolls confront us with the unforeseen consequences of our online life and the limitless yet unfounded trust we put into it. They can show up the sensationalist entitlements of punchline journalism operating on our anxieties. Even when this uncovering of truth has never been the goal—since it has always been for the lulz—it is happening nonetheless, or as Phillips comments on Jenkem: “Participating trolls may or may not have been looking to expose sloppy journalistic standards; regardless, sloppy journalistic standards were exposed.”²¹⁰ In this regard, trolls may even share some similarities with media theorists, at least in regard to values of media literacy. In his essay *Fans, Vampires, Trolls, Masters* Mark Fisher goes even one step further and declares academia to be the ultimate troll meeting point:

In many ways, the academic *qua* academic is the Troll par excellence. Postgraduate study has a propensity to breeds [sic] trolls; in the worst cases, the mode of nitpicking critique (and autocritique) required by academic training turns people into permanent trolls, trolls who troll *themselves*, who transform their inability to commit to any position into a virtue, a sign of their maturity (opposed, in their minds, to the allegedly infantile attachments of The Fan). But there is nothing more adolescent—in the worst way—than this posture of alleged detachment, this sneer from nowhere. For what it disavows is *its* own investments; an investment in always being at the edge of projects it can neither commit to nor entirely sever itself from—the worst kind of libidinal configuration, an appalling trap, an existential toxicity which ensures debilitation for all who come into contact with it (if only that in terms of time and energy wasted—the Troll above all wants to waste time, its libido involves a banal sadism, the dull malice of snatching people's toys away from them).²¹¹

Fisher's analysis understands the academic-trolls' drive for wasting time as a form of sadomasochism entrapping others in it. In this regard, it is more the system of academia—precarious working contracts, invisible power structures, the pressure of producing constant successful output, the journal-industrial complex, and so on—that produces trolls destined to debate with other academic trolls until the next generation arrives. However, this completely disregards the trolls' drive for the lulz, which is more rooted in the voluntary act of trolling than carrying the burden of trolling-for-a-living as Fisher suggests. Moreover, academics could never

²⁰⁹ See Phillips 2011.

²¹⁰ Phillips 2015, 7.

²¹¹ Fisher 2009.

resort to the techniques that online trolls use and also cannot make use of the anonymity that massively adds to the behavior of trolls. Therefore, Fisher's academic trolls are more of a special subset of the perpetrators than a standard model.

This does not mean, however, that trolls are a phenomenon born of the Internet—in fact, they have existed way long before—although what we understand by the term 'troll' has changed significantly. First and foremost, trolling denotes a certain type of rhetoric used not only to invalidate the other person's arguments, but also to embarrass, upset, and expose them. If we go back in the history of Western philosophy—we will see very shortly why this is of great importance—one of the first trolls using his powers consciously to put others in bad light for the lulz was Diogenes. Plutarch reports from a meeting of the Kyneticist philosopher with Alexander the Great in Corinth:

Diogenes raised himself up a little when he saw so many persons coming towards him, and fixed his eyes upon Alexander. And when that monarch addressed him with greetings, and asked if he wanted anything, 'Yes,' said Diogenes, 'stand a little out of my sun.' It is said that Alexander was so struck by this, and admired so much the haughtiness and grandeur of the man who had nothing but scorn for him, that he said to his followers, who were laughing and jesting about the philosopher as they went away, 'But verily, if I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes.'²¹²

Diogenes was famous for his negligence of authorities and the privileged as well as his erratic yet fearless attitude. His practice was characterized for its intertwinement of sharp wit and ice-cold logics seemingly devoid of any self-promoting flattery. In many ways, Internet trolls try to appropriate this attitude of being above things and becoming sacrosanct using words—a purpose that could also be attributed to the canon of Western philosophy itself. The study of rhetorics has been subject to the art of discourse from Ancient Greece to modern-day competitive debating and is concerned, for the most part, with triumphing over your opponent using logical argumentation. Since this is not always possible—sometimes, even trolls are wrong—it became necessary to resort to other techniques. Arthur Schopenhauer published his book *The Art of Being Right* in 1831 where he drew up 38 different ways of winning an argument, even if on the verge of losing.²¹³ Strategies include anything from pointing out irrelevant yet false propositions and arguments ad hominem to the suggestion of speaking in an authoritarian tone for psychological effect. Schopenhauer's book reads like a trolling manual and perfectly dissects the general rhetoric Phillips called 'the adversary method' in reference to Janice Moulton's theory of 'the adversary paradigm' in philosophy: "Under the Adversary Paradigm, it is assumed that the only, or at any rate, the best, way of evaluating work in philosophy is to subject it to the strongest or most extreme opposition."²¹⁴ Moulton goes on to

²¹² Plut. Alex. 14.2-3.

²¹³ See Schopenhauer 2018.

²¹⁴ Moulton 2003, 153.

describe the process of imagining the ‘ideal’ opponent’s position in order to defend one’s own, thus creating some kind of bifurcated arena. Needless to say, the adversary method is commonly associated with the stone-cold logic of white, Western, male philosophers—not because other forms of rhetoric are less effective, but because the conflation of aggression and rhetorics flourishes in patriarchal societies. When trolls on 4chan uncritically invoke the Western tradition of philosophy, and especially the branches of rhetorics, they are confirming their embedding in a binary system of being either right or wrong, thus implying there is some form of objective truth. While some trolls transgress this dichotomy, others reinforce it to the maximum worst outcome, for example, the alt-right attack on the US Capital on January 6, 2021.

As stated earlier, the trolling rhetoric applied also stems from a Eurocentric tradition that is further linked with the history of colonialism: “To these early adopters—the vast majority of whom were white males—the Internet was a land of endless opportunity, something to harness and explore, something to *claim*.²¹⁵ Similar to Americana imaginaries of the Wild West or outer space, the Internet was seen as an infinite resource of entertainment and, of course, unsuspecting victims. In this understanding, the users demonstrating male-coded behavior by pioneering the newly acquired space and testing out its boundaries were hailed. In fact, a lot of early Internet research concluded that anonymous users on message boards are assumed to be white men, simply because “white masculinity is the constructed centrality in many participatory collectives.”²¹⁶ This is further cemented by the so-called ‘online disinhibition effect’: According to John Suler, online communication shows a tendency for people to dare write things they would be afraid to say. This may manifest in acts of kindness and care for others in positive settings, but also as toxic disinhibition in environments characterized by aggression and hate. Toxic disinhibition, Suler argues, is further amplified by dissociative anonymity (the lack of a name or identity), invisibility (the lack of mimics and body language on message boards), and asynchronicity (the media-specific ‘infinity’ of the Internet that is nowadays known as doomscrolling), among others.²¹⁷ In my understanding, the online disinhibition effect allows for the de-personification of users and may also explain why many trolls behave quite normally in their daily life compared to their online personas. A troll is, therefore, a mask used to undermine social norms—this is later demonstrated quite literally by the generous usage of Guy Fawkes masks by 4chan-born hacker collective Anonymous.

This brings us to the million-dollar-question regarding trolls: who are they, and where do they come from? Trolls have already been members of 1990s Usenet newsgroups, most famously with the onset of the eternal September in 1993.²¹⁸ The people most often associated

²¹⁵ Phillips 2015, 129.

²¹⁶ Miltner 2014. See also Milner 2013.

²¹⁷ Suler 2004, 322-324.

²¹⁸ Tanni 2014, 5.

with trolling are users of the image board 4chan, or to be more precise, users frequenting the boards Random aka /b/ and, later on, Politically Incorrect aka /pol/ and ROBOT9001 /r9k/. 4chan was founded in 2003 by 15-year-old Christopher Poole as the spitting image of the popular anonymous Japanese message board 2channel which functions as a site of exchange about otaku culture.²¹⁹ An image board requires the uploading of an image in order to start a new thread, which is the primary reason why 4chan became so influential for visual memes. As a teenager, Poole frequented 2channel as well as a specific board on the message board Something Awful with the lovely title Anime Death Tentacle Rape Whorehouse, renowned for its crude humor and rare Japanese imagery. Generally, most social interactions were decorated with insults and degradation, sometimes in explicitly non-ironic manners. Once a certain board was deemed unbearable due to its members, the creator and founder of Something Awful, Lowtax, simply purges the site of unpopular boards and members. This happened, for example, to furries (a fandom obsessed with and cosplaying as anthropomorphic animals) and lolicons (short for lolita complex, a Japanese subculture often difficult to distinguish from images of child abuse).²²⁰ With the launch of 4chan, many users emigrated from Something Awful, presumably not to make a stand against the strictly-enforced rules, but simply because they wanted to trade images and memes in peace. This means that 4chan also inherited the specific form of humor and trolling from Something Awful, or as Dale Beran recounts: "As Lowtax described it to me, '[4chan] was like a race to see who could be the most crazy, fucked-up piece of shit possible. And they were all winning.'"²²¹ Partly, this was due to the total anonymity on 4chan—in contrast to a paid membership on Something Awful, 4chan used 2channel's system of automatically generated numbers to differentiate posts. This has also given rise to a cult of GETs and especially outstanding sequences of numbers such as 3333333 or 123456789, which are under superstition and particularly popular. Moreover, 4chan automatically deletes older posts and has no own archive, meaning that depending on the specific board's traffic, a post will not stay on the website much longer than 2 to 24 hours. While it may seem impossible to ask who is behind the posts, specific acts of communication suggest differently: "What is empirically verifiable, however, is the observable fact that trolling behaviors are gendered male, are raced as white, and are dependent upon a certain degree of economic privilege."²²² Considering that most people imagine the average 4chan anon (short for anonymous) as an unemployed, single adult man living in the basement of his family home, this might come as no surprise. In fact, many 4chan users also refer to themselves as NEETs, an acronym for not in education, employment, or training. Moreover, the actual language used on 4chan, including the constant

²¹⁹ Otaku culture refers to Japanese fan culture including manga, anime, cosplay, video games etc.

²²⁰ See chapter 3.4.

²²¹ Beran 2019, 57.

²²² Phillips 2015, 42.

dropping of racial slurs and the mundane denomination of oneself and others using homophobic slurs also suggest a cis-heterosexual identity. Usage of racist and homophobic language on 4chan needs to be contextualized in fragile masculinity and its testing of limits among pre-pubescent boys: Although it is often argued that the slur [f--] was a) never a derogatory term, for example, in the United Kingdom, where it denotes a cigarette, and b) the slur was re-appropriated similar to Women's movements re-appropriation of the word 'bitch', these arguments seem more like sallow excuses. Here, C. J. Pascoe's study on forms of masculinity in high school is helpful: Drawing on Judith Butler's research on gender identity, Pascoe describes the [f--] as an abject disposition hinging on heterosexual masculinity, meaning that it "is not necessarily a static identity that attaches permanently to a certain (gay) boy's body; rather, it is a fluid identity that boys struggle to avoid, often by lobbing the insult at others."²²³ Pascoe traces how this fluidity makes it a perfect disciplinary tool even applied by educational institutions: "It is fluid enough that boys police their behaviors out of fear of having the [f--] identity permanently adhere and definitive enough so that boys recognize a [f--] behavior and strive to avoid it."²²⁴ Since nobody wants to be labelled like that, teenage boys will go out of their way to avoid that, thus resorting to primal displays of "compulsive heterosexuality"²²⁵ or all the practices that ensure their display of normative heterosexuality. This suggests that 4chan either primarily attracts high school boys—especially in the beginning, when it was an online hangout for teenaged Poole and his friends, this is absolutely plausible—or grown men with great deals of (internalized) homophobia suffering from fragile masculinity.

As stated earlier, the potpourri of 4chan has also engaged in the creation and circulation of many, many Internet memes. *LOLcats*, image macros with photos of cats and misspelled, often derogatory captions are among the earliest most famous products. Whole sets of character-driven memes known as Advice Animals have also found their way from Something Awful, while so-called *Rage Comics* have been native to 4chan. Its users have also been responsible for some of the biggest Internet raids that can be described as multi-media strategy against designated opponents or victims by flocks of anons. *Over 9000 Penises* denotes an incident when talk show moderator Oprah Winfrey was trolled during live television. The raid needs be understood in two parts: *Over 9000* is a catchphrase denoting a very, very large number from the Japanese anime show *Dragon Ball Z*. In one of the episodes, the main character Goku's power level is asked by two antagonist warriors to which is replied: "It's over 9000!" Any physics teacher would counter with "9000 what?" to indicate the missing size unit. Later, it was even identified as a translational error with the original Japanese version only

²²³ Pascoe, 22.

²²⁴ Pascoe 2007, 54.

²²⁵ Pascoe builds the term 'compulsive heterosexuality' on Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*. Pascoe 2007, 86.

attesting a power level over 8000. Nevertheless, over 9000 became synonymous with anything incredibly large and has been used for exaggerations. It made its way to Oprah's official forum website in a post by someone—presumably a 4chan user—pretending to be part of a pedophile network. In a live show on the topic of internet predators in September 2008, Oprah would address the post as following:

Rules of the internet.

1. Do not talk about /b/
2. Do NOT talk about /b/
3. We are Anonymous
4. Anonymous is legion
5. Anonymous never forgives
6. Anonymous can be a horrible, senseless, uncaring monster
7. Anonymous is still able to deliver
8. There are no real rules about posting
9. There are no real rules about moderation either - enjoy your ban
10. If you enjoy any rival sites - DON'T
11. All your carefully picked arguments can easily be ignored
12. Anything you say can and will be used against you
13. Anything you say can be turned into something else - fixed
14. Do not argue with trolls - it means that they win
15. The harder you try the harder you will fail
16. If you fail in epic proportions, it may just become a winning failure
17. Every win fails eventually
18. Everything that can be labeled can be hated
19. The more you hate it the stronger it gets
20. Nothing is to be taken seriously
21. Original content is original only for a few seconds before getting old
22. Copypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
23. Copypasta is made to ruin every last bit of originality
24. Every repost is always a repost of a repost
25. Relation to the original topic decreases with every single post
26. Any topic can be easily turned into something totally unrelated
27. Always question a person's sexual preferences without any real reason
28. Always question a person's gender - just in case it's really a man
29. In the internet all girls are men and all kids are undercover FBI agents
30. There are no girls on the internet
31. TITS or GTFO - the choice is yours
32. You must have pictures to prove your statements
33. Lurk more - it's never enough
34. There is porn of it, no exceptions
35. If no porn is found at the moment, it will be made
36. There will always be even more fucked up shit than what you just saw
37. You can not divide by zero (just because the calculator says so)
38. No real limits of any kind apply here - not even the sky
39. CAPSLOCK IS CRUISE CONTROL FOR COOL
40. EVEN WITH CRUISE CONTROL YOU STILL HAVE TO STEER
41. Desu isn't funny. Seriously guys. It's worse than Chuck Norris jokes.
42. Nothing is Sacred
43. The more beautiful and pure a thing is - the more satisfying it is to corrupt it
44. Even one positive comment about Japanese things can make you a weeaboo
45. When one sees a lion, one must get into the car.
46. There is always furry porn of it.
47. The pool is always closed.

Fig. 28: Rules of 4chan. Although these remained unofficial, their influence on meme culture is lasting. It reads like a manual for trolling and already includes anti-feminist propaganda. Rule 30 builds on the logic that even if you were a girl on the Internet, you would never admit to that in fear of harassment. This is given through rule 31, TITS or GTFO (get the fuck out), asking users to 'prove' their gender. Another popular rule is number 34 which is also often used for trolling attempt, e.g. the note to add "rule 34" to a Google search.

Let me read you something which was posted on our message boards from someone who claims to be a member from a known pedophile network. It said this: '*He doesn't forgive, he doesn't forget, his group has over 9,000 penises, and they're all raping children.*' So, I want you to know, they're organized, and they have systematic ways of hurting children, and they use the internet to do it.²²⁶

The trolling was successful: Oprah not only referenced a 4chan in-joke once, but twice, considering that "We do not forgive, we do not forget" has been part of the rules of 4chan since its founding. [28] In this regard, Oprah successfully took the bait much to the amusement of the anonymous trolls, who saw their mission as accomplished. Moreover, the example also shows the racialized power dynamics that are enforced by the male-gendered, white-read trolls making fun of a Black woman which needs to be understood as an online continuation of structural racism. The dichotomy of the self-perception and the public image of 4chan users has been driven apart by media coverage ever since the conservative network FOX News aired a special report on Anonymous in 2009, calling them "hackers on steroids" and "domestic terrorists" and 4chan "an internet hate machine".²²⁷ Of course, this was wildly celebrated by anons who finally were able to convince media outlets that they really were the monsters these normies should be afraid of. Since the everyday language on 4chan is so ripe with racist, antisemitic, misogynistic, and homo- and transphobic slurs, most first-time users were accordingly disturbed, making it easy to hold up the image of "hackers on steroids" for them. In another vein, the new-found fame also took its toll on the community who suddenly became aware of the inescapability of politics. What became 4chan's most prominent raid also represents a turning point in the history of hacktivism.

In January of 2008, a video of actor Tom Cruise giving an interview to the Church of Scientology was leaked.²²⁸ In the video, Cruise makes several exorbitantly positive claims about the cult and manically promotes it as a life-saver, circa in the same manner as his notorious performance at the Oprah Winfrey Show in 2005.²²⁹ By then, controversies surrounding the cult had been common knowledge, yet it was almost impossible to speak out publicly due to instant threats of legal actions. For example, journalist and writer Karin Spaink found herself in a 10-year-long legal battle against Scientology after she had published allegedly secret documents of the cult online.²³⁰ However, this was not really a problem for the anons of 4chan, who grouped together with other hackers and message board users taking a stance against Scientology to form *Project Chanology*. In an announcement video titled *Message to Scientology*, an

²²⁶ 43anonymous 2008.

²²⁷ Reuploaded by Fangl33t 2009.

²²⁸ Reuploaded by Aleteuk 2008.

²²⁹ Fun fact: Actor Christian Bale, who played the titular role in *American Psycho*, stated in an interview that he based the character off of Tom Cruise's weird appearances in late night shows.

²³⁰ A complete summary of the events can be found on Spaink's website: <https://www.spaink.net/cos/verweng.html>.

automated voice played over a video of a stormy, cloudy sky, confronting the cult with its strategies of misinformation and propaganda before stating: “For the good of your followers, for the good of mankind, and for our own enjoyment, we shall expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form.”²³¹ What is really interesting here is the double-edged reasoning of Anonymous: They’re doing it for a better world for everyone, but also for their own lulz. How does a resistance movement with a political agenda go together with the ethics of trolling? At least in the beginning, the unlikely pair went on very well. In true guerilla fashion, Anonymous planned a series of attacks that ranged from DDoS attacks²³² and pranks like ordering unpaid pizzas to Scientology offices or spamming their fax machines with black pages in order to waste printing toner.²³³ On February 10, 2008, the first real-life demonstrations were held at Scientology headquarters worldwide with more than 7,000 people attending. This is also the first instance of protesters affiliating with Anonymous wearing the Guy Fawkes masks made famous in the graphic novel-turned-movie *V for Vendetta*. Given the growing media coverage of these demonstrations, another real-life protest was held on March 15. The protest turned into a live action role-play of famous Internet memes including the chanting of Rick Astley’s song-turned-meme *Never Gonna Give You Up* in front of the Scientology headquarters. Of course, Scientology was not happy about it at all. They had to accept the fact that they couldn’t take legal action against an anonymous collective as well as becoming a target for ridicule. The protests continued throughout 2008 and 2009, and even though the number of attendees was on decline, they ultimately contributed to a long-standing scratch of the cult’s image.

The much bigger damage, however, hit Anonymous themselves: On 4chan, fiery disputes flared up between the moral anons and lulz anons over the ethics of protesting. The lulz anons accused the moral anons of abandoning their principles as trolls and turning to activism. As described at the beginning, the troll milks the lulzcow for *his* personal entertainment and not to make a political statement. The moral anons, on the other hand, saw Anonymous as a new form of protest for free speech and backed what they saw as actions worthy of support. This dispute was further bifurcated in the wake of the WikiLeaks controversy in 2010.²³⁴ Naturally, Anonymous decided to support the whistleblowing platform along its founder Julian Assange through further DDoS attacks on companies with negative ties to WikiLeaks. A year later, Anonymous attacked Tunisian governmental websites in an effort to support the Tunisian

²³¹ ChurchOfScientology 2008.

²³² Distributed Denial of Server (DDoS) attacks aim to cripple a website. Automated calls to the site make the network of the host that maintains the service temporarily inaccessible. DDoSing is illegal in North America and many European countries and can even be punished with imprisonment.

²³³ Jacobsen 2008.

²³⁴ Coleman 2014, 81-85.

Revolution which accounted for many demonstrators engaging in hacktivism and more formally established the practice as a form of protest. The hacktivists also set up proxies and changed network protocols so Tunisians were able to access again parts of the Internet that had previously been restricted by their government, a practice that later spread to neighboring countries and played a major role in the Arab Spring movements.²³⁵ By this time, /b/ had turned more into a portal for DDoSing than shitposting—much to the regret of the lulz anons: “Furthermore, as Hactivist Anon grew, Lulz Anon receded, suggesting that the cultural landscape has room for only one Anonymous at a time.”²³⁶ Perhaps if their basic morale would not have been mutually exclusive, the practice of trolling would have moved into a different direction. In the end, the least thing the lulz anons were able to do is turn the term [moralf--] into a common slur for activists comparable with the term ‘social justice warrior’ originating on Tumblr. In the meantime, Anonymous hactivists were increasingly criticized in the media for their usage of illegal methods like DDoS as well as the generally unbearable habitat of 4chan, prompting many to ultimately leave the website. By now, it was not possible to go back to the early days of trolling; once you’ve created a global anonymous hacker collective, it’s hard to get back to some form of levity like in the days of Jenkem. From Project Chanology on, all attempts at trolling that could somehow be traced back to 4chan were automatically attributed to Anonymous. As Phillips put it, Anonymous’ declaration of support for the grassroots movement Occupy Wall Street in 2011 “was the final nail in this coffin.”²³⁷ Most users of the lulz section found this turn toward social protest unbearable because they saw the main responsibility of a troll in opposing everyone, not joining in support. Although Occupy was an anarchist movement that opposed the greed and corruption of the financial sector after the global economical crisis of 2008 and was loosely related to the ethics of trolling, it was often contrasted with the right-wing populist Tea Party movement in the media as a leftist counterpart. In fact, Occupy supporters included many prominent left-wing intellectuals such as Jodi Dean and Slavoj Žižek. This could be yet another reason why lulz anon refused to support Occupy: Even if trolls like to position themselves as apolitical or hard to pin down, the basic value of free speech historically stems from the libertarian movement. The use of racist and homophobic slurs as an ‘appropriation of free speech’ demonstrates this attitude very well. Even if the anons never expected to be at the centre of global politics at some point, they should have acknowledged much earlier that the freedom of an individual only goes so far until the freedom of the neighbor is restricted. The fact that this reflection never took place or was ignored on purpose is not only evidence of the political one-dimensionality among anons, but also explains the diaspora of users onto other platforms. The die-hard remnants clung to their fundamental right to free

²³⁵ Jordan 2015, 177.

²³⁶ Phillips 2015, 151.

²³⁷ Phillips 2015, 150.

speech, which would continue to bubble over the coming years and ultimately make a significant contribution to the bundling of the alt-right movement.

4.3. The Evolution of the Image Macro

Most people think of an image macro when they think about internet memes, or “pictures with overlaid text.”²³⁸ But this definition given by Shifman and later reiterated by Wiggins²³⁹ actually lacks a third component, the graphic layout. This is important because the text defines the way of reading for the user: In image macros, there is almost always an intertextual play like a contradiction between the text at the top and the text at the bottom that creates the meme’s meaning. In this regard, image macros combine in themselves the classic triad of image, text, and layout conveying some sort of joke or reaction. But why do so many definitions exclude the layout? In our visual culture, a certain form of literacy of images is quietly presumed. On the one hand, this Eurocentric view glosses over different forms of reading including dextrosinistral writing systems moving from right to left. On the other hand, this assumption obscures the necessary media literacy to understand image macros in the first place which further cements the in- and out-groups. In the same vein, the predecessors of image macros can be found in the graphic design of posters from advertisements to propaganda, for example, the iconic campaign known as Rosie the Riveter or in the feminist pop art of Barbara Kruger [29] and the political photo collages of John Heartfield. [30] Unfortunately, creating an entire canon of image macros in the history of art and images exceeds the limits of this thesis, although I have engaged in projects with students attempting to canonise memes in my teaching.²⁴⁰

One of the earliest examples is the aforementioned template known as *One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor* originating from the 2001 movie *The Lord of the Rings*. [31] The image is a film still showing the character Boromir, played by Sean Bean, making an emphatic hand gesture to highlight his opinion on the difficulty of destroying the legendary ring in the volcanoes of Mordor, namely, that one cannot simply walk over there considering the unspeakable dangers of the land of evil. This led to countless mutations of the text while keeping the opening words “one does not simply”: Many of them replace the word “walk” in order to create more absurd statements, e.g., “one does not simply fly coach to Mordor”, others make use of the prohibitory declaration to state general expressions of opinion such as “one does not simply go to bed at a reasonable hour”. In one very early instance, a Something Awful user photoshopped Boromir

²³⁸ Shifman 2014, 111.

²³⁹ Wiggins 2019, 40.

²⁴⁰ The course revolved around the question whether memes can be understood as a form of art and if yes, where they should be placed in the Western canon of art history. In a critical examination of the canon in small groups as well as in the bigger collective, class participants engaged with metanarratives and created a satirical, rhizomatic ‘canon’ of meme history. The class concluded with the impracticality of static, linear historical narratives in regard to memes that proliferate transversally across time and space and hinge upon a model that is able to correspond to constant change and remixes across media.



Fig. 29: Barbara Kruger, *I Shop Therefore I Am*, 1987, screenprint on vinyl, 125 x 125cm. The caption emulates Descartes' postulate of *cogito ergo sum*.

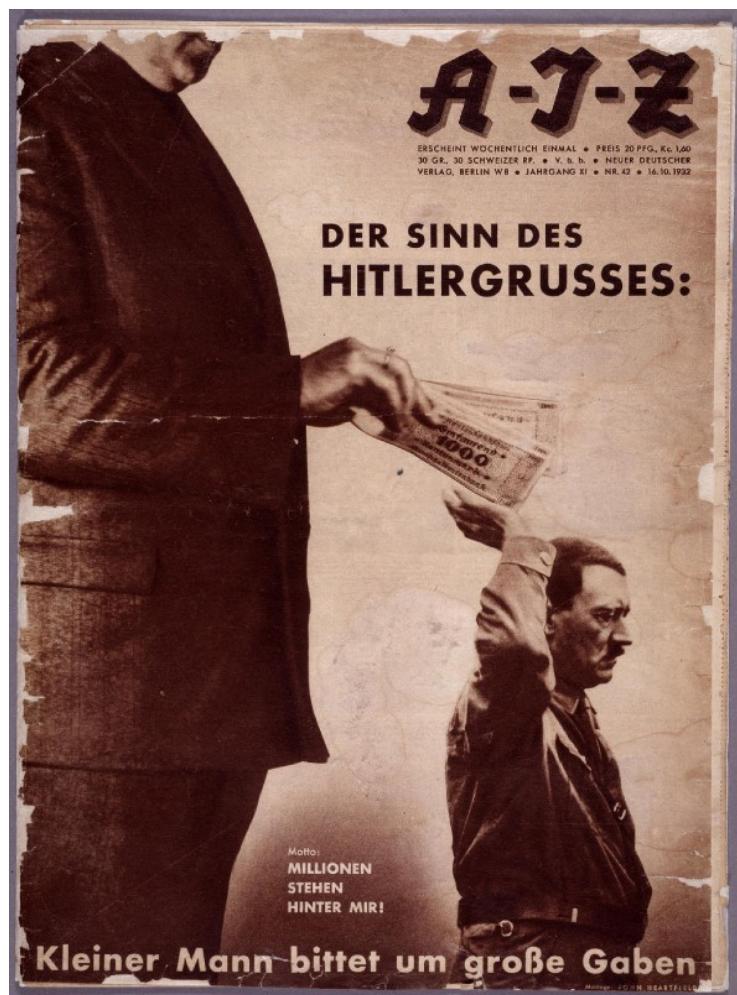


Fig. 30: John Heartfield, *Der Sinn des Hitlergrusses*, 1932, rotogravure. Heartfield published many of his anti-Nazi photomontage works in the *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* including this one.



Fig. 31: One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor. This first iteration of the image macro is from 2004.

into a car with the caption “one does not simply drive into Mordor” and uploaded it to the message board. [32] This is the origin story of the term ‘image macro’: Set up in 1999, Something Awful was perhaps the first humour site on the Internet entirely dedicated to fun and entertainment.²⁴¹ Just like on Usenet groups, users would discuss all sorts of things and exchange jokes and funny media, including what is now known as image macros. The term ‘image macro’ stems from a function used in programming known as macro. The macro is a kind of coding placeholder or shortcut that executes a predefined function when the specific command *macro* is typed. In a thread from 2016, Lowtax recounts adding some macros for posting images that were shared most often on the forum: “Back in 2001 or whatever, I decided to add vB code that would automatically post an ‘image macro,’ which is what the KIDS THESE DAYS call ‘memes’.”²⁴² These pieces of code read “[image-macro]” where the word ‘macro’ is replaced with commands to show up a specific image saved under that name. In their FAQs from 2017, Something Awful lists some of the commands including “[img-amazing]”, “[img-awesome]” or “[img-timeline]”.²⁴³ It is important to note that these commands call predetermined, fixed images, which additionally reveal which reaction they cause by their title, and offer no possibility for further mutation of these. In order to create a new image, one had to add a new macro or simply go the old-fashioned way by attaching the image to the post. It is

²⁴¹ Beran 2019, 57.

²⁴² vB refers to Visual Basic, a source code editor by Microsoft. The original post is archived on Something Awful:
<https://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3773226&page=1>.

²⁴³ The FAQs of Something Awful are not publicly accessible due to the site using a member fee but have been archived by anotherone0: https://anotherone0.tripod.com/SA_FAQ.htm.

interesting that image macros were used on Something Awful as a form of replicating the same image over and over again, thus emphasizing the memetic idea of canonization through repetition.²⁴⁴ For sure, these made many image macros originating from the forum iconic, but gave way to other websites and programs to mutate and further circulate them. Interestingly, the font type classically associated with an image macro—the black-outline, white-filled Impact font in all caps—was already used generously in the early 2000s on Something Awful.

Internet memes have found their dominant form of existence in the image macro at least until the early 2010s. Over the coming years, many more combinations of images and text were remixed resulting in what I refer to as ‘the classical period of memes’. These most well-known Internet memes often combine funny or reaction-provoking photos with Internet slang and were primarily used as visual comments on posts. We can see a clear step in evolution of the image macro from a reaction tool to stand-alone meme in its spread across the internet: While image macros were mostly used to respond sarcastically on Something Awful and 4chan, they became so widespread that they were more and more used outside of this clear communicational context. One of the earliest examples of this trajectory is the *O RLY Owl*, where both text and image have discrete lines of usage before coming together in an image macro. [33] First, the statement “O rly?” is a contraction of the reply “Oh really?” and is almost



Fig. 32: One Does Not Simply Drive Into Mordor.

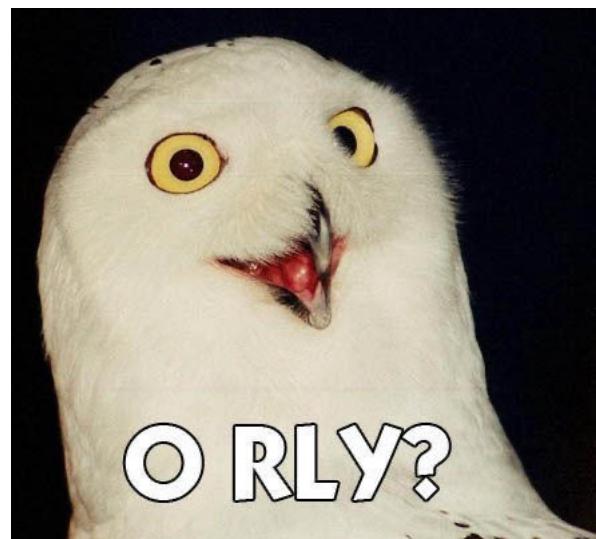


Fig. 33: The sassy O RLY? owl.

exclusively used in a sarcastic and condescending way, especially in response to blatantly obvious posts. This is again in line with the phenomenon of eternal September and the attitude of long-term Internet users toward newbies. In a patronizing manner, ‘older’ users almost never choose to handle new users with kid gloves, especially not on 4chan and Something Awful. Secondly, the image of the wide-eyed, overly excited looking snow owl in the template had been posted on a Usenet

²⁴⁴ Blackmore 1999, 18-23.



Fig. 34: The original I Can Has Cheezburger? cat aka Happy Cat.

such as ‘teh’ instead of ‘the’, misspellings such as substituting the letter ‘s’ with ‘z’ as in ‘internetz’ and ‘lulz’ as well as grammatical errors like ‘I are serious cat’ are all part of *LOLspeak*. The language of LOLcats hinges on minimization and cuteness not unlike phenomena like babyspeak and evolved from chat language. For example, the most famous LOLcat is a British Shorthair cat sitting with its mouth wide open under the caption “I can has Cheezburger?” as if the cat was asking for food. [34] LOLcats anthropomorphize felines and, in contrast to other image macros, are more universally understandable across national borders, which arguably contributed to their popularity. In 2007, the website icanhas.cheezburger.com was created by Eric Nakagawa and Kari Unebasami.²⁴⁶ The blog offered users the possibility to upload, caption, and share their own LOLcats but in the years before, LOLcats were already circulating on 4chan and Something Awful. The former even had its own weekly ritual known as *Caturday* which declared Saturday as the day to flood 4chan with LOLcats and other cat

newsgroup in 2001 before being remixed with the image caption “O RLY?” in all-cap letters of the Impact font type on Something Awful.²⁴⁵ Thus, the meme has to be understood as a sassy, sarcastic response most often used as a reply for stupid questions. One variation of the owl wearing a monocle highlights its condescending grandeur and arrogance while other remixes while the caption has also been used as a snowclone in many other memes.

After O RLY? took the Internet by storm, another beloved animal soon stole the spotlight. LOLcats, referring to the chat abbreviation for ‘laughing out loud’, are image macros using funny or cute photos of cats and intentionally misspelled captions, suggesting that these captions in broken English are uttered by the animal. Abbreviations like ‘plz’ for ‘please’, typos



Fig. 35: Harry Whittier Frees, The Nurse, photographic print, 1914

²⁴⁵ Phillips, Milner 2021, 71.

²⁴⁶ Wortham 2008.

images. It is not exactly clear why the Internet has been so obsessed with cats, but a few reasons come to mind: First and foremost, cats are cute and provide unlimited funny content, as the myriad of cat videos on YouTube and TikTok insinuate. Moreover, many people—not just pet owners—find cats very relatable and, even more important for memes, absolutely hilarious. Their behavior can be unpredictable and odd, for example, the bits of high energy making a cat run around the house maniacally especially after feeding colloquially referred to as ‘having the zoomies’. Lastly, cats are popular pets and street animals across the globe, making them familiar to anyone. In this regard, it is no wonder that cats have been so popular on the Internet where they were endowed with the imaginary possibility of speaking silly stuff—although the trajectory of cat images reaches far longer: In the 1870s, photographer Harry Pointer created the Brighton Cats, staged souvenir postcards of cats with one-liner captions akin to greeting cards.²⁴⁷ This tradition was picked up by Harry Whittier Frees who went even further and photographed dressed-up kittens in elaborate settings, such as wearing an apron while cooking, having a tea party, and jumping ropes. [35] The kitschy images have been used in children’s book and also feature dogs and rabbits—however, they don’t feature superimposed text like the ones by Pointer. Thus, Whittier Frees’ work is more in line with a memetic technique than the medium of image macros. In 1986, photographer John Welzenbach published the calendar *Morris: A Cat for Our Times* [36] featuring an orange cat in different settings with sarcastic captions quite similar to the later phenomenon of *Grumpy Cat*.

The emergence of LOLcats remained strong throughout the 2000s, and although aesthetics have changed away from LOLspeak, cats continue to play a vital role in the creation

of Internet memes. Over the years, many archetypes have formed: Next to *I Can Has Cheezburger? Cat* aka *Happy Cat*, one cat that has prevailed is *Ceiling Cat*. This specimen pushes her head through a square hole in the white ceiling as if looking down from above. [37] It was originally paired with the caption “Ceiling Cat is watching you masturbate” and has



Fig. 37: Ceiling Cat is watching you masturbate.

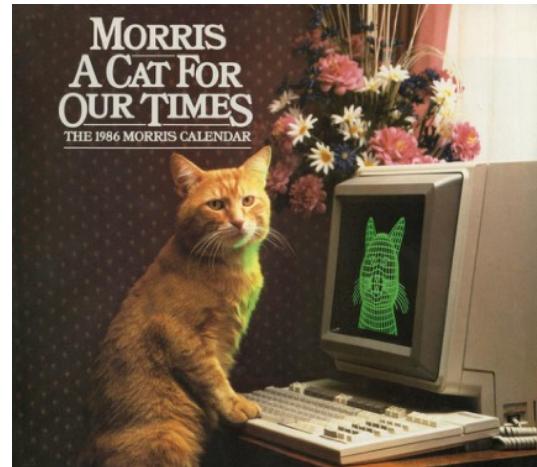


Fig. 36: Title page from the calendar Morris: A Cat for our times.

²⁴⁷ Kovačić 2022, 140.

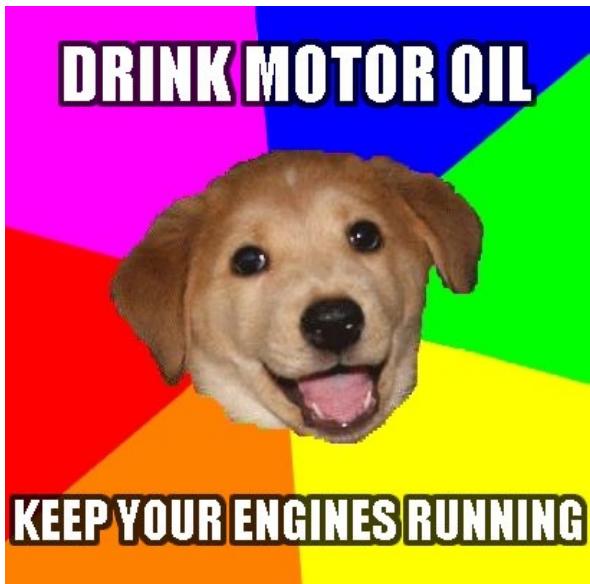


Fig. 38: Advice Dog advising to drink motor oil and keep your engines running.

children's song from YouTube.²⁴⁸

On another note, O RLY? and LOLcats mark the final triumph of animal photos in meme culture that gave way to distinct meme templates known Advice Animals. Generally, these refer to photoshopped image macros of animal heads placed in the centre of a colorful background captioned with ridiculous life advice. In most cases, the background is designed like a color wheel or a hypnotic spiral while each variant is allocated a color scheme. Just like O RLY?, the Advice Animals also make use of the white Impact font with black outlines. The first and most famous example is *Advice Dog*, a photo of a jolly-looking Golden Retriever puppy in front of six rainbow-colored triangle shapes handing out well-intentioned yet bad advice. It originated in September 2006 from a thread on The Mushroom Kingdom, a message board for fans of the video game series Super Mario, where a user was asking for acting advice regarding a kissing scene.²⁴⁹ One of the commenters encouraged the original poster on his undertaking and, as a gesture, also shared an image of his dog, a Golden Retriever named Boba Fett after the *Star Wars* character. A couple of days later, the same user posted Boba's head in front of the colorful background. From there, the meme spread quickly across the Internet, for example, in a YTMND known as *Boba Stares* underlined with a score of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No 13.²⁵⁰ The breakthrough of *Advice Dog* was cemented with its own entry on Internet culture wiki Encyclopedia Dramatica in 2008 and the ready-made, easily accessible upload as a template to meme-building website MemeGenerator a year later. Generally, the tone of *Advice Dog* is more

²⁴⁸ factsoftheworldbynish 2023.

²⁴⁹ Although the message board has been renamed, the thread is still archived there: Fungi Forums, <https://themushroomkingdom.net/board/index.php?PHPSESSID=vbnngi2781pjn53bhhdf5jrq4&topic=9725.0;all>.

²⁵⁰ LizardDude 2006.

resurfaced again in 2018 after a similar incident of a cat looking down from the ceiling was posted on Twitter. Finally, one of the most well-known characters of the Internet rose to fame thanks to LOLcats: Grumpy Cat, who will be discussed in chapter 5.1., became abruptly popular in 2013 thanks to her moody visage that made her an ideal LOLcat template. The ongoing memefication of cats has also made its way to TikTok: In 2023, viral video edits of *Happy Cat*, a video from 2015 of a kitten jumping up-and-down excitedly, were remixed with a high-pitched version of *My Happy Song*, a

wholesome compared to O RLY? and tends to celebrate lack of knowledge in a more naive and gullible kind of way even when the content itself remains dark. Most prominently, the logic of Advice Dog rests on the interplay of top and bottom texts. While the former usually refers to a problem or phenomenon, the latter suggests a contradictory or morbid solution. There are variations reading “Select all your desktop icons” at the top and “Press enter” at the bottom that are essentially trolling attempts; others dive into wordplays like “Drink motor oil/keep your engines running”; [38] while others act as sadistic incitements to violence with examples reading “Buy a dog/Abuse it” or misogynistic examples stating “Hit her all you want/Women don’t have feelings”. Advice Dog makes a great example of the ethics of usage: Emerging from an environment where the predominant form of communication is trolling, even asking for advice becomes a guarantor to be made fun of. While that may be slightly upsetting, it turns really problematic once the boundary between self-deprecating humor and abuse or discrimination is transgressed, whether in terms of animal torture or gender-based violence. However, the tension between the cute, friendly, wholesome puppy and the twisted, violent, dark advice given is also the reason why Advice Dog became so popular and the textbook example for early Internet memes. Their humor was ruthless and mainly marked by methods of exclusion. This is also evident in the popularity of shock sites such as rotten.com, which featured images of dead or sick bodies from autopsies or forensics, as well as the early viral triad of shock images *Tubgirl*, *Goatse*, and *Lemon Party* often used in bait-and-switch pranks:²⁵¹ *Tubgirl* refers to an image of a contorting woman in a bathtub with an orange liquid splashing from her anus down to her face; *Goatse* shows a man stretching his anus very wide with his hands; and *Lemon Party* show three elderly men engaging in sexual acts with each other. In this regard, memes like Advice Dog became artefacts of trolls outdoing each other, always with the goal of creating more unspeakable and disturbing memes that would scare off outsiders. While the enjoyment factor of such content is questionable, it was indispensable to the specific form of dominant humor on the Internet in the 2000s.

The popularity of Advice Dog spawned many mutations starring other animals from wolves to otters. All these memes share the same logic of reading that would become so influential for memes, although each variant inhabits a slightly different niche: For example, *Philosoraptor* denotes an image macro showing the head of a green



Fig. 39: Velociraptor questioning the area of impact of the Zombie apocalypse.

²⁵¹ Bait-and-switch prank is a method of Internet trolling alluding victims to click on something via hyperlink while linking something entirely different. The most popular form is rickrolling or linking to Rick Astley's music video *Never Gonna Give You Up*.

cartoon velociraptor with its claw scratching his chin as if contemplating. Most captions are superficially profound two-part questions split into top and bottom texts such as “If the Zombie apocalypse happens in Vegas, does it stay in Vegas?” and “If they made a movie about Morgan Freeman, who would narrate it?”. [39] Akin to Advice Dog, Philosoraptor’s background is made up of light and dark green triangles signaling a color wheel. Philosoraptor was widely used to mock pseudo-intellectual behavior online. The graphic of the contemplating velociraptor was made by Sam Smith in 2008 as an inside joke of one of his friends that blew up on the Internet: “It was inspired by our friend Devin, who was a philosophy major and was always hunched over his desk thinking, so we called him the philosoraptor.”²⁵² Another spawn of Advice Dog is the template called *Socially Awkward Penguin*. It shows the photo of a strutting Adélie penguin originally taken from the National Geographic website.²⁵³ The penguin is seen from the side and appears to be walking from right to left in front of a background of blue triangle shapes. Again, the layout of the meme is working exactly as its predecessors, but its niche is dealing with social anxiety and inappropriate social norms. Where *Advice Dog* was funny for handing out bad advice and *Philosoraptor* for nonsensical contemplation, *Socially Awkward Penguin* referred to vulnerability and unsuccessful attempts that are also known as ‘fails’. Captions consisted of an ordinary phenomenon or action taking place in the top text and an anxious reaction or response in the bottom text, for example, “Ask friends how to get to the party/Stay home” or “Start telling joke/Forget punchline”. [40] In this regard, *Socially Awkward Penguin* was perhaps the first meme related to mental health and behavioral problems—a trend that becomes much more prominent in the mid-to-late 2010s—as well as heavily promoting the kind of self-deprecating humor that characterizes Millennial and Gen Z jokes. Moreover, *Socially Awkward Penguin* spawned mutations that went beyond alterations to the caption: *Socially Awesome Penguin* memes are inversions of the template showing the bird walking from left to right in front of a red background featuring empowering captions. One example reads “Say a word wrong” that consequently builds up a reaction like running away, but instead the bottom text goes on “Create hilarious inside joke”. [41] Another example describes the high school fantasy of “Crush walks up to you in hall” and continues with “Have a quick chat, you’re meeting her after school”. *Socially Awesome Penguin* is also one of the first memes to engage in cross overs with other memes: In one iteration, the caption is “Visit Middle Earth/Simply walk into Mordor” in correspondence to the popular *Lord of the Rings* meme discussed earlier. In 2011, the meme underwent another structural mutation on Tumblr that combined *Socially Awkward Penguin* with its *Socially Awesome* counterpart by merging the former’s top half with the latter’s bottom half. The split screen was used to transmit contradictory yet relatable social actions that were well-intentioned but turned out to be naive or wrong: For example, “Gives lost stranger directions” in

²⁵² Lazzaro 2016.

²⁵³ Wiggins 2019, 88.



Fig. 40: Socially Awkward Penguin.

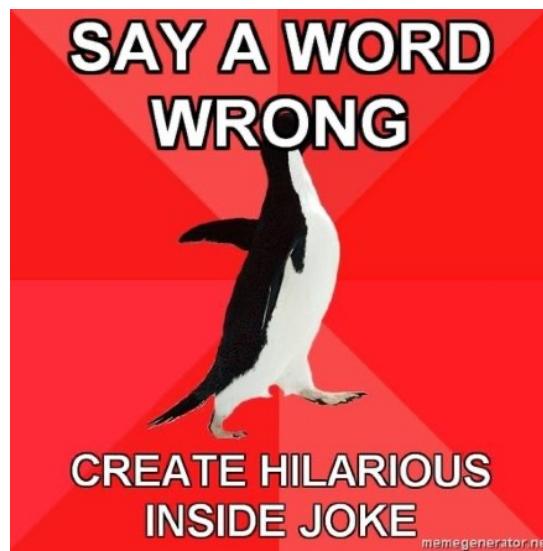


Fig. 41: Socially Awesome Penguin.



Fig. 42: Hybrid of Socially Awkward Penguin and Socially Awesome Penguin.



Fig. 43: Success Kid celebrating his win.

propagating the disgusting and inconsiderate stereotype of a single young man, and *Paranoid Parrot*, an early form of schizoposting using a hypochondriac bird reacting to everyday tasks with bursts of paranoia. In general, the key points of the template—animal in the centre, triangular colorful background, top and bottom text using the Impact font type—did not change except for some anomalies using another font type and similar minor variations. In fact, the image-text-layout triad and especially the color wheel background and the Impact font type have become such a milestone that the design is often invoked to refer to ‘old’ memes. The format was maintained until the early 2010s, when humans slowly began replacing the animals in the meme.

Starring a variety of characters, one of the earliest versions of humanoid image macros stars *Success Kid*, a photograph of a baby at the beach with squinted eyes pressing its lip together and making a fist used to denote a ‘win’ (as opposed to fails like in the template *Socially Awkward Penguin*). The baby’s mother took the photo in 2007 and uploaded it to the photography website Flickr from where it spread to MySpace, where it was used with superimposed text like “I hate sandcastles” suggesting that the kid had just destroyed one.²⁵⁴ In 2011, *Success Kid* arrived on Reddit, where it was photoshopped over a violet color wheel background and captioned with short narratives of unexpected success. In regard to the depicted kid, these are often phrased from a slightly naive perspective while the meme is structured into an expected result at the top and a far surpassing outcome at the bottom, for example, “Ordered a 4 piece chicken strip basket” and “Got 5 pieces” or “Puzzle says 2-4 years/It only took 1”. [43] Alongside animals, babies and toddlers make the most popular meme characters, at least in the mainstream. That is why most memes using children become

the red Awesome upper half and “realizes later that they were wrong” on the blue Awkward bottom half. [42] Although the hybrid version is more in line with the original *Socially Awkward Penguin*, these memes were also used to display the phenomenon of being torn between a socially successful and an embarrassing interaction.

Over the next years, the *Advice Animals* happily propagated across the Internet and spawned iterations such as *Courage Wolf*, a motivational wolf aggressively dictating over-exaggerated advice, or *Foul Bachelor Frog*,

²⁵⁴ Wiggins 2019, 95-96.



Fig. 44: Scumbag Steve won't clean up his mess.

normified rather quickly: for example, Success Kid has been used regularly in advertising as well as in state-founded campaigns.²⁵⁵

Success Kid is a paradigmatic example of a new evolutionary step of image macros: the use of the same photo of a person who, based on their facial expressions, gestures, or style, is attributed with certain character traits generating a new form of stereotype. Similar to a cartoon character, the meme personality is endowed with certain traits exemplifying their archetype. In this stage of evolution, these memes prove their relative autonomy within the constraints of their specific stereotype: Each character inhabits its

own niche where countless stories of them are imagined and refer to them as stand-alone characters. Unlike celebrities, however, they are down-to-earth and relatable. Graphically, most characters lose the pinwheel background of the classic Advice Animals, but continue the top and bottom text using the Impact font. Their origin stories are different, but many of the photos used are found footage of real people that unwillingly became clichés on the Internet leading to unpredictable consequences with some tragic endings. One of the earliest advice animal-turned-human is *Scumbag Steve*, a photo of a white young man wearing a cap backwards, a coat with a fur collar, and a long chain around his neck, an outfit reminiscent of early 2000s rappers. He stands in the doorway with his mouth open, looking like he is about to ask for an annoying favor. The captions mirror this impression: “Don’t worry, bro, I’ll pay you” is written at the top and “Next week” at the bottom or “Pukes on something/Disappears” or “Goes to high school parties/Is 25 years old”. [44] *Scumbag Steve* takes on the role of the unreliable friend—not exactly a rewarding role for Blake Boston, as the young man in the photo is called by his legal name. Shortly after the meme went viral on Reddit, Facebook, and Tumblr in 2011, Boston owned up to it on Twitter and gave several interviews to various Internet magazines, stating that the photo was taken by his mother and later uploaded to his MySpace.²⁵⁶ Boston does not seem particularly bothered that his image has become a meme and, more importantly, has been contextualized negatively. Rather, he seems to be making the most of his 15 minutes of fame, releasing a single called *Scumbag Steve Ouverture* in 2012.²⁵⁷ He also seems to have understood very early on that it is better to resign himself to his role rather than to fight against

²⁵⁵ England 2012.

²⁵⁶ Upadhyay 2014.

²⁵⁷ Scumbag Steve 2012.



Fig. 45: Good Guy Greg always got your back.



Fig. 46: Overly Attached Girlfriend proves her skills.



Fig. 47: Bad Luck Brian never gets it right.

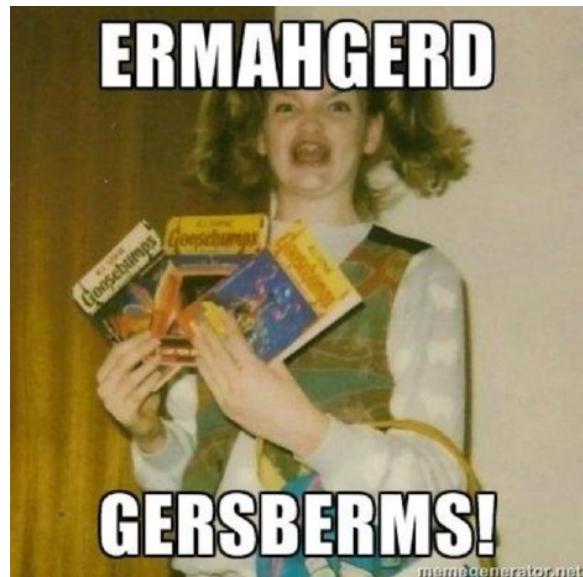


Fig. 48: Ermahgerd showing off her books.

it: When a meme showing a girl grimacing called *Annoying Facebook Girl* went viral that was primarily used to make fun of attention-grabbers, Boston penned an open letter to the anonymous girl depicted about his experience with the sudden fame and becoming a meme. He advises to stay calm and reminds her that she is much more than a photo used without her permission:

The part that will suck though is that there will always be those people that somehow think YOU did this, that you made the meme, and that you could stop it if you wanted to. That you have some control over it. You don't. The internet birthed you and they'll decide when you (the meme) will die.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Douglas 2011.

Interestingly, Boston fully admits to having no control over the spreading of the meme. This attitude might have been even more extreme in the early 2010s when there were little to no encompassing regulations on copyright and censorship for memes. This is part of a greater shift in belief: Where once someone might have sued for the unlawful use of their own image, in times of aspiring influencers selling their online personas, viral circulation functions more as a career booster. Boston's rhetoric of 'me vs. the rest of the world' is also noteworthy: the Internet is commonly imagined as the anonymous mass that has no individuality or control mechanisms, while the characters of Advice Animals appear as individuals fulfilling a specific role. In turn, I believe this is a massive factor in the emergence of these templates: In the endless, disorganized, constantly growing abundance of content, Advice Animals are recurring familiar characters similar to a series or sitcom, thus rendering the infinite Internet comprehensible. This is where the notion of the Internet as the Wild West plays a trick: in fact, the characters circulate in the bubble from which they were produced and thus serve more as identifiers than as general milestones.

The ethical counterpart to Scumbag Steve is known as *Good Guy Greg*, a friendly looking white man smirking at the camera with a joint in his mouth. He is usually captioned with wholesome statements such as "Sleeps on your couch/makes breakfast" or "Sees your grammatical error/doesn't correct because he knows what you meant". [45] *Good Guy Greg* is the anti-thesis of a troll and was mostly used unironically as a kind reply. Another character image macro is known as *Ermahgerd* or *Gersberms Girl*: In a blurry photo of a nerdy-looking girl sporting blonde pigtails and wearing a retainer, she looks over-excited as if photographed mid-sentence. The girl carries her school backpack in the crook of her arm and holds three books in her hand from the *Goosebumps* series, a popular children's horror story book series by R. L. Stine. The caption is onomatopoeic in reference to her braces and reads "Ermahgerd/Berks!" which means "Oh my god/Books!", while 'gersberms' is a phonetical interpretation of *Goosebumps*. [48] *Ermahgerd* was primarily used to signify excitement, whether it be honest or sarcastic. However, some authors also report on these notions as ableist slurs.²⁵⁹ In another vein, the distinct writing style resembles LOLspeak and was also featured in other meme templates, for example, in combination with highly excited pets, especially pugs. *Ermahgerd*'s pose also made it easy to photoshop entirely different objects into her hands, for example, *Grumpy Cat* with the captions "Ermahgerd" and "Germper Kert". *Ermahgerd* has a close relative in *Bad Luck Brian*, who is perhaps the most well-known image macro character of this generation, as apparent from an Instagram post of him meeting Doge in 2023, ten years after both became viral memes.²⁶⁰ The original photo shows an awkwardly smiling, ginger-haired

²⁵⁹ Sparby 2017, 72.

²⁶⁰ A photo of the two has been taken during Craven's trip to Japan in May 2023. @ownthedoge, Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cs6TK_rujWr/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWF1ZA==.

teenage boy with braces in a collared shirt and a sleeveless pullover. He's also emanating nerdy vibes which is affirmed in the captions stating embarrassing fails that went into the wrong direction as revealed by the bottom punchline: "Takes driving test" at the top and "Gets first DUI" at the bottom is written over the very first image macro uploaded to Reddit.²⁶¹ [47] Initially circulated by a childhood friend of the depicted boy later identified as Kyle Craven, the post did not get a lot of attention and was ultimately surpassed by its first mutation with the caption "Tries to stealthily fart in class/Shits". Over the years, Bad Luck Brian proved to be the most commercially successful meme of this era, appearing in McDonald's advertising and being printed on a variety of T-shirts, mugs, and other merchandise.

Another niche has been inhabited by the character referred to as *Overly Attached Girlfriend*: A portrait of a white brunette girl in a light blue shirt with eyes wide open giving a slightly obsessed appearance. The girl, whose name is Laina Morris, uploaded a video to YouTube in 2012 called *JB Fanvideo* from which the still was taken. There, she is performing Justin Bieber's hit single *Boyfriend* interpolated with custom lyrics from the perspective of a jealous and possessive stalker, singing "If I was your girlfriend/I'd never let you leave/Without a small recording device/Taped under your sleeve".²⁶² Just a day later, a still from the video captioned "I sewed my name on your shirts" at the top and "In case you forget you're taken" at the bottom was uploaded to Reddit. Later mutations hit the same notch with "It took you 10 minutes to get Home/Google Maps said it takes 8. Who is she." [46] or "I threw out all my medication/I only need you to be happy". *Overly Attached Girlfriend* also had a cross-over with Bad Luck Brian in a video sketch by Morris where both characters go on a dinner date.²⁶³ Many more additions to this generation of image macros were made between 2011 and 2013 that adhered to the same logic of a fixed character arc conveyed in the contrast between top and the bottom text. This tight framework provided the archetypes with consistency, but ultimately resulted in making the same joke over and over again; in other words, there was little space to mutate content except for the text given that stronger interventions in the design would have resulted in an entirely new image macro. Further, their steady interpretation made it also increasingly easy to monetize inoffensive mutations of these memes; in this regard, the classic character image macros took on the role of stock photos. Other forms of image macros from this period suffered from the same fate: For example, *Classical Art Memes* stem from a practice of captioning drawings and paintings from the Medieval, Renaissance or Baroque period with modern-day catchphrases. This form of memeing began in 2002, when students from the Academy of Media Arts Cologne created a software called Bayeux Historic Tale Construction

²⁶¹ DUI is an abbreviation for driving under the influence.

²⁶² Laina 2012.

²⁶³ Laina 2013.

Kit.²⁶⁴ The program is an image creator letting people chose and arrange specific images and caption them accordingly. The motives are taken from the Bayeux tapestry that was created in the 12th century and depicts the Norman conquest of England and the events of the battle of Hastings. However, the tool was also popular with Something Awful and 4chan users who also contributed to the practice of captioning paintings in old and medieval English in general and held, for example, photoshop contests on the topic. Another big inspiration stems from Medieval book painting that can sometimes be very specific and dubious due to many inside jokes among painters and scribes that are lost today.²⁶⁵ [49] Soon after, Classical Art Memes exploded thanks to a Facebook page of the same name sharing multiple memes a day. Paintings of all kinds were captioned or using object labelling with sometimes less and sometimes more funny outcomes. [50, 51] In turn, this led to an incredibly fast saturation of the meme market with art memes: Since they all built up on the contradiction between ‘ancient’ paintings and contemporary captions, their humor became very predictable and grew stale rather quickly. Additionally, the Classical Art Memes Facebook page began to print their (often stolen) memes onto merchandising products and sell them in their online shop. Nevertheless, these memes seem to still enjoy a greater fanbase that is also reflected in more than 5.2 million Facebook likes respectively 843,000 followers on Instagram.



Fig. 49: This famous depiction of two nuns harvesting penises from a tee is included in a manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose* from the 14th century by Jeanne de Montbaston. It has been interpreted as a harvest symbol as well as an allegory of fornication.

²⁶⁴ Their project site is no longer available but a similar tool has been created in their honor on <https://htck.github.io/bayeux/#/>.

²⁶⁵ See Nun Harvesting Phalluses from a Phallus Tree and a Monk and Nun Embracing, Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index: https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=31987.



Fig. 50: The meme remixes the painting *The Accolade* by Edmund Leighton from 1901 through object labeling: The queen knighting the man is labeled “white people”, her sword “gracias” and the knight “the Japanese waiter at the restaurant”, poking fun at white people trying to impress the wrong crowd.



Fig. 51: Many memes used the portraits by Joseph Ducreaux who was popular for his studies on mimics and expression. This example uses the painting *Portrait de l'artiste sous les traits d'un moqueur* from 1793 and a snowclone raising the hook “Fuck bitches, get money” from Junior M.A.F.I.A. & The Notorious B.I.G.’s classic hit *Get Money* from 1995 to the level of bourgeois language.

4.4. Methods of Niche Construction: Meme Characters

Thanks to the over-commercialization and general acceptance of image macros in the mainstream, they lost their appeal rather quickly for the edgelords on 4chan and Reddit. This led to the emergence of another subset of memes of the classic period, *Rage Comics*: These are badly drawn yet highly distinctive black-outlined faces created in Microsoft Paint, sometimes with the body of a stick figure, but each with a corresponding mood and different attributes. Their DIY aesthetics and heavy usage of badly cropped images or stock images with watermarks correspond to what Nick Douglas deemed “Internet ugly”.²⁶⁶ Over the years, a myriad of different Rage Comics characters have spawned, each of them corresponding to a specific experience or reaction. Most of them appear in 4-panel comic strips often featuring other characters of the family captioned with simple font types like Arial or Courier. Like LOLcats, Rage Comics also use a varied form of LOLspeak.

The very first rage comic today known as *FFFFUUUUUUUUUUU-* or simply *Rage Guy* and shows a scribbly drawing of a head with eyes squinting apart, eyebrows pulled low, and a mouth wide open as if crying out loud. Generally, he is associated not just with anger but with disappointment and dissatisfaction. In 2008, Rage Guy originated on 4chan’s /b/ board as part of a 4-panel cartoon strip demonstrating the reaction to the so-called “toilet splashback experience”²⁶⁷. [52] The fourth image quickly became a popular reaction image and spawned the creation of other Rage characters. In 2009, the subreddit r/FFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUUU (also



Fig. 52: The original Rage Guy appeared after falling victim to the toilet splashback experience.

²⁶⁶ See Douglas 2014.

²⁶⁷ Liang 2015, 11.



Fig. 53: Me Gusta shows an unexpected desire for Derpina's raw stink bugs cookies.

known as r/f7u12) was created to keep track and share all of the characters. Since then, the Rage Comics family has grown to over 40 members until 2012. In order to gain a better understanding of their eco-system, I will give a very quick overview of some of the most commonly used characters

Cereal Guy is the name of a stick figure with a round head seated at a table. He seems rather annoyed as he heavily gestures to the right while eating a bowl of cereals that you can see dropping from his mouth. In the next panel, Cereal Guy's eyes are popping out while he spits out his food out of shock. Most of the time, he appears in a four-panel meme with the snowclone "He will never have a girlfriend" used as a reaction to an incredible transformation in appearance: In a vertical comparison of two images of the same person at different ages, Cereal Guy is first seen eating his cereal dismissively, uttering "He will never have a girlfriend" before reacting to the glow-up progression of images with his shocked mimic. Cereal Guy is among the few Rage characters who survived a mass extinction after *Wojak* comics stole the spotlight in the mid-2010s, but occasionally, he still appears in multi-panel ironic memes. Originally, Cereal Guy emerged in a comic strip by Bob Averill uploaded to Something Awful in

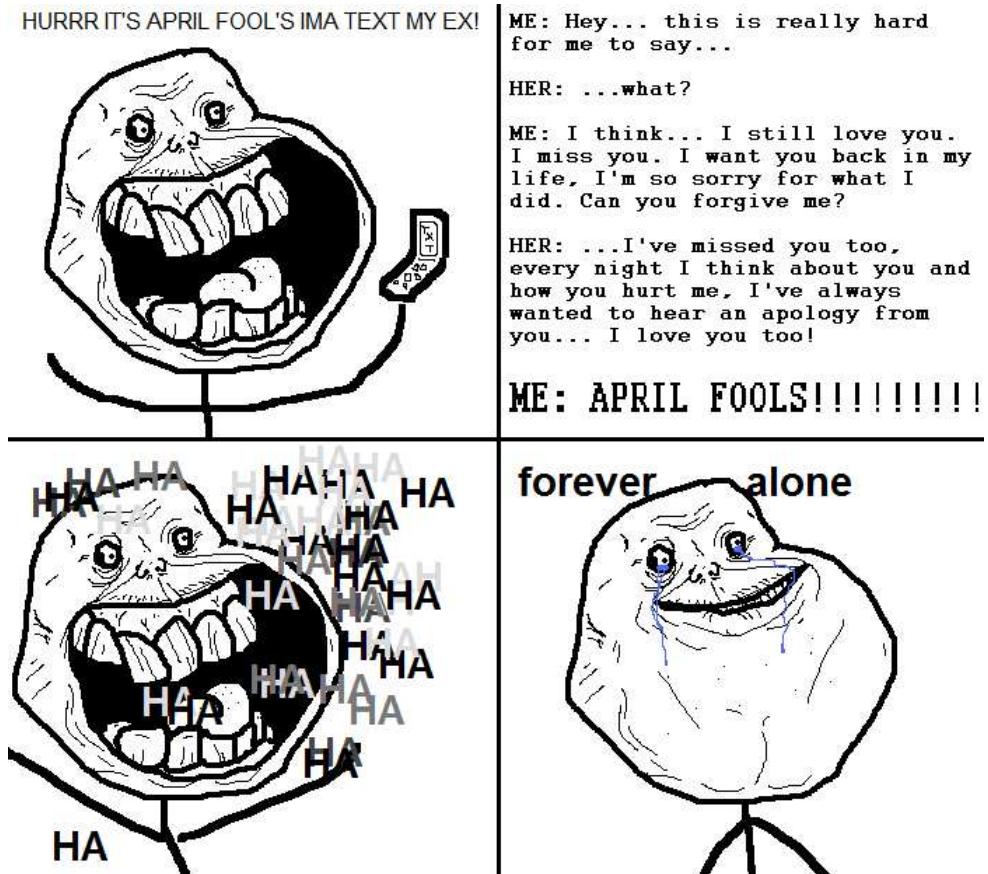


Fig. 54: In an attempt to troll his ex, Forever Alone Guy trolls himself in a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2007, although this is more of an inspiration considering that none of the panels were directly used for the meme.²⁶⁸

Me Gusta refers to a moon-faced *Rage* character with a wrinkly forehead pursing their lips and their eyes rolling into different directions, accompanied by the exclamation “me gusta” (span. I like) in red capital letters. The strange facial expression is used to signal interest of an abject or perverse situation: For example, in a four-panel comic, *Derpina* (see below) exclaims “I made cookies for everyone!”, while *Rage Guy*, after taking a bite from a cookie, asks “These cookies are epic! What’d you put in them?”, to which *Derpina* replies: “Raw stink bugs.” The fourth panel shows *Me Gusta* reevaluating the inherently disgusting thing as a positive desire. [53] *Me Gusta* creator May Oswald revealed in 2019 that “when the *Me Gusta* face was created, and I saw that it was awful and had great ‘viralability’ potential, possibly based on the fact that I had seen similar faces rise to prominence on 4chan plenty of times prior to mine showing up, I thought to myself that I was going to force this thing to become a meme.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ See xLara_Nathanx, Tomb Raider Forums, <https://www.tomraiderforums.com/showthread.php?t=183199>.

²⁶⁹ Sweat 2021.



Fig. 55: The original appearance of Trollface poking fun at the pretentious pride of trolls.

to invite people on a date at the same time when said flash mob took place. The Forever Alone guys became part of it involuntarily, surveilled by the basement dwellers of 4chan who followed the failed dates via an Earthcam live stream. Other Rage characters include *Fuck Yea*, a figure that is confident and winning even in situations where he has actually failed, and *Yao Ming Face*, who is drawn after the facial expression of basket baller Yao Ming laugh-crying at a joke. *LOL Guy* is another character that mostly appears as a floating head with pursed lips as if he were shouting the acronym LOL, while *Derpina* is the only female-read representation among the Rage characters, more precisely, a female-read mutation of the character *Derp* with added eyelashes, long hair, and black bow. We will encounter this practice reminiscent of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib again when discussing Wojak comics, who also spawn female-read mutations out of male-read origins. If not depicted with Derp's naive smile, her facial expression resembles the Japanese emoticon ^^. Derpina often appears in girl-oriented comics that deal explicitly with feminine content. As the only Rage Comic depicting a girl, despite many

Surprisingly, the strategy succeeded and Me Gusta is among the most popular Rage Comic characters.

Forever Alone refers to a stick figure with a potato-shaped head, depicted as hideous and teary-eyed and expressing despair, sadness, and loneliness. *Forever Alone* has *Rage Guy* as a direct ancestor and first appeared in a four-panel comic by user Azuul on the meme sharing platform FunnyJunk on May 28, 2010. We see *Forever Alone* writing to his ex girlfriend in an attempt to try again, only for it to be revealed as an April Fool's joke that has the consequence of leaving him alone forever.

[54] Most mutations stick to this four-panel format, but *Advice Animal* versions with *Forever Alone* also appear on MemeGenerator in late 2010. On May 13, 2011, a *Forever Alone Flash Mob* took place in New York City's Times Square instigated by 4chan trolls.²⁷⁰ They created fake profiles as bait on dating apps in order

270 Olsen 2011.

occurrences in misogynistic memes, Derpina has inspired numerous fan art and appears regularly as a cosplay character.

Last but not least, the probably most recognizable Rage Comic character of all is *Trollface*. With a huge grin and a roguish expression, he is the perfect representation of an Internet troll. However, Trollface can be assigned to both the troll and the trolled. Trollface originated on DeviantART in a 2008 webcomic by Carlos Ramirez aka Whynne making fun of trolls. In the bifurcated vertical strip, we see three panels corresponding to "What trolls want you to believe" and another three labelled "What is actually happening".

[55] The comic poked fun at how seriously trolls sell their 'work' to the outside world, as represented by the Anonymous collective, while most attempts at trolling are simply lazy and aimless. In the following years, Trollface rose to become an icon of memeing and was associated with the 1976 Russian song *Я очень рад, ведь я, наконец, возвращаюсь домой* (eng. *I Am Glad, Because I am Finally Returning Back Home*) by Eduard Khil, who was subsequently referred to as Mr. Trololol. In fact, the song itself can be considered an act of trolling: Since the song is about a cowboy returning to his wife, the lyrics were censored by Soviet institutions. Therefore, Khil performed it as a vocalized version in which he simply sings "lalala" and "hohoho" instead of lyrics.²⁷¹ Sometimes, this sounds like "lol" or "troll", which, together with Khil's exaggeratedly satisfied facial expression, resembled Trollface. Mr. Trololo's song was used as a bait-and-switch similar to the *Rickroll* on Russian Internet platforms. In a 2015 interview with the Trollface creator, Ramirez states that he decided to copyright Trollface in 2010 due to repeated problems with companies that used his meme for profitable purposes.²⁷² For example, a game studio used Trollface in the game *Meme Run* and the clothing shop Hot Topic printed T-shirts with the Rage Comic. In the five years between trademark registering and interviewing, Ramirez had already earned over \$100,000 in royalties.²⁷³ In 2020, Trollface suddenly resurfaced after several years in obscurity. The reason is a four-panel meme called *Cover Yourself in Oil* building on the physical fact that fat always 'floats' in water due to its lower density. The meme consists of three further steps as captioned:



Fig. 56: Trollface covers himself in oil to fly. The comic from 2020 already speaks more to the ironic undertone of schizoposting than classic Rage Comics.

²⁷¹ RealPapaPit 2009.

²⁷² Klepek 2015.

²⁷³ Klepek 2015.



Fig. 57: Pedobear/
Kuma is always on
the hunt.

“1) wait for it to rain, 2) cover yourself in oil and 3) fly”. [56] It was posted by bebelik on 9GAG on February 12, 2020, and falls under the self-referential humor of ironic memes as discussed in chapter 5.2.

Although technically not a rage comic, *Pedobear* deserves an honorable mention as a meme character. The comic-like depiction of a brown bear standing on its hind legs constantly chasing something originally came from the Japanese image board 2channel, where it was shared as ASCII art.²⁷⁴ Although today it is clearly conned to pedophilia, its depiction does not originate from this context: On 2channel, the bear was called *Kuma* (eng. ‘bear’) after the exclamation that accompanies it in word form. In a way, it had a warning function, because *Kuma* was posted under threads that are obvious baits of a troll as a means to alert other

users. This also explains his posture: *Kuma* is constantly on the run looking for new bait. [57] At the same time, *Kuma* became part of other images via Photoshop, often from the lolicon environment. In Japanese pop culture, *loli*, as an abbreviation for *Lolita* according to Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel, stands for any indirectly sexualized, *drawn* depictions of young girls, for example, sleeping or in swimwear. The men who like to look at these images are called lolicons. In Japanese studies, a clear distinction is made between lolicon depictions and depictions of child abuse: The former is called fictosexual, especially in Japan, where it denotes an orientation on the asexual spectrum. Fictosexuality denotes “feeling sexual attraction to fictional objects but rarely having similar feelings to real humans”, or more generally “having sexual/romantic/marital desires for fictional characters”.²⁷⁵ However, this changed with *Kuma*’s way onto 4chan: there, the bear was photoshopped mainly in photos—i.e. *non-fictional* representations—of undressed young women. These pictures clearly are representations of violence against children and absolutely do not fall under the original *loli* context. Therefore, 4chan users started to reuse *Pedobear*’s old warning function to let other people know when depictions of abused and exploited children are possibly shared in a thread:

Pedobear is a shorthand for saying, ‘You’re being creepy about a kid.’ If anyone on 4chan posts a picture of a questionably young looking girl in a sexy pose, someone will inevitably reply with a pic of *Pedobear*. Many times, *Pedobear* is added to a picture to point out real-world sexualization of presexual kids, but it’s alternately shown as an acknowledgment of being inappropriately attracted to a child.²⁷⁶

It should be made clear that depictions of sexual abuse of children have always been forbidden on 4chan. For example, the /I/ board for lolicons was started in August 2004, but was deleted again after barely three months because there were repeated threads with explicit depictions of

²⁷⁴ Douglas 2009.

²⁷⁵ NTU-OTASTUDY GROUP 2023.

²⁷⁶ Douglas 2009.

abuse. On 4chan, Pedobear functioned as a public marker for criminal acts which then could be more easily deleted or passed on to authorities. In this respect, Pedobear should be understood more as a mocking stereotype of a pedophile than as impending danger. In the media, however, Pedobear was represented more like a mascot of pedophiles, which over the course of time, also placed the character in this context.²⁷⁷ For example, visitors cosplaying Pedobear at Comic Con 2010 in San Diego, one of the most colorful festivals for comics, manga, film, and television, were removed by the police, who later also issued a statement regarding the dangers of the character.²⁷⁸ In other cases, Pedobear continues to serve as a denouncement of pedophilia: At a protest against the visit of Pope Benedict XVI in London in 2010, demonstrators wore Pedobear costumes to object structural child abuse in the Catholic Church. At the same time, however, Pedobear continued to thrive as a meme and was even commercialized, for example, in the form of a plush Pedobear that could be bought on its own website, pedobear.org. In this respect, Pedobear is a contradictory meme with conflicting meanings that both pokes fun at distributors of and warns against explicit depictions.

One character that has survived all mass extinctions and evolution of new species, and thus can be rightfully called the horseshoe crab of memes,²⁷⁹ is a line drawing named Wojak. At first, Wojak just refers to the Paint drawing of a bald man's head, but over the years, many different versions of Wojak evolved similar to the different Pepes. Wojak, who is also called *Feels Guy*, takes on different roles and is often shown in comic strips with other Wojak versions. Just like a Rage Comics character, he represents a distinct emotion or ideology while his steady appearance in ironic memes can be attributed to the surge of those kinds of memes in the second half of the 2010s. Despite Wojak's aesthetic resemblance to Rage Comics, strictly speaking, he does not belong to them because for once, he is not an invention of 4chan. His exact origin is unclear, in a thread of the subreddit [r/datfeel](https://www.reddit.com/r/datfeel) dedicated to the meme, user Voyjack claims to have first discovered the character on the Polish image board Vichan and subsequently circulated it on the German board Krautchan.²⁸⁰ In Polish, Wojak means 'soldier' and traces back to the anonymous nickname of the drawing's original poster. This theory is further supported by Wojak's Polish nickname 'ciepła twarz' (eng. 'warm face'). On 4chan, Wojak first appeared on January 27, 2011 in the *I Know That Feel* template, which shows Wojak in an intimate embrace with another character and captures an uncharacteristically emotional and comforting moment. 'Feels' is used primarily as a description of negative, very

²⁷⁷ Phillips 2015, 64-65.

²⁷⁸ Plafke 2010.

²⁷⁹ Records of horseshoe crabs trace back 480 million years to the Ordovician period that are strikingly similar to today's living examples, suggesting that they have not undergone big jumps of evolution throughout all five mass extinctions. This is why they are also called 'living fossils'.

²⁸⁰ Burton 2021, 22.



Fig. 58: The predicted development of Crying Wojak became one of the most-used characters of all time.

strong emotions; for example, someone describes his insomnia in the accompanying post. The portrayal of emotions is also reinforced in other mutations: *Crying Wojak*, a portrait of the character with tears streaming down his face, stems from a progressive increase to ‘feels’ with the caption “When did everything go so feel?” [58] A later version from January 2016 is called *Masked Crying Wojak* and shows a crying Wojak wearing the mask of a ‘normal’ one. In general, Crying Wojak is mostly used to illustrate another person’s apparently ‘wrong’ standpoint in online discussion as an act to belittle and poke fun at them.

Although Wojak was on European image boards as early as 2009 and a much-used meme on 4chan by 2012, he flew under the radar for a few years. This may have been due to the initially widespread Rage Comics and the popularity of *Pepe the Frog* in the early 2010s. In direct comparison, Wojak is mostly used to illustrate emotional, unfair or otherwise sad experiences, while Pepe, especially as *Smug Pepe*, is coined a superior, troll-like character. (See chapter 4.4.) This is also shown in many crossover memes, for example, *Trump Pepe* building a wall to Mexico with stereotyped depictions of Mexican people behind it with Crying Wojak heads. [59] Another example of Wojak’s intrinsic inferiority is the mutation known as The NPC. NPCs are non-playable characters in video games, usually all those the player converses with or combats. Mostly, their animation leaves much to be desired as they make the same movements and utter the same lines over and over. In most cases, they cannot be killed definitely



Fig. 59: Smug Pepe is shown as Trump including the hair and a MAGA badge while stereotypes of Mexican people behind ‘the wall’ are depicted as Crying Wojak.



Fig. 60: A version of The NPC Crowd taken out of its original context and making fun of media concerned with the well-being of the stock market. An earlier, right-wing version used the caption "This is extremely dangerous to our democracy."

which makes them frequent targets for in-game rampages and killings, which further adds to their aura of not being 'real'. On /v/, the 4chan board for video games, NPC has also been used as an insult for all those who are 'basic', that is, follow the mainstream and do not show a distinct character traits as further analyzed in the transgressive hypothesis. This extremely hostile attitude was soon used among right-wingers as an insult towards progressive-leaning users. In this regard, the NPC is married to anti-semitic conspiracy myths propagating hegemonic political masterplans that are endorsed by their herd-like followers that are derogatorily referred to as 'sheeples'.

portmanteau of sheep and people, they are characterized as uncritical masses who follow everything and everyone and were further circulated by conspiracy theorists like QAnon. In the course of the ironization of the Internet, however, the term has also been appropriated by opponents of right-wingers and is therefore mainly used to make fun of supporters of the alt-right movement. The NPC meme first appeared on September 5, 2018 in connection to a viral discussion about inner monologues. Various studies on the topic show that thinking can be expressed in different ways, e.g. visually, emotionally, or even in the form of an inner, verbalized monologue. People who do not have an inner monologue were called NPCs on 4chan and illustrated with a gray-skinned Wojak with extremely simple facial features reminiscent of the Dorito Face emoticon :^). [60] NPC became very popular on 4chan and was used similarly to other Wojak mutations: to trivialize the point of view of others. When the meme reached Twitter, it was not well received there at first as apparent in a tweet by @DreddByDawn on September 15, 2018: „Fascists adopt dog whistles so quickly that as soon as one becomes recognizable to the public (like SJW) they've moved on, it's not coincidence, it's plausible deniability. „NPC“ is explicitly meant to dehumanize, they'll take advantage of lack of recognition as long as they can“.²⁸¹ For example, alt-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones used the meme in a dehumanizing context, calling 4chan users directly to send him his best NPC InfoWars memes and offered \$10,000 to the winner of the contest.²⁸² Other variations, such as the NPC Crowd meme, in

²⁸¹ See @DreddByDawn, Twitter, archived via Know Your Meme: https://i.kym-cdn.com/photos/images/original/001/411/307/c8a.jpg_large.

²⁸² The Alex Jones Show 2018.

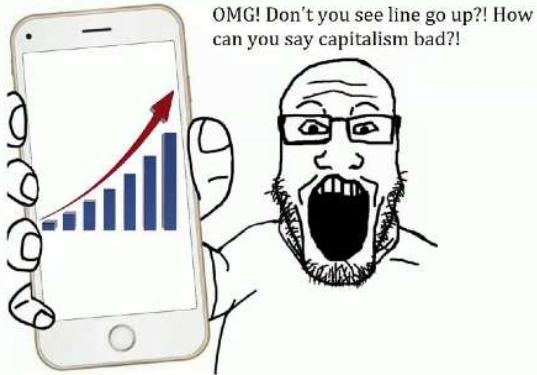


Fig. 61: A soyjak with a faux surprise face showing his phone with graphs going up.

i.e. men critical of their masculinity, feminists, genderqueer people, and so on. The Wojak variation relies on a particular facial expression, the ‘faux surprise face’: The astonished look with big eyes and mouth wide open in amazement. This childlike reaction, which appeared at the same time as the Nintendo Switch console went on sale and was heavily featured in connection with new video game consoles, inspired a series of Soyjaks, all of which are based on photographs. Most Soyjaks are depicted with a patchy beard and some are wearing glasses. [61]

Other mutations of the original Wojak include *Brainlet*, which is mainly used to call someone stupid. The suffix -let is used on 4chan to refer to smallness, for example, small men are also called *manlets*. Brainlet looks like Wojak after something heavy fell on his head. As a result, his head was inverted in half, which is why he now has a crescent-shaped skull. He is also often depicted drooling. Such variations are due to the character trait-based pranking on 4chan—in Brainlet’s case, stupidity—while other variations are based on identity-defining characters, such as gender, age, religion, or ethnicity. Reminiscent of the formation of Rage Comics is the subset of -oomer Wojaks which include, among others, *30-year-old boomer*, *zoomer*, *doomer*, *doomer girl*, *shroomer*, and so on. The 30-year-old boomer sports a half bald head and sunglasses and is usually pictured with a can of Monster Energy drink. He is a symbol for all those who are not that old, but act old—in short, they have lost touch with ‘the youth’ and are annoying to younger people due to

which an endless crowd of NPC Wojaks share a common speech bubble, also support this interpretation. [60] In the years that followed, however, the character was lifted out of its right-wing context, among other things, and is now used primarily against its supporters.

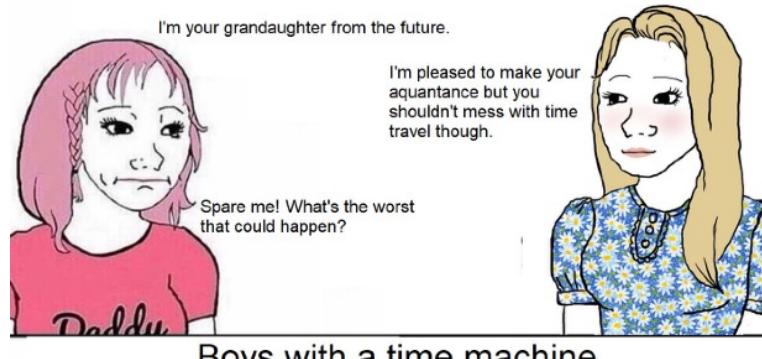
Another popular Wojak mutation resulted in *Soyjaks*, the ‘soy boys’ of Wojaks. Soy boys (sometimes also ‘nu-males’) is a degrading term used by alt-right supporters for men who don’t conform to toxic alpha male stereotypes,

genderqueer people, and so on. The Wojak



Fig. 62: Doomer getting rejected by Doomer Girl and blaming it on being blackpilled (being an incel).

Girls with a time machine



Boys with a time machine

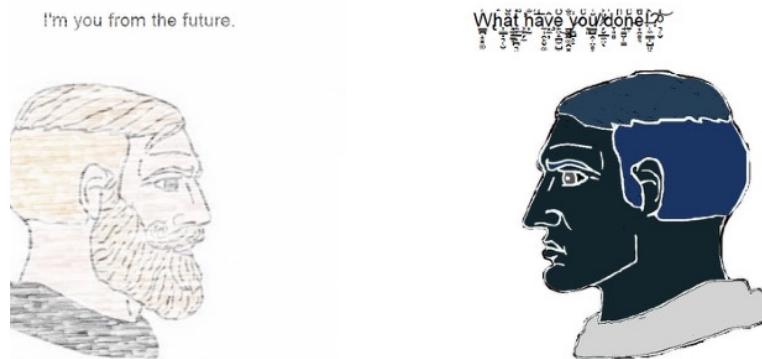


Fig. 63: Pink-haired Doomer Girl visits her Trad Wife grandmother from the future with a time machine vs. Yes Chad visiting his past self and causing a time paradox expressed by Zalgo text and inverted colors

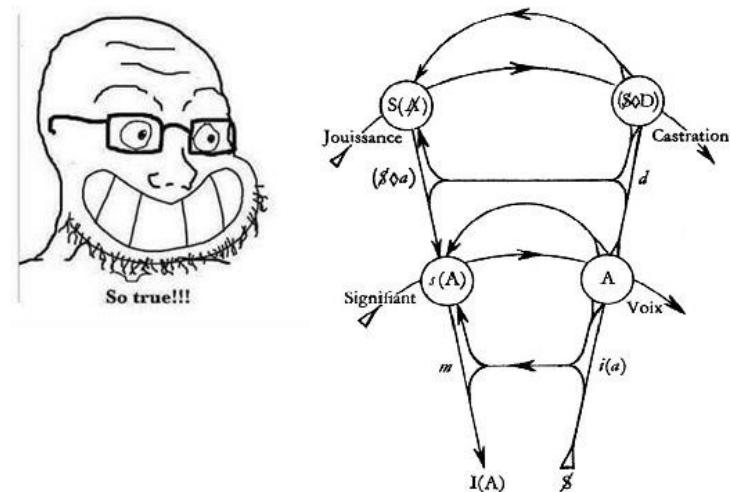


Fig. 64: A soyjak telling off pink-haired Doomer Girl for believing in astrology yet believing in Lacan's theory of desire.

constant asking about what is hot right now while simultaneously not able to admit their age to themselves. Zoomer, on the other hand, is the exaggerated image of a Gen Z member who is shown, for example, doing the *Floss Dance* (a dance made famous by the video game Fortnite). Doomer, on the other hand, is the cliché of a twenty-something suffering from depression, who has neither a career nor a family and has also abandoned all hope. [62] He is a Wojak clone depicted with a black beanie and a cigarette in his mouth and is often associated with the blackpill ideology of the Incels. He is often accompanied by Doomer Girl, a female version with black hair, but in contrast to earlier characters like Derpina, she is not a direct clone of Wojak. [62] Her origin is unknown, but she often appears as a contrast to *Trad Wife*, who, on the other hand, is an exact clone with long blonde hair and a blue patterned dress. [63] *Trad* (short for traditional) Wife is a woman who lives by traditional values such as marriage and having children—in short, the 1950s housewife is considered the archetype. However, just because she is depicted as a woman does not mean that she has escaped the misogynist matrix of 4chan: *Trad Wife* despises modern developments such as feminism and enforces a traditional distribution of roles. This makes her the perfect woman in the eyes of NEETs: Pretty, quiet, supportive, conservative, submissive, and in some cases, religious—ideally Roman Catholic. Therefore, *Trad Wife* is more like how 4chan anons *imagine* the perfect woman.

Many more -oomer Wojaks such as Shroomer, a Wojak mushroom, would be beyond the scope of this text, however, some more characters are included in the mega version of the Political Compass meme. [101] *Trad Wife* is often accompanied by *Nordic* (later known as *Yes Chad*), a blond, bearded man with an expressionless face. He originally comes from the *Nordic vs. Mediterranean* comic which originated on the /pol/ board. The meme is a juxtaposition of two amateurish drawings, on the left the hideous depiction of a Scandinavian man and on the right the imperial likeness of a man living on the Mediterranean. In 4chan tradition, this was meant to express that Mediterraneans were genetically superior. Soon, however, the Scandinavian was also yassified²⁸³ and moved through the Internet as *Yes Chad*.²⁸⁴ Most of these memes featured another Wojak character insulting *Yes Chad*, to which he simply replied "Yes." with his serious face. [63] This is in stark contrast to the old Wojak variants, which always expressed uneasiness or unfairness. *Yes Chad* has become a *Chad* because he just accepts things and does not go for the troll bait. Another template called *I Don't Believe In That Nonsense* is a two-panel meme that juxtaposes a *Soyjak* and a *Doomer Girl* variation with pink hair. She asks, for example, "What's your sign? I'm a Leo", to which an annoyed *Soyjak* replies "Fuck off I don't believe in that made-up nonsense". On the panel below we see an excited

²⁸³ 'To yassify' originally meant editing someone's image with lots of beauty filters and photo manipulation but nowadays refers to being pretty. The word 'yass' translates to 'yeah' and is usually affirmative. It gained popularity as part of the AAVE phrase 'yass queen' used by Black women to show support.

²⁸⁴ In the incel ideology, Chads are hypermasculine men setting an unreachable standard for genetically worse off men called beta males. See chapter 4.4.

Soyjak with faux surprised face supporting shouting "So true!!!" as he catches sight of the popular MBTI personality types, a psychological system used to categorize people's characters. I Don't Believe In That Made Up Nonsense addresses the pick-and-choose attitude of some ultra-rationalistic people who categorically reject spiritual and pseudo-scientific theories but uncritically embrace all other forms of knowledge. In another variation, Soyjak glimpses Lacan's Graph of Desire from the *Écrits* in the lower panel; [64] still others show a clock or mathematical formulas in the lower right panel. Numerous other Wojaks and Wojak comics are still being created as the character is only really gaining traction on the internet as of 2018. The Wojak memeing also includes the possibility of infiltrating bad illustrations of well-known characters into the universe. This often happens after some form of drama that recontextualizes the entire character: The best example is Andrew Tate, online misogynist with a large fanbase even outside of incel circles, who was instrumental in spreading anti-feminist concepts inspiring memes like Trad Wife. After a Twitter exchange with Greta Thunberg, in which Tate posted a video of himself, he was tracked down in Romania by pizza boxes lying around in the video—at least according to the media lore.²⁸⁵ He is currently appealing the verdict on rape, human trafficking, and organized crime for the purpose of exploiting women. In June 2023, a Soyjak drawing based on Tate's face looking shocked went viral. [65] One meme shows *Tate Soyjak* captioned "I'm escaping the matrix", a quote often used by Incels in reference to sociocultural norms, circled around expensive cars, houses, and yachts, traditional gender norms, consumerism, and the hustle-and-grind lifestyle. The meme makes fun of people like Tate that propagate the very values they claim to critique; instead of escaping the matrix, gender stereotypes, class relations, and self-exploitation are reinforced.



Fig. 65: Tate Soyjak by @rhizomaticmemer criticizes Tate for employing the same lifestyle he is apparently critiquing, a specialty of the transgressive hypothesis.

4.4. Early Viral Videos

Videos are deemed viral when a) they gain widespread popularity on the Internet and b) are shared rapidly online through multiple platforms and channels.²⁸⁶ More often than not, these

²⁸⁵ Allen, Green-Barteet 2023, 611.

²⁸⁶ Shifman 2014, 55.

videos become popular in an instant and accumulate millions of views in their first hours online. Content-wise, they can be anything, although humorous, entertaining, and shocking contents are most common. Some videos are recordings of comedy sketches, dance performances, pranks, political satire, cute animals, or simply extraordinary events from pop culture or daily life. Viral videos can be made by individuals, such as the aforementioned *Numa Numa* or by influencers and marketing teams, for example, the *BYE SISTER...* video by beauty YouTuber Tati Westbrook that sparked controversy in the online make-up community.²⁸⁷ Although viral content has increasingly been hijacked as a marketing tool since the 2010s, it is still incredibly hard to predict what will go viral—in most cases, forced memes are just not as successful and popular as memes originating from a semi-closed off community. Geert Lovink quotes author Douglas Rushkoff, who had a determining influence on the term ‘viral video’, from a conversation:

It meant all they [advertising companies] had to do was work on crafting the best meme for it to go ‘viral’. But that’s not what I meant. I proposed that repressed cultural agendas will find expression through viruses. The potential has to be there, already. Trump, the meme, replicates—at least in part—because there was already a widespread white nationalist rage in America. That’s what I meant by ‘cultural immune response’ — which is the real operational factor in any viral spread.²⁸⁸

That is also the appealing site of these videos: Their unpredictability allows for all kinds of relations to them which is why they often end up on the news and actively shape public discourse. On the other hand, in our chronically online world, every tiniest newsworthy bit that has been captured on camera usually gets covered by media outlets that are equipped with further tools to make them go viral. These videos can spark social movements, such as the clip of George Floyd being fatally wounded by a police officer that led to global Black Lives Matter protests, and they can act as evidence in court cases. The less political or relatable videos either enter the meme canon or disappear as quickly as they appeared. In the following, I am analyzing a few examples that went viral in the early 2000s, mostly on YouTube, and subsequently opened the gates for platforms that were explicitly created for viral videos, such as Vine and TikTok.

The video *Leave Britney Alone* was uploaded by Cara Cunningham to YouTube on September 10, 2007. It shows Cunningham close-up under a yellow curtain or blanket. This extreme closeness intensifies the emotional content, as Cunningham is literally begging fans, media, and paparazzi to finally leave the pop singer Britney Spears alone. Amid tears and shouting, she defends Spears, who had her comeback at the MTV Video Music Awards the day before that was dragged through the mud by critics. Cunningham criticizes the media spectacle milking Spears for cheap laughs and gossip: “Her song is called ‘Gimme More’ for a reason because all you people want is MORE! MORE-MORE, MORE: MORE!” Truly, Spears is arguably one of the most eviscerated pop stars in history. In another essay, I discussed her lifelong

²⁸⁷ Reuploaded by Tea Bixch 2019.

²⁸⁸ Lovink 2019, 125.

involvement with the entertainment industry, the sale of her labour, and her conservatorship.²⁸⁹ Much of this can also be traced back to *Leave Britney Alone*: The background of the video is the downward spiral the singer had been in since early 2007, when she was photographed by paparazzi walking into a hair salon and shaving off her own hair. Only a few days later, she attacked a paparazzo with a green umbrella after a long pursuit. Her performance at the VMAs was supposed to signal her return to show business, but was mercilessly torn apart: She was accused of playback, her dance moves were criticized, and her figure was described as too plump. From today's perspective, these statements are absolutely exaggerated, but in the gossip-laden size-zero-era of the 2000s, they were shockingly normal. The appeal of *Leave Britney Alone*, however, lies elsewhere: The video can be seen as a concession by a disappointed, empathetic super-fan, but also as a satirical gesture that holds a mirror up to the craziness of the entertainment industry with its affinity for spectacle. In any case, it is incredibly engaging and one of the most viral videos ever uploaded to YouTube: It reached over two million views after 24 hours and climbed up to 43 million views before Cunningham deleted her YouTube channel in 2015.²⁹⁰

Dramatic Chipmunk, which actually shows a prairie dog, is a 6-second clip in which the animal turns around and stares wide-eyed into the camera while a dramatic triad plays in the background. The video is taken from the Japanese TV program *Hello! Morning* from a scene in which various cute animals are shown, including the prairie dog.²⁹¹ The sound, however, first appeared in the 1974 film *Young Frankenstein* by Mel Brooks and has often been used as background music to reinforce a dramatic incident. The original video of *Dramatic Chipmunk* is no longer online, but was clicked tens of millions of times before taken off YouTube. It has also inspired numerous mutations: There are versions that interpolate the video and replace the music with the famous cry "This is Sparta!" from the movie *300*, while other spin-offs take the characteristic triad sound and put it over videos of other, even less harmful animals, such as sloths. The short duration of the video, the emotional look of the prairie dog, and the easily recognizable music make it a predecessor to short video formats later popularized on platforms such as Vine and TikTok. That same year also gave us the snowclone 'I Like Turtles' which traces back to a viral video of 10-year-old Jonathan Ware being interviewed live at a party on May 31, 2007. The boy, whose face was made up as a zombie for the event, first stands motionless before answering the question of what he thinks of his make-up: "I like turtles." The absurdity of the makeup look and the out-of-context answer made Jonathan famous overnight and his statement one of the most quoted snowclones of the classic era of memes. An excerpt from the live coverage, which was uploaded to YouTube about ten days later, currently stands at

²⁸⁹ Publig 2021.

²⁹⁰ Hider 2021.

²⁹¹ bambicandi 2007.

over 72 million views.²⁹² Mutations include the snowclone, but also Ware's face as a photoshop montage, for example, on a black and white photo of a child riding a giant turtle.

Finally, the song *Chocolate Rain* by Black singer Tay Zonday was even awarded the official YouTube Award in the category Best Music in 2008.²⁹³ The song captivates due to a mesmerizing piano sample and Zonday's baritone vocal performance. Despite the song's explicit social commentary, most viewers probably glossed over the political potential of the song back in 2007. The lyrics deal with structural racism against Black people in the United States, as is apparent in the chorus: "Chocolate Rain/History quickly crashing through your veins/Chocolate Rain/Using you to fall back down again". The song, uploaded on April 23, 2007, has accumulated over 136 million views and countless remixes and covers since its release. Zonday contextualized Chocolate Rain as follows:

I wrote Chocolate Rain in 2007 as a ballad about systemic racism. It became popular as a viral meme that was heavily tied to enjoyment of my deep voice, my small/feminine stature, and my unusual way of moving and singing vowels. Thousands of parodies were created with alternative lyrics. YouTube embraced me and the song as being more brand-friendly than other viral videos and creators at the time. It is remembered as a significant moment in the history of YouTube, 4Chan, nerd culture, viral video and the internet.²⁹⁴

Zonday seems to be aware of the fact that people did not only circulate his video because they liked his singing or its message, but partly also to make fun of him—somewhat similar to Steve Boston's comments on his new-found fame. He also emphasizes the importance of 4chan in the virality of Chocolate Rain, where the video was primarily circulated before hitting the mainstream. Although it may seem absurd that a song about racism would be popular on the hellhole of 4chan, Zonday confirmed that the song's message was lost to most of the listeners back then. Nevertheless, he showed his gratitude to the trolls by uploading a cover of Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up*.

Many more legendary videos have seen the light of day on YouTube in the mid-2000s, another honorable mention being an interview with Caitlin Upton during the Miss South Caroline Teen USA pageant award in 2007.²⁹⁵ When asked what she thinks about a study confirming that 20% of US-Americans cannot locate their home country on a map, she starts babbling about how Americans do not own maps, problems in education as well as South Africa, making her visibly confused reply a viral video that she has taken lightly. She also appears along Tay Zonday, Gary Broolsma, Cara Cunningham, and many more early YouTube stars and memes in the music video to Weezer's 2008 single *Pork and Beans*.²⁹⁶ This sheds light on the culture that

²⁹² CaptJax458 2007.

²⁹³ ytawards07 2014.

²⁹⁴ Zonday 2021.

²⁹⁵ IRamzayl 2007.

²⁹⁶ weezer 2009.

had already emerged around memes steadily growing larger than the original in-group through the exchanging of content. YouTube users, and even those without an account, that had no prior relation to filming, editing, or uploading videos, still become a part of it through the viral experience, which further cements the memetic status of these videos.

Another subset of early YouTube videos absolutely necessary to mention is the microcosmos of ironically remixed videos subsumed under the notion of *YouTube Poop* (YTP). This involves sampling videos, often from popular media such as cartoons, movies, TV shows, and video games, and re-editing them to create 'poor', absurd, and humorous remixes. Most commonly featured are games from the Super Mario and The Legend of Zelda franchise, kid's cartoons and animation movies as well as anime. YTP videos are known for their unconventional editing techniques, use of memes, wordplay, and distorted audios that create bizarre and often unexpected combinations of audio and visuals. In this regard, a genealogy can be traced from YTMND to YouTube Poop. Many YTP reference each other and some even turned into recurring series, for example, *The Misadventures of Skooks* created by Orpheusftw remixing the cartoon series *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!*²⁹⁷ The community of YTP is rather loose and gathers in the comment section of the videos shared by creators like SuperYoshi or EmpLemon. What differentiates YTP from other humorous online videos are the specific techniques of remixing: Recurring motives include sentence mixing, where words and phrases are taken from their original context and rearranged to form new dialogue, as well as word mixing, where single letters are looped or repeated, for example, the word 'lol' turning into a seemingly never-ending 'lololololol'. Another distinct feature is called 'ear-rape' and refers to extremely loud audio distortions similar to a glitch. The subculture of YTP has been a huge influence for video creators on the Internet and can be seen as a direct predecessor of later phenomena such as *MLG Montage Parodies*. Since they often make use of copyrighted material, a lot of YTP videos have been taken down over the years, prompting ongoing disputes with the limits of law. One example that even predates YouTube is called *I'D SAY HE'S HOT ON OUR TAIL* and has been uploaded by SuperYoshi aka Matt Mulligan in November 2006 after first appearing on the now-defunct image board SheezyArt.²⁹⁸ The video, which is only subtly edited compared to later installments, remixes random scene from *The Super Mario Bros. Super Show!*, most prominently, the name-giving exclamation as uttered by Luigi.²⁹⁹ Another classic example is *The UNcredibles* by EmpLemon that was first uploaded in August 2013 but only exists via mirrors today.³⁰⁰ The video remixes scenes from the 2004 animation film *The Incredibles* and makes visionary use of looping, instant replays, and sampling which results in a

²⁹⁷ Reuploaded by Westhoff 2014.

²⁹⁸ Pradeep 2022.

²⁹⁹ SuperYoshi 2006.

³⁰⁰ Suchi 2021.

surprisingly coherent narrative. However, due to the use of copyrighted material, YTP videos may be subject to takedown requests and copyright strikes, leading to a complex legal landscape for YTP creators. Nevertheless, their place in memetic history is cemented also as a huge influence for the generation of YouTubers primarily focused on gaming including but definitely not limited to PewDiePie, Jacksepticeye, and markiplier.

Nevertheless, the relationship between media and memes in 2007 was still in its infancy. While especially young people and technology aficionados welcomed the infinite possibilities the Internet promised, some early YouTube stars suffered through bad experiences suggesting that big media institutions first had to learn how to deal with new media. One of the most legendary viral videos, especially in the German-speaking context, is called *Angry German Kid* and shows a young teenage boy with the alias Slikk going completely berserk while gaming.³⁰¹ He is sitting at his desk and wants to start the game *Unreal Tournament 4*, a first-person shooter, but apparently his computer decides to strike instead. He then starts screaming, hitting the keys, and throwing around the stuff from his desk. In short, the video reproduced the cliché of a gamer who is supposedly particularly aggressive and shocking. The background to this is an ongoing debate in the German media about so-called 'killer games' after a rampage in a school in Emsdetten in November 2006. In the reports of the disaster, the perpetrator's preference for video games was repeatedly thematized and thus framed as an incentive for acts of violence. In fact, Slikk's video was also reproduced in the exact same context: Focus TV, which belongs to the media conglomerate Hubert Burda Media, licensed the video, as the *Angry German Kid* recounts in an anonymous interview.³⁰² However, they failed to inform the creator of its new contextualization: In the lurid documentary *Killer Games and the Amok Run of Emsdetten*, he is portrayed as an Internet-addicted child suffering from ADHD who is secretly filmed by his father going berserk on the computer. Slikk confirms this in an interview: "I gave Focus-TV permission to do a piece about me. However, I was not aware that they were adding stories like 'Slikk is secretly filmed by his father'. A lot of what was shown about me on TV is not true."³⁰³ In this respect, this is another case of sensationalist media companies deliberately spreading false information in order to increase their ratings. As a native German speaker and digital native, it is clear to me that the video was not meant seriously, but I recognize that this might get lost in an international context—especially if you don't know Slikk from other video hits like *Ich bin ein echter gangster*, where he lists random things like watching films with blood and nicking chocolate as things making him a 'real gangster' before bursting into laughter.³⁰⁴ Partly due to Slikk's other videos and partly because the German language has a reputation of sounding

³⁰¹ Dunney 2006.

³⁰² Marco 2006.

³⁰³ Marco 2006. Translated by the author.

³⁰⁴ Reuploaded by KeremB74 2007.

overly aggressive to foreigners, numerous subtitle parodies have emerged that profess to translate the German rant into English in order to solve the mystery of the *Angry German Kid*, but are really just thrown-together subtitles without any narration. For example, one parody suggests that Slikk is dying to see a “fat man singing and dancing” before the video to *Numa Numa* is played.³⁰⁵ On April 10, 2018, Norman Kochanowski aka cochan91 uploaded a video in which he outed himself as the *Angry German Kid* revealing his legal name and face. Among other things, he says that the Focus TV documentary was taken at face value by a large number of people, which led to years of bullying. This confirms the complicated relation between Internet humor and news coverage as we have already seen in cases like Jenkem. In Kochanowski’s case, society in 2006 was not yet able to distinguish between a person playing a character on YouTube and a normal person leading a normal life. Over the last 15 to 20 years, this has changed completely: More extreme and out-of-place performances have become normalized, and while not every subversive or controversial take is instantly accepted in the mainstream, people have become at least a bit better at spotting satire and irony. However, this lead to an instability of truth in general. Nowadays, Kochanowski would probably be an extremely popular influencer on TikTok.

Of course, this chapter is far too short to show the many different ramifications of viral videos on the Internet. In addition to a few of the featured classics, for example, there were rows and rows of shock content that did not exist freely accessible on YouTube for obvious reasons. One notable example is 2 Girls 1 Cup, an infamous scene from a feces fetishism porn movie. These and other videos are examples of the accessibility to disturbing content online and epitomize the realization by many of having been exposed to disgusting content too early. But while shock content videos have a clear reading, this is not so easy with many of the videos presented: multiple layers of irony and satire overlap, making a clear interpretation impossible. This attitude, which has been a major contributor to audience segregation by age on the Internet, lands in the mainstream by the mid-2010s at the latest and sets the tone for the memes that will be discussed in the coming parts.

³⁰⁵ CLIPADAY 2006.

4. A Memes to an End: Strategies of Mutation, Appropriation, and Hijacking

4.1. The Commodification of Memes

The ethical twist passing through 4chan cannot solely be attributed to the emergence of hacktivism collective Anonymous but also has to be seen in relation to the onsetting commodification of memes. This chapter explores the state of memes around 2011, when LOLcats, Rage Comics, and Advice Animals crept from 4chan to dedicated entertainment websites and, from there, into the centre of everyday life. The mainstreaming of memes led to their institutionalization and subsequent commodification that can be traced back to a couple of consequential platform acquisitions highlighted in the following. In return, many memes mutated from a specific significance assigned by a somewhat closed-off community to 'floating signifiers' according to Ernesto Laclau, meaning a signifier oscillating between different meanings 'waiting' for its adherence to a specific significant to generate meaning:

It is no longer that the particularism of the demand becomes self-sufficient and independent of any equivalential articulation, but that its meaning is indeterminate between alternative equivalential frontiers. I shall call signifiers whose meaning is 'suspended' in that way 'floating signifiers'.³⁰⁶

While memes emerge through the intertwinement of previously unrelated events or agents, their own genesis is narrated through circulations of the in-group that created them. With the establishment of entertainment websites like Cheezburger and 9GAG around 2010, these memes were cut off from their origin story and consequently alienated from their own history. On the one hand, this led to a lot of anger on the side of original creators on 4chan and Reddit, on the other hand, it enabled the breakthrough of memes as ever-mutating sympoietic symbols steadily actualizing their meanings. Moreover, these acquisitions enabled memes to become essential channels of information and communication in the coming years.³⁰⁷

After stumbling upon the image of the famous grey LOLcat asking "I Can Haz Cheesburger?" on Something Awful in 2007, software developer Eric Nakagawa decided to found the website icanhas.cheezburger.com with his friend Kari Unebasami.³⁰⁸ The website not only lets users scroll through archives of LOLcats, but also had a function called LOL builder to create their own LOLcats. Users could choose from an existing pool of cat images or upload their own before captioning the image with LOLspeak using the Impact font type and the distinct image macro format. The LOL builder was the first sign of the commodification of memeing: Before, users would simply resort to standard image manipulation software like Photoshop or its free and open-source alternative GIMP. In order to popularize the LOL builder, Cheezburger also collaborated with image hosting website Photobucket that was subsequently

³⁰⁶ Laclau 2005, 131.

³⁰⁷ An interpretation of floating signifiers in more detail can be found in chapter 5.2.

³⁰⁸ Wortham 2008.

bought by Fox Interactive Media in 2007. Quickly, investors decided to jump onto the train and acquire Cheezburger just a couple of months later for \$2 million.³⁰⁹ Internet investor Ben Huh planned to make it the face of his entertainment website conglomerate The Cheezburger Network that also includes, among others, the meme encyclopedia Know Your Meme and popular website derivates of the YouTube channel FailArmy. In contrast to Something Awful and 4chan, Cheezburger made use of advertising, thus ultimately profiting off their users that were actively creating the website's content. In a conference talk on internet culture, 4chan founder Poole regrets this development:

'The problem I have with your model,' moot began, 'is that you're essentially an oil tower—it's milking and milking and extracting, but it doesn't really return much. And you can say we're giving people tools to create LOLcats, and that's great and all, but more or less you're giving people those tools so you can post them on your site because you monetize them with display ads. Do you feel that you put something back? Because I don't.'³¹⁰

While it is debatable whether 4chan is 'putting something back' to society, the image board's high horse is and always has been its noncommercial attitude and refusal of ad-sponsorships. That this was largely due to the fact that many advertisers found the content on 4chan appalling and did not want to be associated with the website is another matter: in 2007, 4chan was banned from the Google ad network AdSense for violating content policies.³¹¹ Nevertheless, the acquisition of Cheezburger as well as the availability of meme-creating tools mark a turning point in the history of memes that is further exploited with the boom of social media.

In 2007, another ad-fueled entertainment website changed hands: eBaum's World, founded in 2001, was a popular reposting website further circulating the content of Something Awful and 4chan to a broader audience. Similar to Cheezburger, the makers of the site were heavily criticized for stealing original content, and as a result, were attacked and raided again and again. According to Encyclopedia Dramatica, the administrators of eBaum's World were accused of cropping out watermarks of image marks and rewriting them with their own logo.³¹² Nevertheless, the website was acquired "for \$15 million in cash up front, plus \$2.5 million in Handheld stock and up to \$52.5 million in cash and stock over 3 years."³¹³ Since then, eBaum's World has become an entertainment/news website similar to BuzzFeed and denotes themselves as the "most engaged humor community on Facebook."³¹⁴ Interestingly, when

³⁰⁹ Moses 2008.

³¹⁰ Phillips 2015, 140.

³¹¹ Kulp 2016.

³¹² Coleman 2014, 69.

³¹³ Cashmore 2007.

³¹⁴ See eBaum's World: <https://www.ebaumsworld.com/pages/advertise/>.

eBaum's World proprietors went out of business, they were bought by the same media company who later bought Cheezburger, Literally Media.

The final straw for underground memeing was the emergence of the most hated entertainment website in the lulz part of the Internet in 2008, 9GAG. Founded by Ray Chan as a site just for fun, 9GAG participated in the 500 Startups accelerator program by a venture capital firm investing in technology companies of the same name in 2011.³¹⁵ Just like eBaum's World, 9GAG continued the undermining practice of scouting for memes on 4chan and Something Awful, removing its watermarks, and putting its own name on it. In a way, 9GAG was even more successful doing so and already registered 70 million unique visitors per month by 2008.³¹⁶ The aggressive expansion of 9GAG manifested in an attitude of seizing everything they could find not unlike the colonialist attitude of users on early message boards—with the sole difference that, this time, it was *those* older users who were upset. One of the most blatant carbon copies of Internet culture were 9GAG's normified Rules inspired by 4chan's Rules of the Internet: [28]

1. 9GAG is just for FUN.
2. 9GAG is JUST for fun.
3. Get Involved.
4. If you're funny, you get Likes.
5. Play Nice.
6. Respect originality and creativity.
7. Moderate your content.
8. No repost.
9. Report Abuse.³¹⁷

To be honest, I believe the formulation of 9GAG Rules is more of a hoax than an institutional guideline due to its over-naive tone and obvious fake content (the appeal not to repost is sardonic at best). Perhaps it was also due to this normie attitude that 9GAG became a popular target for raids: One of the biggest raids originating from 4chan took place on December 21, 2011, and shut down the site for a while, but due to its high server capacities, *Operation 9GAG* did not have any major consequences for the website. 9GAG ultimately emerged as the winner of the feud, contributing significantly to the commercialization of memes. This form of self-institutionalization was literally set in stone in 2017, when 9GAG's YouTube channel unveiled the *Meme Monument*, a 24 ton heavy, 4.5m high limestone slab with memes engraved on it, which, according to those responsible, should be buried somewhere in the desert as a relic to tell future generations about memes.³¹⁸ The video urges viewers to download the commercial 9GAG app and vote for their favorite memes to be engraved onto the stone. The so-called first monument dedicated to humor was full of old and unfunny memes deemed “9GAG’s best”

³¹⁵ Chen 2015.

³¹⁶ Jain 2012.

³¹⁷ Posted by butler4chan, 9GAG, <https://9gag.com/gag/aOVVO6E>.

³¹⁸ 9GAG TV 2017.

although most of them actually originated somewhere else. Insofar, the monument was already frowned upon on other networks before 4chan's /pol/ board decided to put an end to it. They conspired where to find the stone using the video and, in just 4 hours, narrowed it down to a quarry site near Almería, Spain.³¹⁹ However, considering the stone's subterranean environment, /pol/ users were in need of a plan on how to destroy it. They settled on pouring vinegar into the grounds to dissolve the limestone, but there are no records online if that ever took place or the Meme Monument is really dormant for future civilizations to find.

The commodification of memes on websites like Cheezburger, eBaum's World, and 9GAG is also referred to as 'the cancer that killed /b/'. The catchphrase has been an in-joke on 4chan and has also materialized in various image macros while 'cancer' refers to poor quality posts. The notorious community that had produced original content for the past years was suddenly overran—or perhaps trolled—by big money players. Of course, this point of view reflects the false sense of superiority readily demonstrated by 4chan users, adopting some kind of victim narrative in the unstoppable privatization of online content. Nevertheless, this development becomes more urgent in the context of the attention economy: As famously noted by Davenport and Beck in 2001, the economics of attention treats human attention as a scarce resource diverse media outlets compete for.³²⁰ In this regard, every laugh at a meme comes with a price determined by the time spent on it, or as the saying goes: If you're not paying for the product, *you* are the product. (See also chapter x) In a perverted posthumanist turn, this evolutionary step ultimately equalizes humans and memes as commodities on the Internet: As a resource of communication veiled under the guise of 'fun' as propagated by 9GAG, memes become just as exploited as any other resource on the Internet. In fact, their relations to users are explicitly exploited by marketing teams as stated in an article on social media marketing: "Memes can be a social marketer's dream come true. Not only is their instant recognizability easily leveraged to create a connection between the consumer and the business's brand, but they are also free."³²¹ Memes facilitated campaigners to enrich themselves using 'free' stuff created by others to make money out of peoples' love for them.



Fig. 66: iMessage reposted by @ripannanicolesmith, original unknown. Unfortunately, this version is no longer online either.

³¹⁹ Internet Historian 2018.

³²⁰ See Davenport, Beck 2002.

³²¹ Sweeney 2013.



Fig. 67: Keep Calm and Stop Abusing this Meme already suggests an over-saturation of the template.

Utopian projections of memes as “the gateway to the liberation of the masses” [66] are ultimately shattered by the ongoing privatization of the Internet while users directly produce commodities that are then being sold back to them. As will be shown later on, memes are adapting to the capitalist structures they inhabit, but in 2012, the novelty of memeing promised a huge market for marketing, licensing business, and merchandising. In the following, three cases of economically successful memes are introduced and their necessary mutations in order to appeal to a broader audience analyzed.

One of the most notorious exploited memes is the snowclone *Keep Calm And Carry On* from a British World War II poster. The slogan is written in white upper-case letters on a red background with a white pictogram of a crown above it. The poster was created in 1939 by the Ministry of Information and was meant to simultaneously motivate and reassure the population in the event of an occupation.³²² After the war, the remaining posters were destroyed and the slogan vanished into oblivion until the year 2000, when the owners of a book store rediscovered them by accident. Soon after they started selling them, the slogan was re-popularized and inspired a huge merchandising empire, soon appearing on mugs, mousepads, umbrellas, door mats, keychains, and so on. On the Internet, the graphic also spread as a meme, spawning more diverse mutations like the My Little Pony variant *Keep Calm and Become a Brony*, the subversion *Now Panic and Freak Out*, and the weeb³²³ version *Keep Calm and (ﾉ•ヮ•)ﾉ*:・ﾟ✧*. [67] Within a very short time, the market for Keep Calm memes was oversaturated. Souvenir shops and department stores' chains were full of Keep Calm merchandising far beyond the borders of London. As the copyright had long since expired, the design was in the public domain and thus readily commercially available. An immediate success thanks to its cold-blooded British humor, which also took on a new meaning in the wake of the economic crisis in 2008, but by 2010, at the latest, no one could see the design anymore. What had happened? The snowclone did not come from an eco-system like a message board, but was used directly for commercial purposes. The operators of the bookstore were the first to print the design on merchandising products, and although it would take a few years before other companies followed suit, the spread then took place exponentially. The meme's inability to adapt and mutate to other in-groups via the internet meant that initially, only the Keep Calm and Carry On

³²² Chu 2013.

³²³ A weeb is a person interested in otaku culture, especially in manga and anime. The word comes from the derogatory term ‘weeabo’ meaning the same.

variation was distributed commercially. Since there was no space for a self-reflexive analysis that also questions the digital conditions of production, the meme remains unironic and one-dimensional. The mass media phenomenon of marketed memes emerged: Instead of the heterogeneous, branched growth that most memes undergo through circulation (from *many* to *many*), the asymmetrical dissemination of a single originator manifests itself similarly to mass media like radio or early TV. This leads to marketing memes losing their memetic appeal extremely quickly and degenerating even faster into stale memes. Combined with the real-life spamming through commercials goods, *Keep Calm* may be one of the most commercially successful memes but has cemented a hate status on the internet that it might never recover from again.

Another marketing phenomenon is *Hide the Pain Harold*, the meme alter ego of 77-year-old Hungarian retiree András István Arató. In 2011, Facepunch users posted stock images of an old man with an ambiguous facial expression as if smiling his sadness away. In 2014, /b/ users added to Harold's lore by typing out a whole fabricated backstory that was later used as captions for a photo story using his images on Imgur.³²⁴ [68] In the meantime, image macros using the stock photos circulated on Reddit. Arató revealed his identity on Russian social network VK in 2016 holding up a piece of paper reading: "I'm alive!". Following this, Arató has repeatedly approached the media to talk about his experience as a meme, which he learned about when he stumbled upon the image macros. He gave a TEDxTalk in 2018 and turned toward commercial endeavors like becoming the face of Coca Cola Hungary.³²⁵ In his retirement, Arató experiences a renaissance that he knows how to turn into money: Nowadays, he performs as a comedian and took part in the Hungarian version of the TV show *The Masked Singer*. Thanks to the sale of merchandising and licensed products, his net worth is estimated around 4.34 million.³²⁶ Unlike the *Keep Calm* meme, however, image macros with *Hide the Pain Harold* are still being created and shared. His character has risen to iconic status with a clear niche, the sad smile.



Fig. 68: Smiling through the pain: When it's 2nd April and your life is still a joke.

³²⁴ See SomeShitbag, Imgur: <https://imgur.com/gallery/KjtbV>.

³²⁵ TEDx Talks 2019.

³²⁶ See <https://peopleai.com/fame/identities/andras-arato>.

Due to his high recognition value, Harold can dominate this niche, at least until he either falls into oblivion or others compete with him for it. But is the commercialization of Harold more forgivable than that of Keep Calm? Even in times of little knowledge on privacy on the internet, it seems logical that Arató has the rights to his face—only he sold it in the course of posing for stock image photography. Through his identification, his rights have come back to him, so to speak, not in the form of his civil name, but as a new identity, Harold. In this respect, his situation is more like that of a celebrity than a ‘normal’ citizen. His face, which can also be bought printed on T-shirts or greeting cards, has thus become the commodity. However, this does not mean that all memes featuring Harold are automatically commercial, but in most cases, they are read commercially: In turn, this also reconnects to the reason why Harold was used as a meme in the first place.

A similar example is provided by *Grumpy Cat*, or, as her actual name was, Tardar Sauce. Her eponymous facial expression was the result of a genetic mutation of feline dwarfism and contributed significantly to her status as an internet celebrity. Like Harold, her expression is scowling and unhappy, which made her a popular LOLcat with misanthropic captions. [69] The first images of Grumpy Cat were posted on the subreddit /r/pics, which gave way to the creation of image macros. Accordingly, Grumpy Cat's Imgur page received over one million hits in its first 48 hours of existence.³²⁷ This viral spread continued steadily and, just a day after it was first posted on Reddit, numerous online newspapers and magazines had already reported on Grumpy Cat. Less than a week after the first Reddit post, T-shirts with image macros of the cat went up for sale,³²⁸ and the merchandising assortment was expanded in the following months to include games, stuffed animals, costumes, and so on. Officially licensed merchandise was also sold at other stores. After the publication of *Grumpy Cat: A Grumpy Book* and a comic book, as well as numerous appearances on television and at events, Tardar eventually became the ‘spokescat’ for the food brand Friskies. Within a year, Grumpy Cat went from an average house cat to the most famous feline on the internet. At the same time, she went through a turbulent commercialization of her own existence, which was to determine her life until her death in 2019. As early as 2014, her owner was able to live off the income from licensing deals and



Fig. 69: A classic Grumpy Cat caption exudes nihilism and sarcasm.

³²⁷ See Grumpy Cat, Know Your Meme: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grumpy-cat>.

³²⁸ Thibault, Marino 2018, 483.

media appearances, which she managed with her brother who confirms: "It's been great for our family."³²⁹ Although the official figure has never been given, Grumpy Cat's fortune can be estimated in the seven-figure range. But unlike Hide the Pain Harold, an adult who can come to a decision, it is difficult to verify how much of the cat's work was voluntary. In 2013, #FreeGrumpyCat went viral to draw attention to the cat's exploitation and busy schedule. Not much came of it, however, after even the animal welfare organization PeTA backed Grumpy Cat's media empire, pointing out the strict rules determining the duration of press appearances.³³⁰ Even if the accusation of animal cruelty was averted, the ongoing practice of exploiting pets as goldmines remains questionable. In fact, Grumpy Cat was just one of the first of many cats, dogs, bunnies, fish, and other creatures to be turned into commodities.

In the end, the transformation that memes undergo from 2011 onwards can only be analyzed in this way: A former weapon of subversion, i. e. trolling, is devoured by late capitalism as a free resource affecting users in their relation to marketing and advertising, but also regarding political campaigns and news coverage. Instead of an anonymous collective, there is a central creator-distributor fueled by commercial interests, and the ultimate target is our attention. The singularization of the figure of the creator can be observed in the viral videos of the early 2010s such as *Gangnam Style* by PSY: The K-pop song and music video became an international sensation in 2012 and became one of the most watched videos on YouTube ever, currently standing at 4,8 billion views.³³¹ *Gangnam Style* is characterized by its catchy upbeat tune and PSY's famous dance moves, above all, the horse-riding dance, which became a global role model for memetic dance challenges. The song's title refers to the affluent Gangnam District in Seoul that is associated with a sophisticated lifestyle simultaneously parodied by the song in terms of consumerism and extravaganza. *Gangnam Style* also paved the way for other memetic dances such as the *Harlem Shake* in 2013 or the *Floss Dance*, taken from the game *Fortnite*, in 2017. These serve as examples of the 'taming' of memes in order to gain broader acceptance: To commercially appeal to the masses, memes are cut off from their partly hateful origins and 'normified'. In turn, of course, this gives way to a counterculture of a new set of memes known as dank memes as analyzed in chapter 5.2.

5.2. Coming Together: Online and Offline Encounters

During the 2000s, extensive implementing of fast broadband infrastructure made the Internet a lot faster, at least in Europe and North America, which of course accounted for an increasing amount of time spent online. This was further enabled by the mainstreaming of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets beginning in 2007. Subsequently, more and more social

³²⁹ Jarvey 2014.

³³⁰ Herrman 2013.

³³¹ officialpsy 2012.

networks came into being as an alternative to industry giant Facebook that finally surpassed 1 billion users on September 14, 2012.³³² While Facebook followed the strategy to acquire every living person on its platform, other social media were more specialized and attempted to create distinct users bases using different incentives and practices. In the following, I will analyze how communities formed on three different platforms: Twitter, Tumblr, and Twitch. In this vein, this chapter aims to examine specific developments of these digital cultures, which materialize in memes, among other things, but also in hashtags birthing entire political movements.

Twitter was founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams with the unique feature of a short message service known as tweets, texts of a maximum of 140 characters,³³³ which could be shared with followers in real-time. Microblogging allows for quick and concise communication, making it easy for users to share updates within their community. Combined with Twitter's early adopters that mostly consisted of politicians, journalists, and celebrities, the real-time sharing of news took center stage in the early days. Twitter also further popularized the use of hashtags as a way to organize and categorize tweets around specific topics, inevitably creating online spaces for communities around specific buzzwords. Consequently, hashtags became a powerful tool for starting and tracking conversations around various subjects as well as spawning grassroots movements subsumed under the notion of hashtag activism or, more derogatorily, slacktivism.³³⁴ Hashtag activism refers to a specific way of using social media platforms in order to raise awareness and promote a cause. These are marked by a specific hashtag, for example, #BlackLivesMatter or #MeToo. One of the first big movements channeled by a specific hashtag was #IranElection in 2009, which allowed protesters in Iran to communicate and share information during the Iranian presidential election and subsequent protests by the Green Movement.³³⁵ Since then, hashtag activism has become a tool that a) puts a name on a movement, b) gathers people and resources around a specific hashtag, and c) serves as a platform for low-threshold discourse on said topic. The dynamics of virality may also further spread a cause rapidly among users, which is especially interesting for marginalised groups and grassroots movement to amplify voices that would otherwise go unheard. This was the great promise of Twitter: Creating an actually inclusive 'public' where content mattered over gender, race, or class. However, as we will see in the following chapter, what started out as a powerful tool especially for marginalized communities has been skewed by its opponents as 'cancel culture'. The organization of specific groups around a hashtag weaves tight-knit communities that are usually very homogenous in beliefs and are rarely traversed by dissidents, a phenomenon also known as 'filter bubble' or 'echo chamber'. Note

³³² Tsukayama 2012.

³³³ Later expanded to 280 characters.

³³⁴ Mina 2019, 148.

³³⁵ Mottahedeh 2015.

that this does not only happen on Twitter, but on any social media platform, however, its effects were more apparent on the bluebird network since it became a forum for the exchange on daily politics. Moreover, slacktivism was often criticized as rendering political engagement to blips of satisfaction (also denoted as ‘virtue signaling’) by simply (re-)posting a hashtag without taking any further political action. I believe this sentiment ultimately fails to take into account that hashtag activism was never meant to substitute offline activism, but support it and enrich it by discussing politics online. In my opinion, the dangers of hashtag activism rather lie in the oversimplification of complex issues due to the extreme brevity of tweets and other microblogging tools as well as the bifurcation of users into a pro-group endorsing a hashtag and an anti-group demonstratively opposing it. Nevertheless, hashtag activism has undeniably played a significant role in raising awareness about various social, political, and environmental issues.

One community that came together early on is the very loose and heterogenous network of Black Twitter. Its formation began roughly in the late 2000s and stood out due to its specific narration on the platform: While the short message service was mainly used to share updates, many accounts also practiced a humorous form of story-telling resulting in tons of in-jokes and memes. The phenomenon of Black Twitter can be attributed to the filter bubbles created by hashtags: According to Kiana Tipton, Black Twitter mirrors offline conversations among Black people that are propagated around specific hashtags, which, in turn, bring together different users around a central topic.³³⁶ Hashtags like #BlackMomsBeLike and #YouKnowYou'reBlackIf target Black experiences and thus prompt participation of Black users. The image of Twitter as a ‘Black utopia’ soon emerged and describes a space where whiteness is not the norm, but Blackness is. The popularity of Twitter among Black people has been studied in 2014, when a study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that Black users make up approximately 22% of all Twitter users compared to white people making up 16%.³³⁷ The specific usage of hashtags on Black Twitter also gave way to a new form of long-standing political campaigns.

The biggest example is #BlackLivesMatter, a hashtag started in 2013 after the controversial acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer. It gained significant momentum following the deaths of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson and 43-year-old Eric Garner in New York City, who was killed using an illegal chokehold and whose last words “I can't breathe” have become a parole of #BLM. The hashtag has been instrumental in the discourse on police violence, racial injustice, and systemic racism, and has sparked protests and discussions worldwide. Black

³³⁶ Say It Loud 2019.

³³⁷ However, these numbers need to be taken with a grain of salt considering the semi-anonymity on the platform: Users could just set up an account using a Black profile picture and pass despite being of non-Black descent. Nevertheless, most Black users were able to identify culprits through a lack of knowledge of Black culture and the misuse of AAVE (African American Vernacular English). See Smith 2014.

Lives Matter grew into a global movement in 2020, reaching a tipping point after years of ongoing systematically racist and regularly lethal pre-judgments of Black people in the United States, including 26-year-old Breonna Taylor, who was shot in her sleep after policemen mistook the wrong apartment door and stormed her apartment without knocking, and George Floyd, a 46-year-old man who was overwhelmed by a policeman kneeling on his back after pleading for his life and repeating the phrase “I can’t breathe” more than 30 times. While it is important to note that the Black Lives Matter movement is an ongoing project, it already achieved explicit social change, such as the bringing of issues like structural racism and police brutality to the forefront of public consciousness, subsequently leading to a stark impact in the public opinion of these problems and generating strong support of the movement’s goals, but also in initiatives seeking to reform law enforcement practices and criminal justice beyond US borders. Additionally, Black Lives Matter spawned many artistic and cultural engagements with Black culture and led, at least to an extent, to more visibility for Black artists.

Other practices for promoting justice and sharing unwanted behavior displayed by an individual with others is the phenomenon of ‘canceling’. While terms like ‘cancel culture’ are almost entirely used in a negative way nowadays, the practice stems from Black Twitter and is defined by Meredith Clark as “an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money.”³³⁸ However, as Eve Ng points out, the practice of canceling was soon overshadowed by the pejorative cancel culture discourse that was heavily criticized by conservatives:

One thread of this criticism was that the cancellings of historical figures or media texts are unwarranted, particularly for past actions, storylines etc. that were a product of their times. This line of argumentation has often been tied to defenses of ‘free speech’ and U.S. First Amendment rights, particularly when media gatekeepers have been cancel targets—an argument that mainstream liberals have also made—but a key shift in right-wing critiques is claiming that ‘cancel culture’ unfairly polices conservatives.³³⁹

What started out—as we will see shortly—as strategies by a community to disengage from hurtful to downright criminal actions comparable to offline boycotts was soon turned over through stereotypes of ‘hysterical’ women negatively distorting ‘reality’ with their ‘unfounded claims’. For example, Donald Trump famously reframed the narrative around his impeachment in 2021 as a result of cancel culture and its direct attacks on American values.³⁴⁰ The interpretation of free speech as a means of existing in actively oppressive relations is also similar to the arguments of trolls as discussed in chapter 3.2. While canceling used to denote the sharing of a rightful negative opinion on someone, nowadays, it has become synonymous with

³³⁸ Clark 2020, 88.

³³⁹ Ng 2022, 74.

³⁴⁰ Levine, Gambino 2021.

nipping critical discourse in the bud. In this regard, canceling has been degraded to the unjust prejudgment of people who are ‘innocent until proven guilty’, as is often stated. However, cancelling never meant to rob people of their rights, but to make apparent when a famous or influential person is getting away with crimes unpunished and, most importantly, to make visible systems of oppression that are often not represented by laws and policies because the law tends to treat people differently based on their class, race, or gender.

The first attempt at canceling, which should also become the blueprint for #MeToo, centered around American R&B singer and, by now, convicted sex offender R. Kelly. It was founded by Oronike Odeleye and Kenyette Barnes in July 2017 to draw attention to the mass of allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse of the singer, a fact that had been concealed or rather tolerated by the music industry and fans alike since the 1990s.³⁴¹ #MuteRKelly was a way for victims to speak up and for others to support the survivors and loudly call for accountability. By doing so, it sought to amplify the voices society silences the hardest: those of young Black women and girls. While Kelly had been known as a sexual predator since the early 1990s, for example, he married 15-year-old singer Aaliyah in 1991 by forging documents to claim she was 18 years old, his behavior never seemed to have consequences for his career, except for the occasional satire in late night shows. The hashtag was a possibility to spread these facts on channels that are not directly tied to the media or music industry. Once #MuteRKelly blew up and became bigger than the tight-knit communities of Black Twitter, it also yielded results: Radio stations stopped playing Kelly’s music, his concerts got cancelled, and when the documentary *Surviving R. Kelly* aired in January 2019, a comprehensive look into the singer’s tactics of silencing was made possible. While all of these allegations might paint a clear picture to some, the trials proved to be long and exhausting for the victims. After almost three decades of denying allegations, R. Kelly was sentenced to 31 years in prison in February 2023 due to possession of depictions of sexual abuse of children, sex trafficking, and racketeering.³⁴² Of course, it can only be speculated whether he would have been convicted without #MuteRKelly – but I think probably not. The hashtag grew under the right climate in a community of not exclusively, but mainly women who were tired of being silenced while their abusers were further financially endorsed by fans and media institutions. However, Kelly’s conviction only came at the price of exhaustive activist and emotional labour like the permanent accusations of victim blaming, derailing of conversations, and other strategies of belittling and discrediting victims, as has been continued in the #MeToo movement.

#MeToo further exposed and criticized the culture of sexual harassment and assault by using hashtags as a social weapon. The hashtag gained popularity after actress Alyssa Milano used it in a tweet in response to numerous allegations of sexual misconduct against film

³⁴¹ A detailed timeline has been created by DeRogatis 2017.

³⁴² Chiarito, Jacobs 2023.

producer Harvey Weinstein: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet."³⁴³ Just like #MuteRKelly, the tweet aimed to break the silence that many people who experienced sexual abuse feel forced to keep up, which is why speaking up needs to be situated as the only way to break through the patriarchal logic of suffering in silence. In this regard, #MeToo piggybacked on the success of #MuteRKelly by creating a new self-understanding for victims of abuse: By creating a sense of empowerment for survivors to share their stories, it was soon evident that the same strategies by people in power are played over and over to get away with abuse. On the other hand, speaking out enables victims to influence the narrative and take matters into their own hands. While the movement attempted to bring attention to the intersectionality of sexual violence, it was primarily engaged with and represented by white women and also criticized for its essentialism of the 'female experience' not adequately reflecting on multiple factors of marginalization such as skin color, religion, gender or class.³⁴⁴ Nevertheless, like #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo needs to be understood as an open-ended process that is steadily developing and mutating.

However, not all viral hashtags are decidedly political, sometimes, people just want to engage in online discourse: *The Dress* refers to a viral discussion on various social networks that took place in February 2015. Tumblr user swiked uploaded a photo of a dress in really bad lighting asking what color it is. [70] The image sparked an enormous debate on whether the dress is white and gold or black and blue. In its first 48 hours, the thread already gained over



Fig. 70: The original photograph of The Dress.

400,000 notes. Subsequently, online media outlets like BuzzFeed reported on the dress and conducted an online poll in which 72% of over 1.8 million people voted for the dress being white and gold. On the same day, an image of the dress in an online shop revealed it to be royal blue with black lace details. Following this, a thread asking how the photo is perceived so differently across the Internet was posted to r/askscience:³⁴⁵ Apparently, it comes down to whether your brain reasons the background light to be warm or cold, with the former making the dress appear white and gold and the latter making it look black and blue. Similar viral discussions have been held on other forms of thought experiments (most notably, If a Dog Would Wear Pants) and optical illusions like forced perspective photographs and

³⁴³ See @alyssamilano, Twitter: https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976?

³⁴⁴ See Rosenberg 2021.

³⁴⁵ See thread by the moderator bot, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/askscience/comments/2xbfxp/what_color_is_the_dress_why_do_some_people_see/.

trompe-l'oeil effects.

Founded roughly around the same time as Twitter, Tumblr emerged by the hands of David Karp and also put microblogging as its primary focus. The structure of a Tumblr blog is similar to classic website builders such as Wordpress: Users are able to blog pictures, videos or texts that other users can favorite, comment on, and reblog. The last function is crucial for the distribution of content on Tumblr: In principle, the platform can be divided into reblogging pages that make about 90% of all blogs and original content pages only accounting for the remaining 10%.³⁴⁶ Similar to Twitter, posts can be tagged using hashtags to organize and aggregate content. Users can also follow each other, which reinforces the strong focus on community building on Tumblr. Therefore, the social network is sometimes referred to as a 'hugbox', which refers to a safe space in an online community of like-minded people characterized by good behavior and friendliness as opposed to boards like 4chan—however, that is not quite the case. The cliché rather stems from Tumblr's decision to target a young audience that is artistically engaged and wants to express themselves creatively online.³⁴⁷ This is also represented in a more relaxed attitude toward nudity and explicit sexual content that soon cemented the cliché of Tumblr as frequented by more socially progressive users in comparison to other platforms.³⁴⁸ Similarly, many girls, women, and members of the LGTBQIA+ community joined Tumblr that was preoccupied with stereotypically 'girly' things like fandoms, art, and photography as well as inquiries into the different forms of Internet aesthetics (e.g. mood blogs³⁴⁹) and subcultures. This also influences the discussions on politics, such as feminism, trans issues, structural racism, homophobia or mental health issues, which are often tackled from progressive perspectives. Additionally, many users who felt like misfits on Reddit also joined the microblogging platform, sometimes astonished over the difference in tone: In a Reddit post titled "What's the deal with Redditors and Tumblr users appearing not to get along, including in the SPN [TV series *Supernatural*] fandom?", user *jojodacrow* replied:

Reddit loves to talk about SJW's and Tumblrinas but what they are really picking apart are young teenage girls who want to be passionate about causes but who are still learning. They also dislike feminism and get really antsy when people talk about it and other race/identity/sex issues. Now this is not everyone but these are the types of things you see subreddits designed to mock tumblr posting about.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Salmon 2012.

³⁴⁷ Shafrir 2008.

³⁴⁸ Nudity and depictions of sexual interactions were tolerated on Tumblr until December 2018, when the platform announced the purging of such content. Tumblr famously lost a whopping third of its user base after banning adult content.

³⁴⁹ Mood blogs are collections of images and media on a specific feeling, sentiment or atmosphere mainly used for aesthetic pleasure and inspiration.

³⁵⁰ See the comment by *u/jojodacrow*, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/fandomnatural/comments/34xpfh/whats_the_deal_with_redditors_and_tumblr_users/.

While Redditors, meeting up on an entirely different platform, could have just gone along with what they are doing, subreddits such as r/TumblrInAction were started to explicitly make fun of Tumblr's user-generated content. This bitterness also comes from the fact that many elements of trolling internet humor have also found their way onto Tumblr. This is shaped, as we have learned, by the traditions of white men. When these users (and their successors) now see similar jokes on Tumblr, but about 'women's issues', they are certainly not amused by them. In fact, Tumblr adopted much of the trolling logic and spreads hoaxes as well. One post that also insulted 4chan's favorite food, chicken nuggets, went viral in 2014, showing a photo of a machine oozing pink slime, causing the bowl to overflow. [71] The caption reads:

Say hello to mechanically separated chicken. It's what all fast-food chicken is made from—things like chicken nuggets and patties. Also, the processed frozen chicken in the stores is made from it. Basically, the entire chicken is smashed and pressed through a sieve—bones, eyes, guts, and all. It comes out looking like this. There's more: because it's crawling with bacteria, it will be washed with ammonia, soaked in it, actually. Then, because it tastes gross, it will be reflavored artificially. Then, because it is weirdly pink, it will be dyed with artificial color. But, hey, at least it tastes good, right? High five, America!

We are again faced with a case of media literacy: while the description is unfortunately true, the picture does not show a chicken factory, but the tubby custard machine from the children's show *The Teletubbies*. The extra-serious and taunting tone of the post is reminiscent of the Jenkem letter and already serves as an indicator that wrong information is circulated. However, to anyone more unfortunate in their understanding, it might serve as a trigger responding to vegans and vegetarians dragging meat-based nutrition through the mire from a morally superior perspective—considering that chicken nuggets is the long standing favorite food of 4chan NEETs. As with any hoax, the joke is on those swallowing the bait without doing their own research.

However, this does not mean that Tumblr is a 'left-liberal utopia' or free of any kinds of hate. Angela Nagle tried to popularize the image of 'Tumblr liberalism' in her book *Kill All Normies*, a sensationalist analysis mainly illustrating the author's unsituated viewpoint concerning social phenomena on the Internet. In the chapter on Tumblr, she seeks to analyze how the platform has become a breeding ground for 'social justice warriors', a derogatory term used by right-wingers to ridicule people caring about inequality. According to Nagle, the "generation snowflake" was founded on Tumblr and has spread from there to universities, where students now have to sign "contracts of consent" before they are allowed to make sexual



Fig. 71: The Tubby Custard Machine accused of producing mechanically separated chicken.

advances.³⁵¹ Nagle's view that Tumblr "tried to move the culture in the opposite direction by restricting speech on the right" and its results of "making increasingly anti-male, anti-white, anti-straight, anti-cis rhetoric normal on the cultural left" is not just wrong, but quite problematic:³⁵² Besides an obvious lack in sociopolitical education, this line of argumentation affirms the claims of the alt-right movement, which was still non-existent when Tumblr was founded yet already a united movement when her book was published. But by establishing an imaginary liberal opponent to platforms like 4chan in the form of Tumblr, Nagle jumps onto the bandwagon of the narrative of the Great Meme War, a call to action enforced by Donald Trump and his supporters surrounding the 2016 presidential election that will be analyzed in the next chapter.³⁵³ Lastly, the author does so by resorting to starkly over-exaggerated claims and microaggressions, such as deliberate misgendering or a three-page copypasta with a list of genders she found on Tumblr to demonstrate the apparent ridiculousness of such identifications. Apart from a lack of differentiated analysis of these self-labelings also known as *otherkin*, she uses the example as proof of the left's "victim complex", which the alt-right should later appropriate: "The cult of suffering, weakness and vulnerability has become central to contemporary liberal identity politics, as it is enacted in spaces like Tumblr."³⁵⁴ A look at the history of trolls or incels should be enough to realize that the fixation on suffering, whether in oneself or in others, is certainly not a "liberal phenomenon" but occurs just as much in right-wing communities, and probably even more so. In fact, a lot of discourse on intersectional movements and queer feminism can be traced back to Tumblr. While it is true that snowclones like 'hating all men' have their origin on Tumblr, I believe that Nagle fails to understand the tongue-in-cheek humor she is so eager to relativize on the side of 4chan trolls. For example, in 2017, Tumblr user *dirk-has-rabies* created the *Rabies Pride Movement* which was initially understood by other users as a movement for LGBTQ+ members who also suffer from a rabies infection. In Tumblr tradition, the tag 'rabies pride' made its rounds and a corresponding pride flag was created. In an accompanying post, however, *dirk-has-rabies* aka Jakob Strider explains the term as follows:

Rabies Pride is for Autistic Trans ppl. It's for all the people that were treated like animals, treated like they were contagious or had a deadly disease by classmates/siblings/anyone just for being 'too loud' 'too hyper' 'too close' 'too much' due to having autism and being openly trans.³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Nagle 2017, 70-71.

³⁵² Nagle 2017, 69.

³⁵³ Nagle's misconception of alt-right trolls being the reason why Trump was elected further added to its materialization in many academic discourses. As will be shown in the next chapter, this point of view is highly abstracted and therefore too good to be true. See also Phillips, Milner 2021, 87.

³⁵⁴ Nagle 2017, 73.

³⁵⁵ See Strider's homepage, MSPaint Adventures: <https://homestuck.me/post/641865151841206273/rabies-pride>.

The idea of rabies pride served as bait for those feeling triggered in their own gender fragility on Tumblr, but proved to be very funny and somewhat soothing for users on the in-group. As mentioned before, hating Tumblr is the dominant narrative on Reddit and 4chan, exemplified in the now-banned r/TumblrInAction already dating back to the early 2010s and accumulating more than 450,000 members.³⁵⁶ Sarcastically, most Tumblr users would probably agree on hating the platform for various reasons considering that the import of troll humor also brought with it the limited mindset of tolerating other opinions: You can get beat up on Tumblr just as much as on 4chan—but only if your political views are more in line with the latter. Despite the widespread use of irony, more serious issues such as mental health awareness have always been thoroughly discussed on Tumblr. This is also where the clearly gendered abyss of the platform becomes apparent: For example, the early 2010s saw the emergence of many blogs on self-harm or anorexia (so-called ‘pro-ana blogs’) which were particularly rampant among young girls. The pro-ana movement has been especially damaging to many women visiting the platform during this time: Based on the size zero beauty ideal of the 1990s and 2000s, people who suffered from disordered eating primarily used Tumblr to share weight loss tips. In the process, the unhealthy behavior was anthropomorphized in the figure of Ana, a constant companion. As a psychological method, this is a therapeutic way to cope with chronic diseases, but Ana took on an imperative tone and was presented as creator of the *Letters from*



Fig. 72: A collection of thinspo images after typing ‘#thinspiration’ into Tumblr’s search bar in 2014. Nowadays, an automatic pop-up appear asking “Are you okay?” and providing the contact to mental health institutions for people with eating disorders.

³⁵⁶ See ICYMI 2021 and see also the post by @unsureabouttia, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/comments/2ah6lr/cmv_i_dont_understand_why_so_many_people_like/.

Ana and other texts full of rules and commandments brainwashing young people into eating disorders. The most prominent text reads:

I expect you to drop your calorie intake and up your exercise. I'm going to push you to the limit. And you'll do it because otherwise I won't be your friend anymore: I'll leave you feeling empty and alone. I'm inside your mind. I'm with you when you wake up in the morning, I'm there looking at your number on the scale, I'm looking at you with disgust when you reach for that cookie, I'm smiling at you when you choose the diet soda over the regular one, I'll be next to you when we look into the mirror, we can poke at your fat and stroke my delicate bones: you'll get here too one day. It's okay, I can deal with the hard stuff for you, because you are slowly becoming me.³⁵⁷

A veritable cult of Ana developed, with blogs sharing, for example, highly aestheticized thinspo images (short for the portmanteau thinspiration, photos of starkly underweight women), thinline (a kind of motivational slogan for anorexic people such as Kate Moss's famous quote 'nothing tastes as good as skinny feels'), and resources such as BMI calculators. [72] The aesthetization of Ana needs to be seen as part of a wider phenomenon on Tumblr: The mapping and denominating of different images, colors, music, fashion, films, and other cultural works into explicit aesthetics such as pastel goth or Vaporwave. While 'Internet ugly' memes such as Rage Comics were common on 4chan, cute and pretty aesthetics such as Kawaii, Twilightcore or Mermaidcore were popular on Tumblr. This led to a veritable mania for aestheticizing everything that is now carried on in pretty much the same fashion by TikTok users.³⁵⁸ In this regard, anorexia and bulimia were aestheticized and thus added another incentive to participate in disordered eating next to the community aspect of the blogosphere. Although Tumblr banned most pro-ana blogs in 2013, the discourse surrounding the movement continues to this day, even though its followers have since split into two major camps: Those who see Ana as a personification of their lifelong illness, where self-reflection and self-help can take place (often

³⁵⁷ Excerpt from Letter from Ana, The Ana/Mia Community: <http://theanamiacommunity.blogspot.com/p/letter.html>.

³⁵⁸ This suggests a hypothesis on the ongoing decoupling of aesthetics and politics: The emo/scene kids culture was especially prominent on Tumblr and is often lamented to have been the last subculture to have formed 'organically' prior to the Internet. Subsequently, style dominated over substance—at least to an outsider's eye. While emo kids were famous for their melancholic mindset, despite the style of music, what really connected them were hairstyles, clothes, and make up. Thanks to the visual fetishization of style propelled by the Internet, most subcultures have been rendered meaningless except for looks. The West Coast Hip Hop culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s emerged from specific political conditions, but the aesthetic of Dark Academia merely channels the appearance of old libraries and candlelight. This is not an accusation of the youth of being apolitical, on the contrary: I believe that the Internet as an increasingly decidedly commercial space can either amplify political causes on its own terms, as in hashtag activism, or veil any political potential in favor of pretty aesthetics. The further implications of the decoupling of politics and aesthetics are the general disappearance of individual and subversive style in the mainstream in favor of unremarkable clothing. This is also beautifully reflected in the Normcore trend of 2014, which was characterized by basics like white t-shirts and jeans that wanted to liberate its followers through conformity, or rather take away the burden of having to dress extravagantly. See Ewens 2015.

referred to as ‘with Ana’), and those who submit to Ana, even though they may become seriously ill or even die in the process (‘Ana till the end’).³⁵⁹

The most dominant discourses on Tumblr and, to an extent, also on Twitter and Reddit belong to fandom culture: These are communities that love a certain manga, anime, book, show, game, and so on, and come together online not just to exchange about these cultural products, but also to create their own fan fiction and fan art related to them. Among the biggest fandoms are the ones worshipping the books and films of Harry Potter, the TV show Supernatural, the games Minecraft and Animal Crossing, the manga and anime My Hero Academia, and the superheroes of the Marvel Universe. By writing individual fanfic, fans can incorporate themselves and their values into the fictional universes and recreate them according to their own ideas.³⁶⁰ Depending on their actions, some fandoms are considered more ethical than others, since a lot of fan fiction also thematizes taboos such as incest or sexual relations before the age of consent. The fandoms of the cartoons Rick and Morty or Steven Universe hold notorious reputations which are considered particularly destructive on Tumblr and beyond. However, if there is one thing Tumblr users cannot take a joke about, it is their fan culture, especially when the general consensus in a fandom is that the border of artistic freedom has been traversed. Paige Paz aka zamii070 was cyberbullied on Tumblr until she tried to take her own life. Her crime was, among other things, recreating the character Fluttershy from My Little Pony in an anthropomorphized, Native American version, a practice deemed ‘racebending’ on Tumblr.³⁶¹ Her biggest offense, however, was her drawing of the Steven Universe character Rose Quartz in a skinnier version that other fans deemed ‘fatphobic’. This marks the beginning of a months-long cyberbullying attack on Paz much in the tradition of 4chan raids, with users commenting “hope you die” and “kill yourself” to her postings ultimately leading to her attempted suicide. Meanwhile, the creators of Steven Universe publicly stated support for Paz and artistic freedom and condemned the behavior of the fanbase. In the end, this led to a re-evaluation of the fight for social justice on Tumblr, which can be, as stated earlier, just as hateful and cruel as on other platforms.

This brings us to one of the most popular practices on the platform, shipping, or the adorning of romantic relationships between certain characters. These are often ‘forbidden’ akin to the narrative of star-crossed lovers and are always described with portmanteau words of the couple’s names. Popular examples from 2022 are *Byler*, formed by the characters Will Byers and Mike Wheeler from the series Stranger Things, or the evergreen ship *Drarry*, Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy from the eponymous magic epic. Many of the ships are homosexual, which in turn foregrounds the inherent queerness of Tumblr. A very different, much more consequential

³⁵⁹ Eichenberg, Flümann, Hensges 2011, 498.

³⁶⁰ See Black 2009.

³⁶¹ Nguyen 2015.



Fig. 73: The Interwebs Series including the platform names of the characters.

form of shipping was triggered by the webcomic *The Interwebs Series* in 2012: Drawn by user 8-butt, it featured 18 anthropomorphized personifications of the most popular websites in anime style.³⁶² [73] YouTube, for example, was depicted as a skater boy with a camera in his hand, Wikipedia as a white-haired professor type, and MySpace as a ghost in a blue T-shirt. The image went viral and the characters began to break away from the original drawing and appear in their own narratives. This, of course, involved shipping: the forbidden love between Tumblr, a blue-haired girl with long hair, and 4chan, a green faceless man in a suit, was particularly popular. The idea of *4chumblr* had been floating around on /b/ for a while after the two platforms got into a war in November 2010.³⁶³ 4chan, or rather /b/, had long been under the assumption that Tumblr would steal their jokes and otherwise just produce ‘cancer’ anyway. In the course of *Operation Overlord*, Tumblr’s homepage was spammed with gory images and pornography as well as crippled by DDoSing. But the Tumblrites were prepared, so-called ‘survival guides’³⁶⁴ were circulated in advance and counterattacks were planned. With the same means—meme spamming and DDoS attacks—4chan’s website was finally paralyzed on November 15. This led to 4chan’s moderators taking away the ability to create threads to

³⁶² Four of Us 2017.

³⁶³ See Hagen 2023.

³⁶⁴ See the post by utter-ma, Tumblr, <https://fyeahmika.tumblr.com/post/1573057422/survival-guide-to-4chans-raid/amp>.

contain the attack—so even users who had nothing to do with the feud could no longer talk to each other on the image board. This resulted in the idea of a diversionary tactic to turn the raid into a romance to get rid of the Tumblr users. 4chumblr spawned masses of fanfic and fan art that is still carried on through cosplaying and definitely accounts for one of the weirdest chapters in internet history.

As we have seen so far, different social media platform are often made up of different target groups. Since the beginning of the social mediafication in 2007, most platforms rely on targeted advertising as their primary form of income.³⁶⁵ After the triumph of Facebook, other platforms had to impress with other features to attract new users: Tumblr went after artists, Twitter used their short message service to recruit journalists, media professionals, brands, and academics, at least in their early days, and Instagram targeted primarily young mobile photography enthusiasts and people interested in a more visual form of social media. Yet another social network is Twitch, a video platform that offers both live streaming and on demand services. It was founded in 2011 and is particularly popular among gamers and eSports fans that use Twitch for so-called Let's Plays, i.e. self-streaming of well-known gamers playing games for an audience. Similar to YouTube, you can subscribe to other people's channels while live streams also have a realtime chat function, which often serves as a battleground for trolling attacks. In addition to gaming, Twitch was also used for broadcasting professional sports and for charity campaigns. Streamers can earn money through ads and sponsored content, similar to YouTube. Particularly popular are so-called parasocial interactions,³⁶⁶ usually in the form of continuous livestreams lasting several days forming social bonds between streamer and fans. Viewers can participate in the livestream through chatting and sending gifts which is followed by the streamer and commented on vocally. This principle can be found in almost all apps today, including TikTok and Instagram. The non-gaming content heavily relies on IRL streaming, i.e. people streaming their daily life, and also includes, for example, ASMR³⁶⁷ videos or sleeping streams, which show streamers sleeping. Twitch is also used for light sex work, although nudity is forbidden on the platform, there are ways to get around this. For example, the category hot tub streaming has become established by streamers like Amouranth, an adult film actress and OnlyFans model with more than 6 million followers and one of the biggest fanbases on Twitch.

Due to the phenomenon of compartmentalization on Twitch, where a community gathers in the space of a live chat for a stream, the memes of the platform are strongly

³⁶⁵ Hagen 2023, 5.

³⁶⁶ Parasocial interactions denote relationships between media performers and consumers of mass media. The latter typically consider media personalities as friends despite having no personal interactions with them. In digital participatory media, this boundary is further dissolving due to real-time interactions such as chatting. See Giles 2002.

³⁶⁷ ASMR is short for autonomous sensory meridian response and a form of paresthesia, a tingling sensation felt without a direct physical cause.

influenced by the shared experiences. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* was a nearly 17-day long livestream that began on February 12, 2014, and has given birth to a number of memes. An anonymous Australian programmer added a feature to the Game Boy classic Pokémon Red's code that made the popular open world game's character controllable via live chat on Twitch. This allowed participants to type out commands such as 'left', 'right', 'start', and so on to control the character. Chaos was inevitable: What began like a persiflage of the Infinite Monkey Theorem³⁶⁸ turned into a record-breaking phenomenon on Twitch, and the memes it produced had a lot to say about social structures and collective efforts. The up to 100,000 participants made it impossible to control the character effectively, so important coordinates to actually go anywhere in the open world game were stored in an extra GoogleDocs file. Imagine the gameplay as follows:³⁶⁹ The character constantly turns around its own axis, constantly opens its items or the Pokédex, takes three steps in one direction and then 15 steps back again. The emulator was frequently overwhelmed by a myriad of inputs, which is why they were only executed with a delay, which in turn made the game harder to control and significantly lengthened its duration. At a specific place in the game, Route 9 connecting Cerulean City with Route 10, the experiment almost failed due to the virtual environment: There are ledges in Pokémon that you can jump over from top to bottom, but not vice versa. [74] Since the section the character had to pass was close to such a ledge, it took several hours to overcome it as the



Fig. 74: Main character Red is jumping over the infamous ledge (once again). On the right side, we see a counter stating how long the game has been running and below is the list of commands performed by the character. At this point, there is still only democracy mode available as is apparent by the inconsistent commands.

³⁶⁸ The infinite monkey theorem is a thought experiment stemming from statistical mechanics that imagines an infinite number of monkeys randomly typing on typewriters for an infinite amount of time. Given enough time, these random processes would eventually produce a specific piece of text, such as a complete work of Shakespeare or any other given text. The infinite monkey theorem has also been used to explain the tendency of natural selection to create more complex beings from very simple sets of rules.

³⁶⁹ See The Gamer from Mars 2020.

ledge was constantly jumped over and required a relatively long diversion back to the start. João V. Tomotani attributed this to the inherent trolling in the live chat: Using the in-game map of Route 23, he calculated that the path covered by the character only takes 70 in-game steps to master, yet a troll factor—meaning the percentage of people in the chat not typing the commands needed to move forward, but instead control the character into different directions—of 10% already resulted in an average of 285 while 20% trolls in the live chat pump these numbers up to 1,011 steps.³⁷⁰ Similarly frustrating—at least for those players who took the game seriously—was the maze of in-game enemy Team Rocket: This level consisted of a labyrinth using spinning floor tiles that push the character in a certain direction. Due to the aggregated crowd control and the lags in the game, it became the most difficult obstacle of the entire game, which took more than two days to complete. After this incident, which was also influenced by the fact that the trolling in the chat made the game virtually unplayable, the

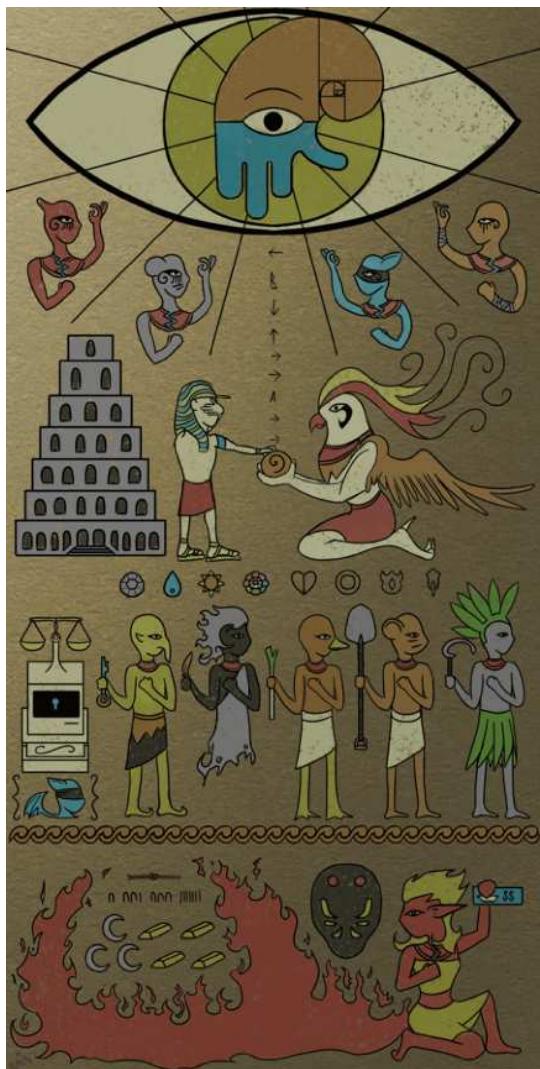


Fig. 75: Fan art by u/whoaconstrictor in pseudo-hieroglyphic style. It narrates the cosmology created by fans around the game.

streamer implemented a voting system that let participants decide whether to play in ‘democracy mode’ or in ‘anarchy mode’. The democracy mode consisted of a counter that added up all inputs in the chat every 30 seconds and then executed the command with the most votes. The anarchy mode was akin to the variant used before. Players used the terms ‘democracy’ and ‘anarchy’ to vote for the operating system, which was constantly displayed on a slider. The democracy mode quickly became extremely unpopular, as people found it boring and slow. Although the anarchy mode didn't get you anywhere either and was invariably annoying, most users saw it as at least retaining the spirit of a mass-controlled single-player game. Pro-anarchy mode users therefore began to protest when the mode changed to democracy, e.g. using the command ‘start9’ which opens and closes the item bag nine times. Of course, this action does nothing and only wastes time. The worst incident, however, occurred in anarchy mode and went down in memetic history as *Bloody Sunday*: In all Pokémon games, you can

³⁷⁰ Tomotani 2016, 29.

only carry six Pokémons in your bag at a time. All the others are stored on an in-game computer and can be exchanged from there. This function was Twitch's undoing: After catching a legendary, i.e. occurring only once throughout the game, Pokémons, they needed to get to a computer as quickly as possible. In addition to the function of discarding a Pokémons you are carrying, however, there is also the option of releasing it so that it can return 'into the wild'. However, this function is irreversible—yet it's exactly what happened on Bloody Sunday not once, but an incredible 12 times. Over the course of the game, it developed a cult-like following which also enabled the creation of myths and spiritual narrativization. [75] Among others, there was *Bird Jesus*, a highly beloved Pidgeot with the beautiful official name aaabaaaajss taking on the role of the team leader, or *Lord Helix*, the aforementioned legendary fossil that evolved into an Omastar and has also been given the nickname God due to its combat experience. Despite all the setbacks, participants were able to defeat all eight arenas and the top 4, the strongest opponents in the game, thus completing Pokémons Red: After 16 days, 7 hours, 45 minutes and 30 seconds, the credits finally started rolling. Due to its huge success, the series has been played through with all nine other Pokémons editions as well as other spin-off games, and has also inspired all kinds of other collective-based games, such as Tetris, Dark Souls, and The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

Unfortunately, not all memes in the gaming community have been so innocent. The common gamer stereotype, which also overlaps with that of a 4chan user, paints a picture of a grown man who still lives at home in his 30s and has his mum do his laundry, otherwise has little to no social contact and has zero experience with relationships and sexuality. It is important to emphasize here that despite various similarities, a distinction must still be made between typical gamers and followers of the so-called manosphere, such as incels and pick-up artists, who are dealt with in chapter 3.3. However, as will be shown below, misogyny and homophobia have always been extremely widespread in the gaming community, too. *GamerGate* was an online controversy that covered the greater part of 2014. What apparently set out as a critique of ethics in video game journalism quickly spiraled into a months-long series of misogyny, cyberbullying, harassment, and several attempts at doxxing women in the gaming industry that unveiled its inherent sexism. It began with the so-called *Zoe Post*³⁷¹ by Eron Gjoni on August 16, 2014, a blog entry accusing game developer Zoe Quinn, his ex-partner, of having a romantic relationship with a journalist for favorable coverage of their game. Although these claims were later unveiled to be false, it kicked off what was quickly dubbed *Quinnspiracy*: Quinn released their game Depression Quest, a text-based role-playing game where you can take on the role of someone suffering from depression, just a year before. The game reflects a broader engagement with the mental health issues or feminist and queer causes in the indie game industry further exemplified by viral hits such as Life is Strange from 2015. Soon after the

³⁷¹ Reposted as The Zoe Post: <https://thezoepost.wordpress.com/>.

allegations, gamers found out about alleged donations to Quinn's Patreon account by gaming journalists as well as their receiving of an award while having an affair with one of the judges. Now while these allegations, if reasonable, account for Quinn's unethical standards, the whole discourse, while upholding the image that it was concerned with ethics, was soaked in trolling and misogyny. Nevertheless, #GamerGate went viral after actor Adam Baldwin used it on August 27 and was retweeted almost 250,000 times within its first week of existence. Media outlets began reporting on the incident, staging GamerGate as the anti-feminist movement par excellence and asking why gamers were so angry and sexist. In turn, this fueled the rage-ridden supporters of the movement who hated women as well as those who originally wanted to criticize sloppy journalistic standards. Eventually, the harassment and hate got so bad it evoked censorship on 4chan: By mid-September, users of the image board noticed that all posts relating to GamerGate were automatically deleted. Poole thus released a statement: "The decision to remove 'GamerGate' threads has been poorly communicated, and that's my fault. Said threads are being deleted primarily because they violate our blanket 'no personal information / raids / calls to invasion' rule."³⁷² This led to the exodus to 8chan, a now-deleted image board built on the same principles as 4chan but with even less moderation. 8chan, rebranded as 8kun, would later become notorious for its extremist far-right content and perpetuating of conspiracy theories such as QAnon.



Fig. 76: The Oppressed GamerGater Advice Animal in the six versions posted by Wu.

³⁷² Kidd, Turner 2016, 117.

Meanwhile, GamerGate also gave birth to a kind of belated version of Advice Animal image macros showing a kid pulling his hair in front of a blue-purplish background dubbed *Oppressed GamerGater*. The image was captured with “This is about corruption/Tweets 500 things attacking women” or “Fighting an apocalyptic future/Where women are 8% of programers and not 3%”. [76] These were reposted by Brianna Wu, a game developer, who commented on the meme with “Love it”. Consequently, the next day, someone doxxed her on 8chan, urging her to flee her house. Similar things happened to Anita Sarkeesian: On October 29, 2014, the feminist video game critic and scholar was a guest at the late-night show The Colbert Report to discuss GamerGate. Afterwards, she received rape and death threats on social media and was doxxed a couple of times. Her Wikipedia entry was constantly slammed with slurs and even a low-quality browser game called Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian appeared. GamerGate was particularly propelled by right-wing writers like Milo Yiannopoulos on the alt-right platform Breitbart, who framed it as the long-overdue uprising of gamers suffering from a dictatorship of authoritarian leftist doxa that reveals an apparently underlying culture war: Denying “great art” of “immersive games such as *Call of Duty*” in favor of “[F]eminised, infantilized, social justice-oriented art” thus brings with it “faux victimhood, robbing players of agency and individualism in favor of identity politics and meditations on ‘oppression’.”³⁷³ While one of the most popular games of all time, first-person shooter Call of Duty may not be the first masterpiece coming to mind as particularly ‘great’ art, but framing it that way definitely speaks to a lot of online gamers out there. The quote also conclusively demonstrates the attesting of a ‘victim mentality’ to marginalized identities that apparently threaten the ‘universal’ man that acts as a figure of identification to the alt-right similar to the rhetorics of Nagle: Ironically, this point of view does not reflect on its own complicity in ‘faux victimhood’ that is materialized in the pondering, writing, and publishing of such ‘articles’. But that is besides the point anyway: Considering the importance of participation in the attention economy, such texts need to be seen as an attempt to mark discourse in order to engage people emotionally in specific narratives, codes, and stereotypes. This is all the more apparent in Yiannopoulos’ sudden change in tone regarding gaming as observed by Colin Milburn:

Although he had formerly dismissed gamers as ‘pungent beta male bollock scratchers’ and social outcasts (‘Few things are more embarrassing than grown men getting over-excited about video games’), at the time of GamerGate he made an abrupt about-face, professing a newfound admiration for geek culture.³⁷⁴

Unsurprisingly, the opportunistic appropriation of GamerGate through prominent supporters like Yiannopoulos and Richard Spencer later expanded their influence on the alt-right movement. In this regard, GamerGate needs to be seen as a prelude to the events of 2016: In a way, the

³⁷³ Yiannopoulos 2014.

³⁷⁴ Milburn 2018, 169.

distrust and fragility of many male gamers was exploited by right-wing media outlets, who regarded them as a cheap way of generating more interest. However, this would never have been possible without explicit misogynistic tendencies in the gaming community in the first place. Under the guise of ‘free speech’, the angry mob of irritated man-children was hijacked to enforce anti-feminist spirits among its followers in order to combat an imaginary enemy. What is so interesting about the controversy from a feminist perspective is how Quinn, Sarkeesian, and Wu handled it: Instead of digging in and never going public again—a perfectly understandable reaction—they decided to play the cards they were dealt. Sarkeesian used her infamous popularity to speak out against sexism in the gaming industry, giving a talk at TEDxWomen³⁷⁵ and, along Quinn, at the United Nations headquarters. Wu founded a fund for legal defense against online sexual harassment. Quinn, protagonist of the witch hunt, withstood the pressure and has been fighting against sexism in the gaming industry ever since. In a 2015 BBC interview, they state that the claims about ethics in gaming journalism were never at the heart of the matter considering that 4chan decided to go against indie game developers instead of AAA publishers, where most of the power is concentrated. They tearfully recount:

To me, GamerGate will always be glorified revenge porn by my angry ex. Before it had a name, it was nothing but trying to get me to kill myself, trying to hurt me, going after my family. [...] There was no mention of ethics in journalism at all, besides making the same accusation everybody makes toward any successful women, that clearly she got to where she is because she had sex with someone.³⁷⁶

Indeed, it may come as no surprise that GamerGate exposed many gamers as fragile, misogynistic, and reactionary—however, nobody deserves to be doxxed and persecuted because of their gender. Lastly, it is well worth situating this story historically: For a very very long time, gaming was considered a classic boy’s issue, similar to information technology in general. Recalling 4chan’s rule 30 further illuminates this attitude: “Girls do not exist on the internet.” For sure, this is an extremely partial view as there have always been non-male gamers as well as huge markets for games targeting girls and women including popular life simulator The Sims and more than 40 titles in the Barbie video game series. The specific gender-based marketing of such games led to their erasure in video game history just like the limitations enforced by patriarchal standards add to the image of a purely men-based gaming industry. When feminism became more visible due to increased activism on platforms like Tumblr and Twitter, it also became attractive for marketing purposes as an additional target group. No matter if the title character of a game is a woman for moral or capitalist reasons: In any case, a large proportion of male gamers used to male-dominated spaces felt taken by surprise and patronised. Although the debate calmed down since 2014, the sexist views held by many gamers are still apparent, for example, in viral discussions about the character design of

³⁷⁵ See TEDx Talks 2012.

³⁷⁶ BBC News 2014.

protagonists Ellie from *The Last of Us 2* or Alloy from *Horizon: Forbidden West*. Despite all this, GamerGate has raised awareness for women's issues in the gaming industry, which doesn't automatically include feminism in games these days, but at least makes it an issue—especially in influential AAA titles. In addition, GamerGate serves as a look behind the curtain of the later alt-right movement's tactics: Seizing the moment of any controversy by staging an apparent battle against corrupted 'leaders' at the back of an already-disparate community, which we will trace along the story of Pepe the Frog in the following chapter.

5.3. The Story of Pepe the Frog

Pepe the Frog, who has had an impressive career spanning 20 years and counting, serves as an example for the journey a meme can travel—from beloved meme to hate symbol and back again. He was originally a character in Matt Furie's comic *Boy's Club*, which appeared in 2003 and dealt semi-autobiographically with the cartoonist's mundane post-college life:³⁷⁷ Pepe the Frog's human-animal hybrid cohabitants spend their days drinking, ordering pizza, smoking weed, gaming, and so on. *Boy's Club* propagated the laidback Californian lifestyle mixed with faecal humor and Millennial clichés. One specific comic strip shows Pepe in the bathroom peeing standing up. With his trousers pulled down to his ankles, his flatmate asks him what he is doing to which he responds: "Feels good man...". [77] The encouraging reply soon did the rounds on message boards as a snowclone, to a great extent on those dedicated to the subject of fitness and body styling.³⁷⁸ Before-and-after photos of men training were posted with the caption "feels good man..." In addition, image macros with the catchphrase kept popping up, including mutations like "feels Goodman" using a photo of actor John Goodman. Furie, who did not spend a lot of time on the Internet and only learned about memes through Pepe, dismissed Pepe's catchphrase appearing on memes as a weird coincidence. In 2008, after spending most of his time on MySpace and the anime network Gaia Online, Pepe the Frog surfaced on 4chan for the first time. From then on, the frog's circulation accelerates: The troll culture on /b/ adopted or rather claimed Pepe as its own, which was supported by newer variations like *Sad Frog* from 2009 showing Pepe with a lowered gaze. [Part I Fig. 12] This mutation became particularly popular, adorning posts lamenting the solitary lives led by NEETs that had great identification potential: A frog with anxiety and depression somewhat reflected the users on the boards /b/ and especially /r9k/, where a special bond with Pepe was established.

The /r9k/ board opened in 2008 and was actually intended as an experiment: It used the code ROBOT9000 by Randall Munroe, which deleted exact reposts, thus performing a form of automoderation.³⁷⁹ Primarily, this was used to bypass copypastas, but it was also an

³⁷⁷ Jones 2020.

³⁷⁸ Jones 2020.

³⁷⁹ Munroe 2008.



Fig. 77: The comic strip that started it all: the influential Pepe drawing can be found in the bottom right panel.

experiment to see if a community would emerge anyway—which did: /r/9k/ became the birthplace of greentext stories, personal anecdotes often rendered in a self-deprecating and self-pitying tone. Sad Frog was often accompanying these greentexts and seemed to be even more popular than previous versions, perhaps because Pepe also looks very cute with his poor expression. In fact, this version seemed to go down especially well with girls and young women, prompting users to create make up tutorial videos of Pepe that went viral. In addition, celebrities also jumped on the Pepe trend, for example, singer Katy Perry and rapper Nicki Minaj, who posted Pepe memes on Twitter in 2014. This point in time was still characterized by emulating the ‘perfect’ life on social media further fueled by the image-centered logic of platforms like Instagram, where everyone was equipped with a big grin and mysteriously appeared to always be on holiday—in short, everything was *live, laugh, love*. In this pretend perfect world, Sad Frog took on a special role that can be viewed as a forerunner of the later cultural shift away from

faked happiness and toward an uglier, more realistic approach to social media. But is that really the reason why 10-year-old girls painted Pepe on their faces? Probably not—nevertheless, that accounted for the end of the road for 4chan users who saw their ‘original right’ to Pepe the Frog violated. After all, Pepe was at home on 4chan, he was one of the anonymous basement dwellers who had nothing better to do all day than sit at home and play video games. This anger can be seen in a new Pepe mutation, *Angry Pepe*, which saw the light of day on /r9k/ in 2014: With his eyes squinted shut and his mouth wide open and his tongue slobbering out, Pepe appears to be yelling angrily and gesticulating with his hands. His rage is intensified by the motion blur and the red filter that is placed over the entire image. [78] For 4chan, this was the appropriate reaction to the normies who appropriated ‘their’ meme. To prevent the further normification of Pepe, the users came up with a plan to create as many offensive and insulting memes of Pepe as possible to stop the further circulation among normies. This can also be understood as the first step towards a decided radicalization of the meme. According to the tone on the boards /b/ and /r9k/, Pepees with assault rifles and balaclavas were soon added. However, this could not really contain the further circulation of Angry Pepes on Tumblr, Facebook, and Twitter. The first big turning point took place on May 23, 2014: On that day, 22-year-old Elliott Rodger attacked several people in a racist and sexist motivated rampage in Isla Vista that left six people dead and another 14 injured.³⁸⁰ After the crime, a manifesto written by Rodger confirmed that he had been planning the act for a long time and posted about it on 4chan, among other places. He identified as an incel, a loose self-designation for a community characterized primarily by its anti-feminist, anti-social, and self-pitying attitude. In order to reflect on the further blending of Pepe with incel ideology, a short excursus follows.

The portmanteau for involuntary celibates—people who would like to act out their sexuality but do not seem to get the chance—designates a community that is part of a broader misogynistic online movement commonly referred to as ‘the manosphere’: This includes men’s rights activists, extremist father’s rights perpetrators, pick-up artists, and Men Going Their Own Way.³⁸¹ Despite their many intersections, these groups are also at enmity with one another and largely overlap with the alt-right movement. It should be noted that not all incels automatically take on extreme right wing positions as the movement is not homogenous, but the language,

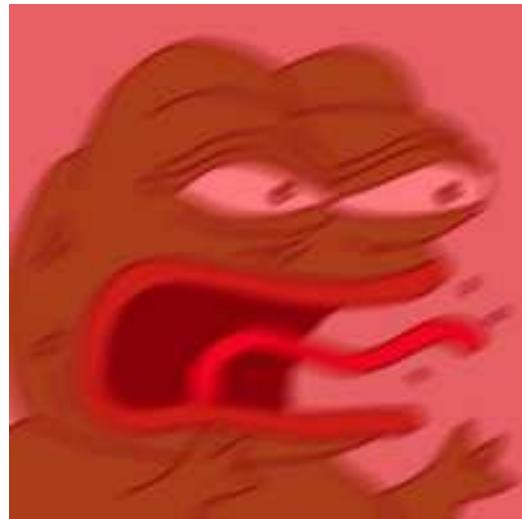


Fig. 78: A Really Angry Pepe.

³⁸⁰ Phillips, Milner 2017, 59.

³⁸¹ Wendling 2018, 63.

ideologies, and platforms such as 8chan/8kun clearly stem from such a sentiment. However, the incels' subculture is responsible for a large part of memes: partly as self-reflexive memeing and partly because other communities make fun of them.

The beginnings of the movement lie in a very different eco-system than one might expect: In 1997, Alana, a twenty-something based in Toronto who just started dating, founded a forum for lonely and single people of any gender to share their experiences. More of a grievance box than a breeding ground for misogyny, Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project served as a place to unload a good cry: "There was probably a bit of anger and some men were a bit clueless about how women are unique, individual humans, but in general it was a supportive place."³⁸² When Alana had her bisexual coming out around 2000 and found more comfort in her sexuality, she transferred the forum to an anonymous user. At the same time, more and more message boards for unhappy lovers and lonely people appeared, which still regarded inceldom as a phase to be bridged and functioned similarly to a self-help group. Some of these boards, such as IncelSupport.com, were heavily moderated and did not tolerate any hate comments about women or the LGBTQ+ community. This caused many frustrated users, by far cis-heterosexual men, to move to other sites such as love-shy.org. Here, a different picture was already emerging: Due to little to no moderation, a toxic worship of misogynist murderers like George Sodini, who shot three women and injured nine others in a 2009 rampage at a fitness center, came into being. This sentiment also shapes the /r/9k/ board and needs to be understood as fragile masculinity: Let's think of it as a feedback loop that needs to constantly check masculinity from the outside in order to be sure of itself. The expectations of a specific form of masculinity are those of the patriarchy, which propagates characteristics like dominance, physical superiority, heterosexuality, virility, and so on. If a subject eventually breaks down under this pressure, it is easier to scapegoat other individuals than the whole system. One prejudice incels carry is that women would avoid androgynous or 'unmanly' men, who are also called 'soy boys' (see chapter). The term comes from the misconception that products made from soybeans contain higher levels of phytoestrogens responsible for 'feminizing' men. Of course, these plant-derived estrogens have no notable effect on humans and merely share similarities in their chemical structure. In the context of fragile masculinity, however, this is enough to evoke a fear reaction regarding a devaluation of manhood. The term soy boy has thus established itself as a swear word against male feminists similar to the term cuck. Cuck, short for cuckold, originally referred to an unfaithful husband. In the fetish scene, however, a cuckold is also a variation of a voyeur who takes pleasure in watching their partners have sex with others. Since the early 2010s, the term cuckervative has also been used in the alt-right scene to insult people from the conservative camp who were not extreme enough for them.

The fragile masculinity of incels is combined with a pessimistic understanding of the

³⁸² Taylor 2018.

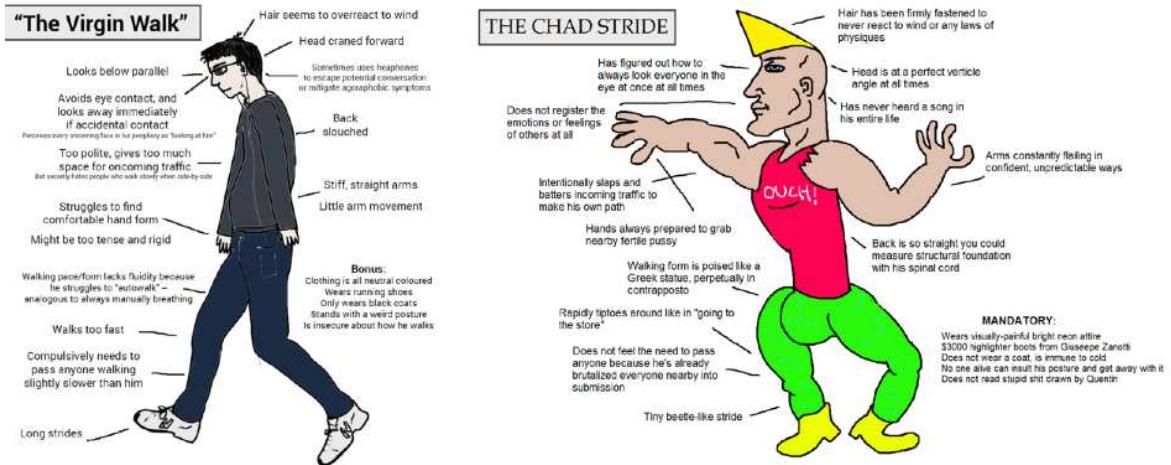


Fig. 79: The Virgin Walk vs. the Chad Stride compares two different types of men: those lacking self confidence and those who have too much.

world and a complex iconography: The firm conviction that incels have lost the genetic lottery and are situated in hopeless circumstances is known as being 'redpilled' (and, sometimes, in apparently more hopeless circumstances, 'blackpilled') in analogy to the illusion of choice offered in the 2000 movie *The Matrix*, where the red pill lets the protagonist 'escape' the simulation.³⁸³ Incels believe in an extreme form of biological determinism: According to their lore, the world belongs to alpha males, called *Chads*, who date all the beautiful women, the *Stacys*, while the incels have to either put up with an average-looking woman (called *Betty*) or just stay alone forever. In a perversion of the Pareto principle, they believe to be left in the basket because 80% of all women only want to date the top 20% of men. The earliest depiction of a Chad goes back to the meme *The Virgin Walk vs. The Chad Stride*, in which the introverted, shy demeanor of an incel is contrasted with the loud, present existence of a Chad. [79] It also emphasizes physiognomic features of the Chads, who are always tall and muscular, as well as having angular facial features such as high cheekbones and a prominent chin. These are perfectly reflected in the meme called *GigaChad*, the emblem of the alpha male



Fig. 80: GigaChad aka berlin.1969.

³⁸³ That this is not true should be clear to anyone who has watched the rest of the trilogy: In fact, the world inhabited by the people who escaped the matrix and 'woke up' from the simulation is just another iteration of the matrix. On top of that, considering the Wachowskis' transition, they later proclaimed that the red pill was, in fact, a metaphor for estrogen that was made available as red-colored Premarin pills in the 1990s. Critical film and media competency is not the biggest strength of incels considering the other movies worshipped by them are *Fight Club* from 1996, a tale of fragile masculinity based on a book by gay author Chuck Palahniuk, and 2000 *American Psycho*, a satire of alpha masculinity directed by a woman, Mary Harron, based on the book by queer author Bret Easton Ellis.



Fig. 81: Debimbofication is a comic strip dripping wet with sexism: A ‘hot’ bimbo woman stumbles upon a book that makes her smart and look ‘normal’. In the accompanying disclaimer on DeviantArt, creator sortimid states that the image was commissioned by a client with a debimbofication fetish. As an apology, sortimid also drew pride-themed comics of the bimbo and the smart girl being a couple.

and a downright caricature of alpha masculinity. [80] GigaChad, of whom there is merely a series of black and white photographs on his Instagram profile *berlin.1969*, is not, however, a Russian bodybuilder named Ernest Khalimov, as the profile leads us to believe. Rather, it is an art project by Russian-Lithuanian photographer Krista Sudmalis, who analyzes body images in her project *Sleek'n'tears*.³⁸⁴ Therefore, GigaChad doesn't really exist, but is a photoshopped version of a bodybuilder. Women, who are reduced to the binarity of Stacy and Becky, are memed in a comic strip circulated on Twitter known as *Debimbofication*: [81] There, we see a tall, tanned, blonde woman wearing a pink mini dress and high heels—the archetype of the bimbo—picking up a book from the floor and, upon reading it, transforming into what is supposed to show an educated woman, I guess; a pale woman tying her hair in a bun and wearing long sleeves and jeans while carrying a backpack and the book.

In a way, incels are what the author Michel Houellebecq deemed ‘the losers of the sexual revolution’ in his 1994 novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (eng. *Whatever*). That is also why many online communities, especially on Instagram and Twitter, tend to make fun of incels. From a gender theoretical perspective, incels are a particularly interesting phenomenon: YouTube essayist Contrapoints aka Natalie Wynn emphasizes the surprising overlaps between incel and transgender communities.³⁸⁵ One of the examples is the fetishization of the skull, which can be found in both communities: While many trans women undergo facial feminization surgeries, where parts of the skull are scraped off to give rounder and thus more feminine-read facial features, many incels suffer from a ‘weak’ bone structure like a receding chin or deep-set cheekbones. Wynn sums up that the skull acts as a symbol of eternity similar to Renaissance depictions of *memento mori* because of the great difficulty of making adjustments to it—and

³⁸⁴ See @sleekntears, Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/sleekntears/>.

³⁸⁵ Contrapoints 2018.

thus provides an bottomless pit for self-doubt. In general, the incel community can be very well critiqued on the basis of gender theory: Obviously, self-proclaimed beta males are aware that the socially propagated image of masculinity is unattainable and ideologically absurd. Masculinity, which is bound to doctrines such as heterosexuality, functions as a punitive measure for all those who do not want to submit to the narrow scope of these. Similar to the constant worrying of being masculine enough as discussed in relation to 4chan's heavy use of homophobic slurs, the disciplinary effects of normative heterosexuality play a huge part. However, incels seem to have a blind spot regarding this attitude is consequently made fun of online: The snowclone *Two Bros Chillin' in a Hot Tub 5 Feet Apart Because They're Not Gay* originated on Tumblr³⁸⁶ and stems from a 2016 Vine³⁸⁷ showing the conversation of two young men at opposite ends of a swimming pool. This shaming of fragile male behavior is also established on TikTok, where a rap song by user @yeahitsak went viral in the summer of 2021. The starting point was a viral discussion about whether it is true that straight cis men avoid washing their anus because it would be 'gay' to touch themselves down there. Within a few days, more and more women and queer men joined in, claiming that they had to teach their cis boyfriends and friends proper personal hygiene. @yeahitsak's rap was directed at a commenter who made fun of him and referred to himself as an alpha male, thus prompting the TikToker to state that whoever calls himself an alpha must have trouble with anal hygiene. His rap began with the lines "I'll be damned/I'll be damned if I listen to facts up out the mouth of a man with an unwashed ass."³⁸⁸ To date, over 113,300 videos use this sound primarily to criticize toxic male viewpoints.

In addition to its unlimited self-pity, /r9k/ inherited the cynicism, misanthropy, and trolling of other 4chan boards. This spilled over to other platforms like Reddit, where the subreddits r/Incels and r/braincels provided meeting places for the community before they were finally banned in 2017 respectively 2019. In this regard, a large and especially extreme part of the movement was concentrated on /r9k/, where more and more bonds with far-right content were formed, which played a significant role in shaping the ideology of the incels. The board established a posthumous cult around Rodgers, declaring him a saint of incels who was acting as the 'supreme gentleman' as he self-described in his manifesto. /r9k/ is also the herd of the *Beta Uprising* meme that was supposed to represent the revolution of the incels, who would come together and defeat all Chads and women.³⁸⁹ From then on, all kinds of attacks on women and LGBTQIA+ members were hailed as the beginning of the Beta Uprising: For

³⁸⁶ See bumble-bee-tea, Tumblr: <https://bumble-bee-tea.tumblr.com/post/161637255292/lgbt-lesbian-gay-babadook-two-bros-chillin>.

³⁸⁷ Padilla 2016.

³⁸⁸ Yeahitsak 2021.

³⁸⁹ Dietze, Strick 2017.

example, Alek Minassian announced his 2018 rampage on 4chan using a Pepe meme before driving a truck deliberately into a pedestrian zone in Toronto, killing 11 people and injuring 15. In this regard, it was just a question of time until edits starring Rodgers and Pepe appeared. These were highly incel-coded and further radicalized Pepe's image—for 4chan users, it was the perfect timing to re-appropriate 'their' frog meme. For Pepe, it was the beginning of a very, very violent time of his life, serving in what 4chan users coined *The Great Meme War*. On Urban Dictionary, this conflict is framed as follows:

The Great Meme War took place from Juner [sic] 16, 2015 - November 9, 2016 and was the internet (primarily social media) battle between supporters of Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Gary aka Aleppo Johnson, and Jill Stein. Attacks and battles took the form of arguments and memes in comment sections, threads, photos, videos and more. These memes were used to attack a candidate or sway their supporters. The War also included heavy shitposting [sic], spam, copypastas, and dank memes. The War's fronts include Reddit, instagram, ifunny, youtube, the news and media, and many others.

The main conflict of the War was between Donald Trump and the Allies, Hillary Clinton and the DNC, and the Republican Party.

Casualties and losses include:

For Trump and the Allies: A lot of time.

For Hillary Clinton and the DNC: The Presidency, a few thousand emails, the states of Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Florida, Wisconsin, a plate full of chicken nuggets

For the Republican Party: A few turtles, a guac bowl and some rice.

For the mainstream media: Their remaining credibility.

For Pepe: Being mislabeled as a "Hate Symbol" by Hillary Clinton and her campaign and the Anti Defamation League.

Trump's victory of the Great Meme War is credited by many as to be the power of K E K.

Many say he was meme'd into the White House.

The Great Meme War of 2015-16 was the greatest war to ever take place on the internet.³⁹⁰

The most dangerous thing about this narrative is that Trump moving into the White House was the fault of fundamental alt-right trolls instead of a result elected by society as a whole. By blaming anonymous basement dwellers, voters are not asked to reflect on their own complicit behavior which seems to me a much bigger reason why right-wing populism is on the rise. According to a VICE documentary, the overture of the 'war' began in 2014 with the circulation of memes from the official channels of Daesh, namely the now-deleted Twitter account @ISIS_media_hub.³⁹¹ Associates of Daesh started to publish videos and memes for recruitment and propaganda purposes that were, in turn, mutated by Western opponents of the extremist movement. But soon the complexity became opaque, which I think was exactly what the Great Meme War as executed by 4chan was supposed to be: Since right-wing, left-wing, proponents of Daesh, and literal kids were all using the same memes and characters, it was virtually impossible to trace the origin of a mutation in order to identify which ideological corner of the Internet it came from, at least in ambivalent Pepe variations. For example, *Jihad Pepe*, the already known version of the frog with balaclava, to which a green headband with white Arabic

³⁹⁰ See The great meme war, Urban Dictionary: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=The%20great%20meme%20war>.

³⁹¹ VICE 2021.

letters were added, probably originated in the hybrid movement of Daesh supporters and right-leaning conspiracy theorists (a kind of proto alt-right) also known as alt-jihadists that channel white nationalist aesthetics and merge it with symbols from extremist groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and so on.³⁹² Sometimes, Pepe is also depicted with an assault rifle or an electric remote control for a bomb. Interestingly, one would expect that the viewpoints of incels and the supporters of Daesh could hardly be more different—but in fact, women and the LGBTGIA+ community are popular enemy images for both groups. In this respect, it is shocking that the outcry over the dissemination of Jihad Pepe memes was much less loud than over the make-up tutorials made by little girls—but considering that most records of the conflict stem from a cis-male perspective, it is also unsurprising. In the course of my research on the Great Meme War, it also becomes increasingly clear that these are not clearly demarcated fronts, quite on the contrary: In the book *Meme Wars*, Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg argue that the war had begun much earlier, namely with the Occupy Wall Street movement.³⁹³ Accordingly, the Great Meme War has its roots on 4chan and in the Anonymous movement. While Occupy was still following economist David Graeber's slogan 'We are the 99%' in its anarchist origins, the meaning of the quote turned at some point in accordance with the transgressive hypothesis (see chapter). The hatred on the Internet towards 'the powers that be' became greater and more extreme, while at the same time, it connected self-proclaimed NEETs in similar situations. Blame was projected onto those who held the power and yet did nothing to change the situation of the 99%. In the wake of the changes that memes, hashtags, and catchphrases took on the political landscape, the understanding that memes are the easiest way to plant an idea in someone's head confirmed itself. And so a new form of political memeing was born on /pol/: The deliberate use of memes to facilitate political goals. Now, I really don't want to make it sound like anonymous 4chan users had any kind of plan. On the contrary, what makes the whole situation much more elusive is that they simply took the opportunity to get together and *it worked*. In addition to the establishment, the clearly marked target was the so-called mainstream media, which, according to Pepe protestors, continued to convey the lies of the politicians. In the VICE documentary, one of the early adopters of what later became known as the alt-right movement even says that the goal was never to oppose the usually left-wing social justice warriors—after all, those were only manipulated by the mainstream media and reproduced their content like puppets on a string.³⁹⁴ Already at this point, extremist political views, conspiracy theories, and new media were merging and forming a Borromean knot that would become tighter over the course of the 2010s. In my opinion, the term 'meme war' is a misnomer, as it suggests that there were any clear positions to take on.

³⁹² Ayad 2021, 24-28.

³⁹³ Donovan, Dreyfuss, Friedberg 2022, 22.

³⁹⁴ VICE 2021.

Instead, in 2015, several right-wing and extreme right-wing splinter groups are at work, which are not only resorting to memes, but to social media in general as well as podcasts, video essays, and their own news channels to gain an ever larger audience. Influential right-wingers were, among others, Alex Jones, operator of the InfoWars platform, Richard B. Spencer, self-confessed neo-Nazi and organizer of the Unite the Right demonstration in Charlottesville 2017, and Steve Bannon, who ran the Breitbart News platform from 2012 to 2016 before becoming Trump's campaign manager.³⁹⁵ But who was behind the memes on 4chan? The extremely misogynistic and racist tone already established on /b/ and /pol/ coupled with the self-image as lone wolves fighting against the establishment, a legacy of the transgressive philosophy of trolls, proved to be the perfect breeding ground for far-right ideas. This phenomenon spread quickly after June 16, 2015, the day Donald Trump publicly declared his intention to run in the next presidential election. The idea was immediately met with positive reactions on 4chan, where Trump was celebrated as an 'outsider' candidate who was not caught up in the intrigues of the established powerful, but ironically considered as 'one of them'. Indeed, Trump had been proving his internalized understanding of the rhetoric of memes for some time: Back in 2012, he already made plans to run for president in order to challenge then-president Barack Obama. However, it quickly became clear that Obama would have too much popular support from all sides and would certainly serve a second term. To distract from this personal defeat, Trump henceforth put all his energy into defaming Obama:³⁹⁶ In his time on Twitter, he allegedly tweeted Obama's name exactly 3,119 times, mostly in relation to the conspiracy theory that Obama was not even born in the U.S. and thus should not officially hold the office of president, which Trump was instrumental in spreading.³⁹⁷ This kind of rhetoric, framed as an unstoppable 'search for the truth' met with an incredible response on /pol/, no matter how ridiculous it might seem from the outside. This is also well reflected in the increasingly blatant Pepe mutations of the time making it increasingly hard to tell how much irony is behind them. On July 13, 2015, the first *Donald Trump Pepe* sees the light of day, still in the style of a poor photoshop meme with a badly inserted hairstyle. The creator posted the meme with the following greentext: [82]

>I will be the greatest jobs President God ever created
>I will bring back our jobs
>I will bring back our money
>The American Dream is dead but if I get elected President I will bring it back: bigger, better and stronger than ever before
>We will make America great again!³⁹⁸

³⁹⁵ See Donovan, Dreyfuss, Friedberg 2022.

³⁹⁶ EmpLemon 2017.

³⁹⁷ Factbase hosts a search function of all of Trump's now-deleted tweets. See <https://factba.se/trump/>.

³⁹⁸ See 4plebs Archive: <http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/47959055/#47960839>.



AMERIKANISCHE VOLK HILF DIE SELBST. JEMAND MUSS HELFEN.

Fig. 82: The first Trump variation of Pepe on 4chan. Also note the caption below the greentext in German (“American people, help yourself. Somebody has to help.”), a standard practice of (American) neo-Nazis.

The comments to this post are surprisingly diverse: While some show support, whether ironically or not (“NEETs for Trump. Only he can save us! Thank you Trump for giving me hope. The first I've had in 10 years” and “Also, because nobody seems to focus on it, Trump is anti-Saudi. That's fucking right, he would be the first President in how many years to call out the Saudi menace? That alone earns my support, we're not just dealing with a rabid populist, Trump is a strategic genius. He's the only candidate who has the vision necessary to maintain America's position in the world”), others try to warn (“The problem is that people don't recognize him for what he is: a nationalist socialist. He wants to secure the borders, he wants nationalized healthcare, a strong military, economic protectionism. It's plain as day”). In another comment, the Trump Pepe image is considered to be “probably the best Pepe”. The reactions welcoming Trump as a presidents for NEETs serve as an example for the phenomenon Deleuze & Guattari labeled microfascisms: “Groups and individuals contain microfascisms just waiting to crystallize.”³⁹⁹ In their immanent ontology, fascism is part of all agents participating in the system in the form of microfascism, which also serves as a theory why there seems to be an ongoing fascination and even yearning for fascism as suggested by the comments to the 4chan post: “Only microfascism provides an answer to the global question: Why does desire desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression?”⁴⁰⁰ It is therefore not one fascist or a single fascist party that put their ideology over any given nation, but a climate or sentiment feeding on the microfascisms present in every agent arriving at a tipping point that gives the opportunity for fascism to thrive. In the case of Trump's presidency, the microcosm of 4chan's /pol/ board can give us further insight into the phenomenon.

³⁹⁹ Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 10.

⁴⁰⁰ Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 215.

It seems that in the beginning, discussions about Trump on /pol/ were still somewhat focused on politics, but a mere year later, at the height of the campaign, this had already shifted to a general pro-Trump sentiment. On August 25, 2016, an anon posted an image of a print-out Pepe at a rally by Hillary Clinton with the caption: "At a hill rally in the top left corner of the balcony. Look for me!"⁴⁰¹ Of course, other anons asked for proof, but a mere 25 minutes later, someone posted a screenshot of the stage confirming that the original poster was actually there. Trolls then fired up the author to shout something into the crowd in order to disrupt Clinton's appearance. Less than ten minutes later, just as she started talking about the alt-right movement, a sudden cry of "PEPEEE!" can be heard in a recording resulting in the thread becoming spammed with Pepe memes and expressions of love for the troll.⁴⁰² This is reminiscent of hoaxes and trollings like Over 9,000 Penises that makes use of the same logic. But instead of teasing a talk show host with a non-existent child abuse snowclone, this one had long-winded repercussions, namely determining the next president. I think it is the highly participatory attitude of the memes on /pol/ that has contributed significantly to the understanding that Trump would have 'memed' his way into the Oval Office. Hoaxes like the 2009 Time poll made 4chan users realize that they could make their voices heard, and now, they had the power to influence the outcome of an election, propagating a new American dream: from 4chan memer to president.

That image was further bolstered by a tweet from October 13, 2015, showing Trump as *Smug Pepe*. Unlike the first Trump Pepe, this is no longer a photo collage with a photo of Trump's hair superimposed on the cartoon character; instead, it shows the coherent merging of Trump and Pepe into a cartoon human-frog hybrid behind the president's lectern in front of the American flag and Smug Pepe's hand position. [13] The drawing is symbolic of the mixing of realities from the Internet to the White House that ultimately make the whole election seem like a fictional fever dream. The variation of Smug Pepe was especially popular among trolls and can be seen as another attempt at 'uglifying' the frog. The tweet, which was also shared by Trump's team and his son, went viral and was also very welcomed on 4chan. Despite its memetic success, the ever-growing alt-right movement faced the problem of having no real unifying viewpoints other than hatred for the establishment, the left, and all kinds of marginalized groups. Before 2016, there were more extreme and less extreme positions in the movement, but no decidedly common values yet. At the same time, an old catchphrase, 'kek', became more prevalent through rapidly growing platforms like Twitch. Kek originated in the gaming community and is derived from the Korean onomatopoeia for laugh, similar to the English haha. Due to an easter egg in the game World of Warcraft, kek became popular in Internet culture in parallel with

⁴⁰¹ Archived via Imgur: <https://imgur.com/gallery/cC90P#AFaFAkl>.

⁴⁰² Earl of Grey 2016.

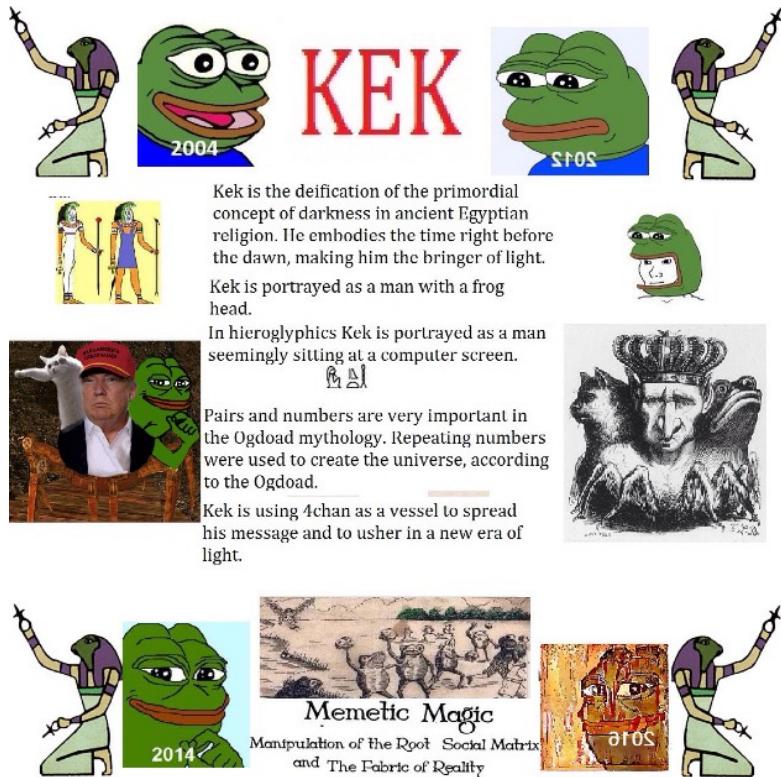


Fig. 83: A prophecy from the Cult of Kek predicting Trump's win through numbers. The mythization of Pepe and Trump uses a language that will later be appropriated by QAnon.

lol.⁴⁰³ In November 2015, when users of the history board /h/ started talking about the ancient Egyptian god Kek, who was depicted with the head of a frog, a new cult was born: the Cult of Kek. Kek was worshipped in Old Egypt as the god of the primeval darkness, i.e. the time before the sun god Ra brought light into the world.⁴⁰⁴ But for the anons, Kek was the absolute answer: On March 11, 2016, an image macro with pictures of Pepe, the Egyptian god Kek, Trump, and their memetic magic was uploaded to the subreddit r/pepethefrog. [83] The image prophesied that numbers would play a big role and that Kek would announce his messages via 4chan, leading its users into a ‘new Golden Age’. This meme was circulated primarily on the boards /pol/ and /r9k/, with a regular cult of Kek developing on the former, advocating Pepe as a reincarnation of the Egyptian god. This was also followed by the virtual creation of Kekistan, the far-right ethnostaate of all shitposters, or rather, the bigger chunk of /pol/. From that point on, a lot of lore emerged that creatively used major events of world history to create a narrative of Kekistan: A fictional origin in the Sassanid Empire, a time of peace in Kekstantinople, the genocide of Armenian women, and, of course, World War II. Kekistan is portrayed as an extreme right-wing ethno-state with a flag that clearly references the flag of Nazi Germany. In a swamp of history, myths, and a strongly rampant victim complex, the cult of Kek has even

⁴⁰³ Wendling 2018, 86.

⁴⁰⁴ Kien 2019, 190.

survived to this day. One of Kek's greatest prophecies took place on June 19, 2016, when the post that got the 77777777 GET number said, of all things, "Trump will win."⁴⁰⁵

The zenith was officially passed when the Anti Defamation League added Pepe the Frog to its Hate Symbol Database on September 28, 2016.⁴⁰⁶ That's where they all came together: *Hitler Pepe*, *SS Pepe*, *9/11 Was an Inside Job Pepe*, *KuKluxKlan Pepe*, a Jewish stereotype Pepe. This marked the first time 4chan users successfully re-contextualized a meme as hate speech:⁴⁰⁷ Inclusion in the database came as a surprise to many, especially to the original cartoonist, Furie. In the documentary, he laments just wanting to be a children's book author, but now being linked forever to the hate symbol database. In a last ditch effort, he collaborated with the ADL for the #SavePepe campaign, which came with a call to create your own versions of Pepe that portray him as the loving and peaceful character he was actually meant to be. Despite numerous participations, it was ultimately not possible to reverse Pepe's fate and he remains listed on the ADL database to this day. In a sad farewell, Furie drew a comic in which Pepe dies and his former housemates attend his funeral.

Well, the world keeps on turning and the Internet does so even faster. All the countless Pepe variations that have emerged over the years had by now reached such a large scale that it was unlikely that any meme had not yet been crossed with Pepe. The hunt for the so-called *Rare Pepes* became a sport and eventually a barter system: Similar to trading cards of famous athletes, users began to sell their Rare Pepes. Assigning value to Rare Pepes using blockchain required the creation of non-fungible tokens (NFTs).⁴⁰⁸ NFTs, as unique digital tokens that are verifiable and indivisible, represent ownership or proof of authenticity of a specific digital asset such as an image. In the case of Rare Pepes, NFTs were used to certify the uniqueness and ownership of a particular version or variation of a Pepe the Frog meme. The process of tokenization requires minting a digital token on a blockchain platform (commonly Ethereum), which contains the information and metadata about the specific Pepe art. The NFT therefore stays associated with the initial creator and can then be bought, sold, or traded on rarepepes.com. Each transfer of the NFT is recorded on the blockchain, providing a transparent and immutable transaction history. The price depends on the rarity of a particular Pepe, which depends on factors like the design, edition size, and overall demand within the market—the scarcer a Pepe, the higher its price. Over time, more and more Rare Pepes were associated with digital tokens on blockchain platforms, further spawning off cryptocurrencies such as the

⁴⁰⁵ The thread is archived via 4plebs: <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/77776483/#77777777>.

⁴⁰⁶ See Anti Defamation League, <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/pepe-frog>.

⁴⁰⁷ This direct pick-up of trolling was repeated multiple times over the following years, for example, when /pol/ users successfully convinced media outlets that the OK hand gesture emoji was a symbol of white power over the course of Operation O-KKK. In the end, the symbol was actually appropriated by white supremacists and used as a dog-whistle. See Sung 2019.

⁴⁰⁸ In the end, this led to a craze of mining memes as NFTs in 2021. See chapter 5.5.

PepeCash token on the Rare Pepe Wallet platform. As early as 2014, the value of a collection of over 1,200 Rare Pepes was dubbed \$99,000. The hype progressed until 2016, when an online market emerged where Rare Pepes were listed as trading cards and could be bought for PepeCash. One of the most popular images was *My Little PEPE*, a reference to *My Little Pony*, where Pepe poops on the ground in a field while Wojak rides him. [84] The most expensive Rare Pepe ever sold is *Homer Pepe*, the green version of the family man from *The Simpsons*. On January 13, 2018, Homer Pepe changed hands for 350,000 PepeCash (circa \$38,500) before being sold again in early 2021 for 205 ETH (a whopping \$312,000). Interestingly, Rare Pepes are more or less the precursors of NFTs, which also accounts for the high price of Homer Pepe.

In the meantime, however, there was no end to the proliferation of hateful depictions of Pepes, and when a children's book called *The Adventures of Pepe and Pede* depicting Pepe as a child-friendly white supremacist hit the market, Furie finally intervened legally. He was able to stop the publication of the children's book, at least as an eBook. Since the original Boy's Club comic from 2003 was under copyright, his lawyers advised him to sue other distributors for copyright infringement. The first big case was against alt-right activist Alex Jones or rather a poster sold in his online shop. The poster featured the likeness of Trump and Pepe. Although he initially wanted to go to court, Jones gave in and paid \$15,000 in damages to Furie and had to



Fig. 84: My Little Pepe, now “well tamed”, with Wojak on horseback.



Fig. 85: A chain of Pepes holding hands in Hong Kong.

take the poster out of circulation.⁴⁰⁹ A small victory against the alt-right movement, but the first step for Pepe into a new life. In all the hubbub over Pepe in the United States, something happened on the other side of the world that no one expected: When protests against the government broke out in Hong Kong in the summer of 2019, Sad Pepe suddenly emerged as a symbol of

⁴⁰⁹ Jones 2020.

resistance.⁴¹⁰ The protest, which was against a change in the law in favor of easier extraditions to the Chinese government, stretched from June 2019 to the end of 2020 and also resulted in bloody police violence. Already in the early days of the protest, hand-drawn Pepes appeared on so-called Lennon Walls, walls in underground stations and public places full of sticky notes with statements of support. [85] The people of Hong Kong were not really familiar with Pepe and knew even less about his reputation as a hate symbol. They might have chosen him as a symbol regardless because on the one hand, Pepe is easy to draw, making him a popular graffito on flat surfaces, while on the other hand, the frog seems to be especially popular among young women in the demonstrations. So after his long excursions into the alt-right scene, different groups of islamist extremists, and Kekistan, Pepe is finally coming back to the girls who like to make themselves up like Pepe? Not necessarily, but Pepe continues to be a popular meme, and today is mainly represented in non-extreme variations. The story of Pepe serves less as an arc of redemption than the possibility of mediating contradictions in one character, thus making the frog a true cyborg. Moreover, Pepe was extremely formative for the coming years of memeing: the spread of false knowledge around public figures in particular with the help of memes in a conspiracy-theoretical, paranoid manner was repeated, for example, in Hillary Clinton's #Pizzagate, an allegedly far-reaching ring around depictions of violence against children. This was repeated again in the trial and suicide of Jeffrey Epstein, which was memed primarily by means of the bait-and-switch snowclone 'Epstein didn't kill himself'. In a sense, the conspiracy theories about Satanic reptilioids⁴¹¹ being secret followers of the Illuminati culminated in the wildly popular theories of QAnon, which in turn strongly influenced the Alt-Right movement and the events of January 6. The paranoid tone that culminated in the practice of schizoposting was eventually ironically adopted by leftist meme accounts and thus subversively 'normalized'.⁴¹² The further conflation of various conspiracy theories and criticism of them made it almost impossible for outsiders to derive any 'truth content' from memes.

5.4. From Weird Twitter to Leftbook

The bifurcating narrative of the Great Meme War that was pushed by 4chan trolls, Trump supporters, and right-wing proponents contributed to the false understanding of a fair battle between two clearly demarcated frontlines in battle. This view is asymmetrical in that it locates the cry of war on the right, but in fact opponents were not called upon to fight. Instead, the narrative of the Great Meme War was proclaimed by many media outlets and some academics,

⁴¹⁰ See Chan 2021.

⁴¹¹ In many conspiracy theories, reptilioids are shapeshifting reptilians disguised as humans. Primarily, politicians and people in positions of power are 'suspected' reptilioids, including Angela Merkel, Mark Zuckerberg, the Rothschild family, or the British Royal family.

⁴¹² See Cittarella 2023.

based on the insufficient logic of so-called culture wars.⁴¹³ In this respect, the majority of memes and their multipliers were situated on the pro-Trump side from the beginning, partly because many memes originated on 4chan. The mass production of inflammatory and controversial memes faced a lot of headwind from the political centre and the left, partly in the form of substantiated analysis and partly in practices like canceling. One prejudice in particular was repeated mantra-like: the left can't meme. On the one hand, because they would not be funny or creative, and on the other, because they would not understand memes and take them far too seriously. It is of course very ironic that this accusation comes from the right, as right-wing memes invariably work at the expense of other marginalized groups and I have yet to come across any self-critical examples. Right-wing memes can thus clearly be categorized as Freudian tendentious jokes, which always need another object to make fun of. The fact that this has nothing to do with humor, but is rather a strategy to circulate extremely simplified content such as 'the wall = great' or 'Islamic countries = bad' and that little or nothing has changed in terms of logic and content in the eight years since Trump's presidential campaign, remains undecided. Nevertheless, if you do a Google search of 'the left can meme', only the results for 'the left can't meme' are displayed. Mike Watson, who has published a book on the topic, speculates on the underlying motives why the Left chooses not to meme:

Given that all creativity is both controlled and abstracted at source, meaningful or truly 'free' production seems near impossible. It would appear then that the only option we have is to bastardise the mechanisms of capitalist cultural production and reception from within, over and over, knowing always that the machine is too vast, too all-encompassing to overcome entirely. As pieces of that machine, we do have a right to help reconfigure it with shocks and shudders that might reverberate and rejuvenate the audience at least temporarily. That Don Draper moment can still happen, but it may just as easily occur in front of a screen as in a bar and when it does it may be so fleeting as to achieve next to nothing, concretely speaking (and indeed, it was never clear what Adorno's 'shudder' might concretely bring forth anyhow). Might we just have to concede that a balked freedom is a freedom nonetheless and work within the mass of web-based communication that dominates our lives? Whether or not this seems palatable, the world of high art has lost its mantle of progressiveness within visual culture to the YouTube video, the meme, social media and gaming culture. If there is a spiritual-revolutionary path for the millennial perhaps it resides here, in a cynical DIY production of culture that is inextricably tied, via appliances, to the materialist path. Some freedom resides in the myriad choices denied to our forebears.⁴¹⁴

The disinterest to create memes might also have to do with a general technopessimistic lens in most leftist communities that condemn any form of media or entertainment derogatorily as 'spectacle' and 'born of the culture industry'. Hardcore Marxists and anarchists regularly proclaiming that 'there's no ethical consumption under capitalism' also don't seem to fight for

⁴¹³ A direct translation of the German word *Kulturmampf*, the notion used to denote specifically the conflict between the Prussian government under Otto von Bismarck and the Catholic church under Pope Pius IX and lasted from 1872 to 1878. The profane usage to describe struggles between members of opposed political parties or people adhering to contradictory values adds to a shift of the discourse to the right as the notion is especially popular among right-wing circles and is similar used to notions like 'cultural Marxism'.

⁴¹⁴ Watson 2018, 73-74

becoming pioneers of memeing. However, this does not mean that left memes do not exist, as is apparent in the myriad of Facebook pages that have spawned during Bernie Sanders' presidency campaign or in multi-platform spaces propagating left theory across the whole spectrum, from queer feminism to anarcho-communism or Maoism, in form of memes. To be clear: Of course the Left knows how to meme, their memes just are not as well-received and 'hyped'. In fact, they seem to spread much less and much slower—and when they do, it's mostly a circlejerk⁴¹⁵ among same-minded memers with the occasional repost from big, often apolitical meme sites. For the most part, this is due to the much higher degree of splinter groups on the left compared to an abundance of unifying enemies on the right. So it's not just content that differs, but the ways of creation and circulation also influence the meme's success. While not all, but a lot of leftist analyses are complex and multifaceted, these are two factors hard to transmit in one meme. Considering the overall reactionary vibe on many platforms were memes originated including 4chan, Something Awful, and, to a slightly lesser degree, Reddit, paints a more nuanced image of 'the left can't meme': As will be analyzed throughout this chapter, branches of 'right-wing' and 'leftist' humor permeate the very same online spaces for just as long. Moreover, trajectories of left-leaning memes have become influential in the phenomenon of dank memes that can also be seen as the next big evolutionary step in meme history. In the following, I will focus on *Weird Twitter* and its partner-in-crime, *Weird Facebook*, which further evolved into *Leftbook* and *Left Instagram*.

Weird Twitter originated sometime around 2010 when the social network was primarily used for 'serious' purposes like news coverage and people still *kind of* believed in media outlets. In a piece by Buzzfeed News, Weird Twitter is described as "where the language of Twitter gets created, where its funniest jokes come from, and where its worst tendencies are isolated, rebroadcast, and sometimes destroyed. [...] It is to Twitter what people used to *imagine* 4Chan was to the rest of the internet: its best, and most powerful, creative engine."⁴¹⁶ The structural differences of the platforms were also crucial in forming Weird Twitter: Thanks to Twitter's algorithm, after following one user, you are suggested similar users with lots of the same followers, thus creating the ultimate echo chamber.⁴¹⁷ Central accounts were and still are @fart, @dril, and @cheesegod69, among others, who all had one thing in common: They used to be active posters on Something Awful's *Fuck You And Die* board before its alleged shutdown on February 1, 2007.⁴¹⁸ Just like 4chan's /pol/, the board is periodically spammed by racist and sexist posts. Some users emigrated voluntarily and spread trolling and subsequent styles of

⁴¹⁵ 'Circle jerk' refers to a sexual practice of mostly all-male group masturbation but has increasingly been used to denote echo chambers online.

⁴¹⁶ Herrmann, Notopoulos 2013.

⁴¹⁷ Pedersen 2014.

⁴¹⁸ It was really shut down in 2020.



Fig. 86: A tweet by @famouscrab ironically asking how to help a NPC in Grand Theft Auto, where NPCs are usually killed infinitely by the player, and @XboxSupport's dry and serious reply.

humor to Twitter. On October 2012, user @koala_hugs attempted to map out all the relations that formed Weird Twitter only to receive lots of backlash from the community itself as they were actively pushing against the narrative of being a homogenous movement.⁴¹⁹

In contrast to the semi-anonymous environment on Something Awful, Twitter was a whole new landscape for trolling: In addition to 12-year-old basement dwellers, the mobile service also had celebrities, politicians, companies, and news outlets that were all competing for users' attention. A lot of them had very little knowledge about trolling and were thus the perfect bait. For example, @dry_hugs recalls: [86]

@Xboxsupport1 gives straight-faced support to any question that anyone asks them for it. At first people were just asking them completely audacious things and reveling in getting a legitimate response in exchange, it's a perfect setup for the sort of 'one-sided vaudeville act' methodology of trolling corporate twitter accounts. But at a certain point you could start to tell that whoever was writing for @xboxsupport1 was in on the joke?⁴²⁰



Fig. 87: This is the Future Liberals Want (apparently).

At a later point, humor would substitute seriousness as the default reply on corporate Twitter, but in 2011, this was still uncharted territory. For example, @lowenaffchen recounts that rock musicians like Uncle Kracker and Mark McGrath blocked her on Twitter because she accused the singers of being responsible for the events of 9/11. Another famous incident is known as the *Pitbull Concert at the Walmart in Kodiak, Alaska*. As part of a marketing campaign, Walmart set up an online poll to decide at which store rapper Pitbull was supposed to play a sponsored concert. Music journalist and Something Awful columnist David Thorpe aka @arr thought it would be funny to tell his followers on

⁴¹⁹ Hermann, Notopoulos 2013.

⁴²⁰ Hermann, Notopoulos 2013.



Fig. 88: Fast food franchise Wendy's trolling a McDonald's customer.

no such things as a bladder & pee is stored in the balls & that's why I pee myself every time those teens kick me in the balls".⁴²¹ The nonsensical statement builds upon a misbelief among children and is especially engaging due to its absurdity. Another example is "bike is short for Bichael",⁴²² a tweet posted by Zoe Quinn aka @UnburntWitch in 2017. Building on the pet name Mike as short for Michael, the tweet inspired numerous similar false conclusions such as 'rat is short for Rattruth'. Apparently more political catchphrases include a tweet from 2017 by the now-suspended account @polNewsNetwork1 who posted a photograph taken on the subway of a woman in a niqab sitting next to a drag queen captioned "This is the future that liberals want." [87] The snowclone is used proportionally more in a sarcastic manner on the left spectrum than as a decided insult from the right, probably thanks to the absurdity of images associated with it. In contrast to other platforms like Tumblr or Facebook, most of the Weird Twitter accounts still exist, so what happened to them? Apparently, the specific humor was incorporated into the platform's tone of conversation: "Eventually the server issues were fixed, the weirdest edges of Twitter sanded down to make the place more palatable to politicians and celebrities, and the executive dreams of making Twitter something it's not took over. [...] the culture of Twitter changed."⁴²³ The irony and trolling humor became more and more incorporated into the everyday language on Twitter, and once the corporations started trolling, it was over for Weird Twitter. [88]

Twitter and Something Awful to vote for the location of Kodiak, Alaska, the farthest Walmart store from the American mainland. Using #ExilePitbull, the small island town took first place in the poll much to the dismay of the Walmart marketing team. On July 30, 2012, Pitbull and Thorpe arrived in Kodiak for the concert that became a well-visited event for the local community including performances by Indigenous dancers and singers.

As a primarily text-based platform, Twitter has been the birthing place to many snowclones, including 'pee is stored in the balls', which can be traced back to a tweet by @rad_milk from 2012: "apparently theres

⁴²¹ See @UnburntWitch, Twitter: https://twitter.com/rad_milk/status/188038248206045184.

⁴²² See @rad_milk, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/UnburntWitch/status/936488164809515010>.

⁴²³ Sinker 2022.

The weirdest thing about Weird Facebook is probably that the uncoolest platform of them all made an actually funny comeback. In 2013, Facebook was already invaded by grandparents, racist distant relatives, and the people from school you never wanted to see again, simply put: the last social media platform expected to put out original memes. Nevertheless, it was the Facebook-specific features that brought us Weird Facebook and ultimately a whole new class of memes, dank memes. Facebook turned into the most normified network imaginable over the late 2000s and early 2010s. In addition, there was criticism of the company's use of data, as Facebook was known for wanting to know everything about people (including 'shadow profiles' of those who did not have a Facebook profile).⁴²⁴ This also included the site-specific forms of social order like groups, pages, and events: Groups were mostly closed, private boards on a topic that one could join on request. Pages, on the other hand, were public profiles on a topic, for example a celebrity or an association, which you could subscribe to via likes. Events, on the other hand, were probably the most useful function, as they functioned like invitation cards that could be attended via RSVP reply. Weird Facebook started with absurd pages and groups characterized by shitposting: One of the earliest



Fig. 90: Another meme making use of distorted and watermarked 'poor' images .



Fig. 89: A meme tying the origin of the word 'logistics' to 'log'.

examples is *Spooki Scary Skeleton*, a page specializing in skeleton memes. [89] Another example is *Stick Memes*, which creates shitposts mainly about logs and Danny DeVito. [90] The graphics of the images are often very poor and pixelated, with cropped text and watermarks and described as follows: "Some of it is funny. Most of it is off-putting. If David Lynch and Yung Leanv could project their consciousnesses into social media, it'd be Weird Facebook. Not the stuff of

⁴²⁴ See Aguiar, Peukert, Schaefer et al. 2022.

mainstream success.”⁴²⁵ The last sentence in particular is very interesting, as the absurd, surreal humor found here on Weird Facebook would become the dominate form of humor in the mainstream from circa 2016 on. The rhetoric of the shitposting pages on Facebook differs from the mainstream memes of the early 2010s due to their absurdity and self-referentiality. Where ‘classic’ memes like Advice Animals rely on a clear reading and function according to rules such as the use of punchlines, the shitposts operate quite differently: Jokes without punchlines, the anthropomorphization of everything and everyone (e.g. a wooden stick), a myriad of obscure pop cultural references, the blasting of established meme templates through formal and textual inversion, ways of reading turned upside down, and the ironic worshipping of certain celebrities of the 1990s and early 2000s like TV chef Guy Fieri or aforementioned Danny DeVito as well as ironic fandoms of *Shrek* and, later, the *Minions*. Between all these signifiers deprived of their original meaning, serious considerations pop up here and there: mental health issues, student debt, lack of affordable housing, bad experiences with racism and sexism, and so on. Sometimes, many of these memes even read like a cry for help, but *hey, it's all ironic and stuff, of course!*

A Weird Facebook specialty was taking advantage of the peculiarity of the events: By default, an event created on the platform can be set to public, becoming visible for anyone, and to private, where only invited guests may see the event. This distinction has been ignored especially in the beginning of the platform, when most users treated it more like a friend book than the data kraken Meta actually is. This can be a disaster, especially at events, if many more people get scent of it than originally planned. I am not referring about people you never intended to invite, but literal strangers: When a German girl named Thessa created a Facebook event for her 16th birthday party in 2011, she mistakenly made a public event which circulated nationwide among users and accumulated more than 15,000 acceptances. Although she deleted the event, many more clones of the original invitation popped up including her full name and address. On the day of her birthday party, more than 1,600 people gathered in front of Thessa’s house in Hamburg which even required closing the road.⁴²⁶ The party, for which some people even had travelled from other parts of Germany, was chaotic but peaceful and was reminiscent of early trollings that sought to test other people's media competency.

Another Facebook-exclusive example is the usage of groups for online role playing: In 2020, a Facebook group popped up with the title *A Group Where We All Pretend to be Ants in an Ant Colony*. Posts and comments all revolved around being an ant and showcasing ant-like behaviour. For example, they would post photos of lumps of sugar captioned “help” as if warning others before a trap. Since ants are not known for doing much except for carrying around stuff and serving their ant queen, most comments were just spaced out words like

⁴²⁵ Pedersen 2014.

⁴²⁶ Miklis 2011.

“P R O T E C T T H E Q U E E N”, “L I F T” OR “B I T E”. [91] One should remember that the group, which had over 777,000 members in April 2020, was created at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic when lots of people were quarantined, thus having the time and state of mind to spend their days roleplaying ants. However, it should also be seen as an attempt to practice affiliation and collectivity in times of social distancing.

In another instance, Weird Facebook spawned off Leftbook, a very loose conglomerate of distinctly leftist shitposting pages with very pronounced characteristics. It emerged from the ironic humor of Weird Twitter and Weird Facebook and can be understood as processing the history of class struggles through memes, among other things. The range of who or what is considered left is quite large: After Britney Spears reposted a poem by leftist writer Mimi Zhu on community during the Covid-19 pandemic, many fans hailed her as a ‘communist queen’ calling for redistributions of wealth and acknowledgment of class struggles.⁴²⁷ Patrick Dirks aka @LA_Someday also posted a red-tinted photo of the singer performing with the image caption: “You better seize the means of work, b*tch” referencing her hit song Work B*tch. [92] These memes are not meant to be understood as transposing complex Marxist contents but to entertain and at least expose others to alternative world views. Symbols like hammer & sickle or the counterfeits of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels become floating signifiers in leftist memes that set the political tone for a specific online community. Pages like *Sassy Socialist Memes*, which was eventually deleted by Facebook despite acquiring over a million likes, posted memes with ironic jokes about Stalin, the Democratic Republic of Germany, and totalitarian collectivism. [93] In my research on the topic, I have found that these memes also tend to make a stark cut in the



Fig. 91: Members of the Ant Group debating whether the lollipop is a trap or not. Note the spaced-out letterings later re-appearing in ironic memes.

427 *Publq* 2021, 41.

target audience: Older users, in this case, those people old enough to have experienced the times of real-political socialism themselves, tend to find these memes not very funny at all, yet among a younger audience they are shared with fondness. Mark Fisher's attestation of Capitalist realism is the obvious answer to this bifurcation: In a world characterized by "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economical system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it"⁴²⁸, alternative systems seem appealing to those whose only experiences with capitalism is the stringing-together of crises. In this regard, socialist and communist memes tap into the desire for a better world yearned for by many young people who may feel like they "know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it."⁴²⁹

Another prominent and still active Facebook group is called *New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens* and is focused on discussions on public transit and urbanist politics.

marx when he sees barnes & noble
charging people \$15.95 for a copy of the
communist manifesto



Fig. 93: Marx being triggered by the cost of the Communist Manifesto.

Founded in 2017, the group currently has close to 230,000 members that abundantly discuss bike lanes, abolition of cars, the re-installing of train networks, and so on. The group is committed to original content, thus condemning reposts, along with trolling or discriminatory behaviour. According to their rules, they describe themselves as "We are not explicitly Leftbook, but we are certainly left-leaning. We won't ban you for being a capitalist, but don't expect us to defend you either" and "Don't come at us with free speech whining. This is a private group and we don't owe you anything."⁴³⁰ It is interesting to note that left-leaning circles

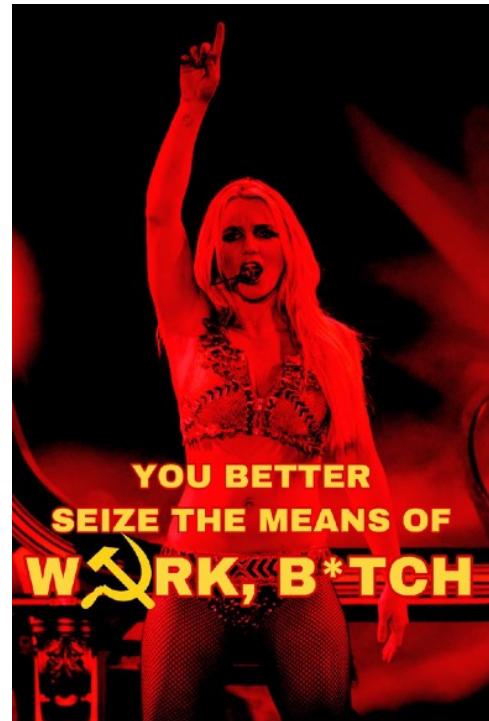


Fig. 92: Comrade Britney is coming to seize the means of work.

⁴²⁸ Fisher 2009, 8.

⁴²⁹ Fisher 2009, 25.

⁴³⁰ See pinned post by Juliet Eldred, *New Urbanist Memes for Transit-Oriented Teens*, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatwouldjanejacobsdo/permalink/1886394438186835>.

when your cat sees you with deli meats



Fig. 94: The much-memed still from a campaign video shows Sanders uttering the phrase "I am once again asking for your financial support." Here, it is combined here with another popular snowclone of an automatic Google search result stating "Cats can have a little salami" as if written from the perspective of a cat.

commonly do not understand 'free speech' as a merit but rather a pretense to insult others. Generally, Leftbook accepts and promotes regulation out of the experience that trolls can otherwise bring down entire communities. This is in stark contrast to barely moderated platforms like 4chan, where there are correspondingly more right-wing ramblings. Another phenomenon is that of post-irony (see chapter 5.2.) or the way in which the puzzling oscillations between irony and sincerity are dealt with: In early 2020, the group's moderators made it official that they were supporting Bernie Sanders in the presidential election. Sanders' Facebook page replied with a thank you-post with a picture of him getting off the bus and an acknowledgement of the group's commitment to public transit and the Green New Deal.⁴³¹ Although NUMTOT was initially founded for shitposting, substantial discussions were just as much a part of the program. Here, we see users who use irony situatively with a genuine agenda, thus showing that the dichotomy of humor and seriousness is not mutually exclusive. Concomitantly, left memes were a widespread phenomenon around the 2020 presidential campaign, especially concerning Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Sanders' early support of memes also traces back to countless Leftbook pages supporting him as early as 2015 such as *Bernie Sanders Dank Meme Stash* and *Barnie Sandlers*. [94]

⁴³¹ See Bernie Sanders, Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/whatwouldjanejacobsdo/search/?query=bernie%20sandlers&epa=SEARCH_BOX.

Around the same time, two memeing friends founded the pages *Cory in the Abyss* and *Lettuce Dog*. Cory, whose real name is Jenson Leonard, was interested in the transgressive potential of memes and created social commentary primarily on the topics of anti-Blackness and white supremacy as well as social commentary on daily events. [95] Leonard, who completed a MFA in Creative Writing at Pratt Institute, states how he became frustrated with writing poetry knowing that even when his work got published, it usually circulates only within the ivory tower of academia.⁴³² As a medium, memes act quite differently, including but not limited to collective modes of production: *Cory in the Abyss* is not only moderated by him, but by a whole team of creators sharing and collectivizing their content. This is also reflected in the manifold aesthetics of his memes:

My work exists within the framework of meme and poor digital image, but it distinguishes itself from the herd through its thick pop cultural plaster. When one encounters a *Cory In The Abyss* meme, my hope is that they see something that looks like it was produced by more than one person (in a way it is). I want my work to look and feel like a microdose of big-budget Hollywood detritus. I want people to ask themselves why my memes are so extra, to question their production value, and the absurdism behind that (because the locomotive subsumption of creativity into capitalism is absurd). The aesthetic maximalism of my memes is my way of finessing on white meme bros, but it's also a means of grabbing the audience's attention through a visual language capitalism has already inundated them to pay attention to. Once I have pulled them in, finally, through that subterfuge, giving them my message. After that they're free to keep scrolling.⁴³³

Another big part of Leftbook are the comment sections that can become spaces of political discourse. Usually, someone would start trolling or ask something offensive that would be met by counter trolls and people taking the time to explain the mistake hoping that the troll may learn something new. This behaviour was specific to Facebook, but can also be found in the comment sections of Instagram and, to a lesser degree, even on Twitter.

Addy Borneman's background, the brains behind *Lettuce Dog*, is much more like the classic troll: She spent her youth on 4chan and thus learned memetic techniques of trolling from an early age: “‘I was the embodiment of 4chan,’ she says. ‘I would say anything just to get a rise, do anything just to get a rise. I don’t even feel comfortable talking about the person I used to be.’”⁴³⁴ She doesn’t consider herself part of the reactionary forces on the message board, but describes herself as a social hacker more interested in the reactions of others. But when her sibling married a black woman and Addy became an aunt, it set a thought process in motion: “I started realizing I was a racist, a sexist, all these things. It wasn’t hard to admit that—it was *empowering* to admit that, because once I did, I could destroy it. I’ve been on a warpath ever

⁴³² Sears 2017.

⁴³³ Abreu 2017.

⁴³⁴ Sears 2017.



Fig. 95: Cory in the Abyss. You Wouldn't Last a Week Without Digital Blackface. The image shows Ray Fisher in his role Cyborg from the film Justice League of the DC Universe.



Fig. 96: Lettuce Dog. Look, Marx has been Disproven. Real Socialism is Rich People Being Nice. Revolution is Illegal. In the tradition of the poor image, this meme uses a watermarked stock photo, various font types, and simple image effects as an amalgam of floating signifiers. The ironic tone satirizes the many people coming to rich people's defense only because they are apparently nice.

since.”⁴³⁵ Addy started the page Lettuce Dog in 2015, which is unfortunately deleted today due to countless spam reports.⁴³⁶ [96] Her motivation came from frustration with ‘social justice warrior’ posting, which she found dry and humorless, and her fascination with Weird Facebook’s dank memes. So she mixed leftist content with the aesthetics and logic of dank memes as well as her experience as a troll on 4chan—but not at any cost: “‘I’ll intentionally make a meme that I know will stir a lot of controversy and anger a lot of people,’ she says, ‘but with the express purpose of empowering marginalized people.’”⁴³⁷ Consequently, when a man from Mexico complained about one of her memes as stereotypical and offensive towards Mexicans, she proceeded to delete the meme. In 2017, Borneman created a new persona, with which she moved on to Instagram and enjoyed great success. @GayVapeShark continued to represent left-wing content as well as social commentary on feminist and trans issues by making them fun. In 2019, Borneman, along with other left-leaning meme page admins on Instagram, took over the show Bottom Text on Adult Swim, a sort of live commentary of the latest memes, before passing away unexpectedly and far too early.

Many of the original Leftbook sites no longer exist and most creators and moderators have moved on to other platforms. The reason for this is also very specific to Facebook: The Meta company is known for its community guidelines enforcing strict censorship and determine what can and cannot be posted. The prohibited things include any kind of sexually violent depictions of children, gore, suicide, and self-harm, but also unspecified hate speech, violent and graphic content, and any kind of nudity.⁴³⁸ However, no matter how exemplary or well-intentioned these guidelines might be, they never work, or only do so in a very one-sided way: One of the ways community guidelines are enforced is through other users reporting posts that do not comply with them. Each report is reviewed by a content moderator, who then decides whether or not it really violates the community guidelines.⁴³⁹ The report function is also a popular means for trolling, because if a post reaches a certain number of reports, it will be deleted even without major reviews. Furthermore, Facebook does not issue any warning or state any reasons why a post was deleted. Accordingly, many trolls have taken advantage of this and have caused a large number of Leftbook pages to disappear. This led to the protest action Meme Alliance,⁴⁴⁰ which demonstrated for several days with #zuxit (portmanteau of

⁴³⁵ Sears 2017.

⁴³⁶ This practice is still common today, for example, Contrapoints’ latest video essay on the legacy of #GamerGate has been taken down from YouTube due to reporting by proponents of #GamerGate.

⁴³⁷ Sears 2017.

⁴³⁸ See Facebook Community Standards, Meta, <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/>.

⁴³⁹ See Gillespie 2018.

⁴⁴⁰ Granata 2019, 268.

Zuckerberg and exit channeling Brexit) by shutting down their pages. At this point, the strike was more against the general censorship endorsed by Meta than to solely raise awareness for the decline of Leftbook. Some of their demands were:

included are pleas for Facebook to 'cease the automated and outsourced censorship of small content creators'; offer 'the option to customize their feed and turn off the hidden filters which manipulate their experience'; 'stop forcing users to reveal their offline identities, thereby discriminating against minorities such as Native Americans and transgender people, as well as putting victims of abuse at risk'; and 'cease the political censorship of journalists, pages, and the rest of its usership worldwide.'⁴⁴¹

Although some journalists used #zuxit to make fun of Leftbook and the usage of Facebook for political activism, to me, this rather shows an ignorance toward the acknowledgment that everything is political with a special emphasis on a blind spot toward data privacy and surveillance capitalism. This mocking attitude vanished with the disclosure of the Cambridge Analytica scandal of millions of Facebook users' data being harvested without their consent, mainly for the purpose of political advertising by the Republican Party for Trump's election campaign and the Leave.EU campaign that ultimately led to Brexit.⁴⁴² In the end, #zuxit was not a fair fight, as operators of meme pages find themselves facing the industry giant Meta. This ultimately led to an exodus of meme page operators to Instagram, which ironically is also owned by Meta, and the never-ending memeing of Mark Zuckerberg.

⁴⁴¹ Brown 2016.

⁴⁴² See Wylie 2019.

5. The Memeing of Life

5.1. Harambe and the Memeing of Life

The year 2016 is representative of the definite dissolution of memes into our everyday lives: Snowclones become part of everyday speech, memes are an integral part of marketing and advertising campaigns, they nonchalantly appear in films, songs and video games, meme characters are interviewed in the news, and, finally, memes become a field of research in their own right. Although such developments cannot be pinpointed on the basis of just one phenomenon, the story of *Harambe*, which spans tons of channels and formats, is exemplary of the memetic turn that took place and set the tone for the next years. Harambe was a 17-year-old gorilla living at the Cincinnati Zoo in Ohio who was shot dead on May 28, 2016, after a three-year-old child fell into his enclave. Even though video evidence shows that Harambe did not harm the child, merely dragging it back and forth in a pond, which of course may have been due to the overall excited mood, the zookeepers decided to shoot him.⁴⁴³ The story made its rounds globally, which subsequently meant that absolutely every person on the Internet felt addressed to add their two cents. While users have always communicated loudly across all platforms, for the first time, the death of Harambe begins a media and meme spectacle that drags on for months without losing any momentum. For example, the tenor in the comment section of the YouTube video showing Harambe with the child blamed the mother who should have been looking after her child. The petition *Justice for Harambe*, published a day later on Change.org, even calls for legal consequences for the family. Primate researcher Jane Goodall defended the zoo's decision to kill Harambe, but also said it looked more like the gorilla was trying to protect the child. When boxing

superstar Muhammad Ali died on June 3, a photoshopped image macro showing him KO'ing Harambe with the caption "June 3, 2016/Muhammad Ali vs Harambe Ape/First Match first Round/First Day in Heaven" is circulated on Weird Twitter and beyond. The meme also needs to be situated in the specific context of the year 2016, in which many world-famous stars such as Prince and David Bowie passed away. According to memes, Harambe is included in this circle, for example, as



Fig. 97: RIP to the legends Muhammad Ali, Prince, Kimbo Slice, David Bowie, and Harambe.

⁴⁴³ A summary of the events following Harambe's death can be found in Kind Studio 2019, 61-63.

part of an image of dead superstars captioned "RIP to the legends" from the Twitter account WorldStarHipHop. [97] A few days later, comedian Brandon Wardell coined the snowclone 'Dicks out for Harambe', which was to be received in numerous other memes. The catchphrase further added to the absurdity of the meme that is, by then, less focused on Harambe and more on plentiful ironic exchanges on social media. Accordingly, another petition was posted on Change.org on July 5, this time addressed to God, asking to let Harambe live again. This was ensued by more or less funny follow-up petitions such as one calling for the Cincinnati Zoo to be renamed into *Kingdom of Harambe*. A successful attempt at trolling managed to get a street in Ohio displayed as *Harambe Drive* on Google Maps for a while. But a tweet by the director of the Cincinnati Zoo, Thayne Maynard, was particularly impactful: after Twitter user @prom hacked into his account, he tweeted "#DicksOutForHarambe" and other ape jokes. That was the final straw: Maynard issued an official statement criticizing the jokes about Harambe and calling for an end to the memes. But expectedly, this was much more likely to lead to the opposite result: Five months after Harambe's death, an article on the satirical website The Boston Leader reported that a Chinese zoo had launched an online poll to name their gorilla offspring, resulting in the name Harambe McHarambeface landing in first place.⁴⁴⁴ The hoax was rather obvious but still carried on by media, trolls, and fans alike, which made clear that the memeing of Harambe surpassed a need for a clear distinction of truth and falsehood. In this regard, tabloid press like The Daily Mail, Mirror, and Metro also reported on the fake vote without any irony. Another Harambe hoax on Twitter made people believe that in the US presidential election, over 11,000 people voted for Harambe as a write-in candidate. Those who thought Harambe's story would remain in 2016 were mistaken when on February 6, 2017, a Cheeto that looked like Harambe was auctioned on ebay. After trolling drove up the price, it eventually crossed the table for \$99,000.

Harambe marks a turning point in memeing characterized by a flood of images, misinformation, and interventions that treat its source material as 'true' whether it actually is or not. These memetic approaches are situated within 'the post-truth condition' that is characterized by "dishonesty and distrust, inaccuracies or false knowledge, all corresponding to a crisis of shared trusted adjudicating authorities."⁴⁴⁵ Early hoaxes like Jenkem or the 2009 Time poll have been happening on a much smaller scale and were shared, for example, within one board on 4chan, but millions of users participated in the Harambe hoax by circulating its content. While earlier cases of trolling regularly made fun of media institutions' lack of fact-checking and premature belief in fake news, the story of Harambe was covered in arts and web sections of newspapers in a semi-ironic style. In this regard, spreading misinformation online has not just become a snowclone in image macros, but also an ironic gesture in memeing often

⁴⁴⁴ Minard 2016.

⁴⁴⁵ Harsin 2015, 4.

accompanied by a nihilist attitude toward authorities of knowledge perpetuated by users and media outlets alike. On the one hand, this is a processing of the post-truth condition itself, and on the other hand, it makes fun of people fooled by false information due to naiveté and a lack of critical thinking as in fact-checking and comparison of different sources. In the trolling tradition, memeing in the second half of the 2010s redevelops into a practice in media competency.

Interestingly, this turn is also materialized in the abundance of subverted rational meme templates, that is, templates using graphs, diagrams, progressing multi-panel memes, and other mutations of data representation. While they promise a ‘clean’ and easily accessible way of memeing, in another vein, they act as graphic marks of locating someone or something in a confined area, for example, a two-dimensional coordinate system. I believe that this logic of (self-)localization can be attributed to a general feeling of ‘being lost’ in the World Wide Web and also resonates with popular tools enabling self-categorization such as astrology, enneagrams and numerology as well as psychological quizzes like the Myers-Briggs personality test. This shift is also connected to the in-and-out-group phenomenon on the Internet; but instead of connecting previously unrelated users through common interests as in the early days of message boards, they function now as bridges between different echo chambers created by recommendation algorithms. ‘Breaking through’ such an automatically designated niche happens between the lines the algorithm cannot grasp, which are, for the most part, sarcasm and irony, tone of voice, neologisms, special ways of writing (sUcH aS tHiS FoRm oF mOcKinG), and other in-jokes. In this regard, after memes had been successfully fleshed out as tools for propaganda and marketing machinery, they had to evolve into something harder to understand in order to withstand a total incorporation into normiedom. Moreover, most of the meme templates discussed in this section adhere to the logic of exploitables that can be easily

mutated and re-circulated. For example, *Drakeposting* refers to a four-panel meme featuring two stills of the rapper’s music video to his viral single *Hotline Bling* from 2015. In the first image on the top left corner we see Drake wearing a red puffer jacket leaning to the side and pushing his flat hand away as if declining something, while the second shows him from the front with an affirmative mimic and hand gesture. Text is usually placed in the panels on the right [98] The way of reading is thus highly explicit: It can be understood as a first-person perspective of rejection versus



Fig. 98: Drakeposting on cringe culture.

appreciation (simplified to like vs. don't like) as well as a form of progressive logic that leads from one to the other. Drakeposting became one of the most easy-to-understand memes that spawned near-infinite mutations from individuals as well as from corporations. In early 2016, GIFs and stills of the *Hotline Bling* music video were used on 4chan as reaction images, slowly invading more and more boards before spreading to r/4chan.⁴⁴⁶ Originally, the term 'drakeposting' referred to discussions around the rapper and his music along sharing image stills from the music video, but was more or less substituted by the four-panel template. Easy-to-exploit templates mutate accordingly quickly: Drakeposting was straightforward to re-create by just superimposing text on the existing letters using standard photo editors or in-app editors. Additionally, Drakeposting is not very offensive, which may account as an additional reason for its huge success. Over time, the format has been substituted by templates comparing similar reactions of fictional characters or celebrities. One example is *Kombucha Girl*, which refers to a viral TikTok by @brittanyt445 showing her drink Kombucha for the first time and seemingly be conflicted in forming an opinion.⁴⁴⁷ [99]

In this confusion of social networks, combined with a general destabilized political climate globally, the call for trustworthy sources of information became louder and louder, which is directly picked up on in the discourses surrounding post-truth and fake news. A large part of this is made up of infotainment practices, i.e. media content that tries to engage its audience by interweaving factual content and entertainment, ultimately further blurring the lines between traditional news reporting and amusement. The aesthetics need to be clear and uncluttered on the one hand, and on the other, visually appealing so people would be attracted to it. In fact, Instagram marks the premature death of the prevailing 'internet ugly' aesthetic of Rage Comics in favor of a commercially successful form of beauty. This may also be due to the social pressure to always look presentable on the internet, which apps like Instagram have massively contributed to. In terms of educational and informative content, slide show formats have prevailed that present a topic in an accessible and clearly laid out manner over multiple continuous images. These have been further popularized by graphics apps such as Canva, which provides different background templates, shapes, and fonts for creating such slide shows. The production of graphic or lazy memes coincides with the logic of infotainment: Both



Fig. 99: @brittanyt445's reaction to Kombucha can be appropriated indefinitely.

⁴⁴⁶ Afifah, Sari 2019, 173.

⁴⁴⁷ brittany_broski 2019.

provide clear readings through graphically delineated layouts and the constant possibility of expansion through overwriting, which is why lazy memeing became so omnipresent and dominated the meme discourse for years. The rest of this chapter introduces to the most common types dubbed 'lazy memes' encountered on the Internet in the mid-to-late 2010s.

The Political Compass serves as a graphic orientation for determining a position on the political spectrum. It shows a two-dimensional coordinate system in which the x-axis leads from economic-left to economic-right positions and the y-axis from libertarian to authoritarian stances. The template originally comes from the website the-politicalcompass.com which has been online since 2001. Its aim is to make it easy to compare political positions with each other and to locate oneself on the spectrum. For this purpose, the website offers a multiple choice test that uses 62 questions to find out where one falls on the matrix of the political compass. The online tool first appeared as a meme in 2012 on the now-offline Japanese image board Warosu. Its implementation in humor may also stem from the fact that after completing the test, one can download a free PDF with one's score among the marked positions of famous politicians. In most memes, the quadrants were tagged in satirical exaggeration from the first-person perspective. From 2016 on, possibly in anticipation of the US presidential election, more and more parodies of the political compass appeared. Unsurprisingly, in a candidate ranking of the website, opponents Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton both ended up in the same quadrant, the authoritarian-economic-right.⁴⁴⁸ A classic meme is the assignment of well-known meme figures, for example, different meme frogs: [100] It needs no further explaining why Smug Pepe inhabits the authoritarian-right corner; the Advice Animal of the type Foul Bachelor Frog is unsurprisingly libertarian-right; in the libertarian-left quadrant we see *Dat Boi*, a 3D animation of a green frog riding a unicycle often appearing in dank and surreal memes; and in the left-authoritarian quadrant is an image of *Kermit* drinking tea that is also known by the snowclone 'that's none of my business'. Although Political Compass memes have reached their zenith in the mid-2010s, they are still used regularly in 2023, suggesting quite a long life cycle for a meme that can be attributed to its versatility and inclusivity even of diametrically opposite

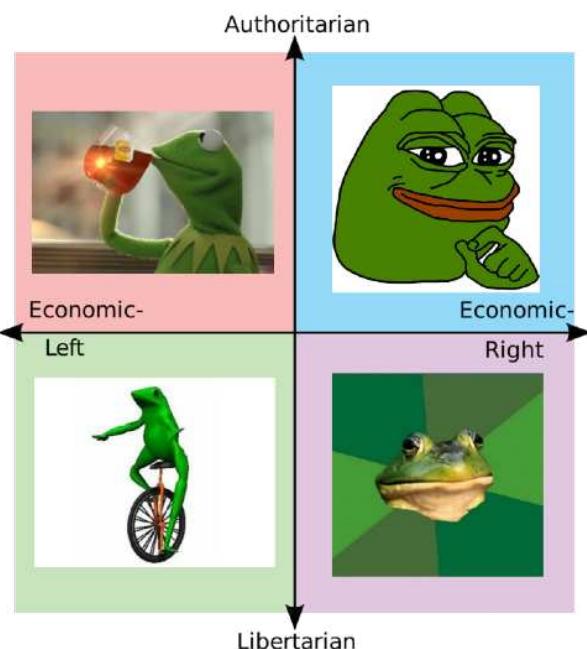


Fig. 100: The Political Compass of green frogs.

⁴⁴⁸ See *The Political Compass, The US Presidential Candidates 2016*, <https://www.politicalcompass.org/uselection2016>.

Authoritarian



Libertarian

Fig. 101: The 6x6 Political Compass of film directors arranges contemporary and classic film makers in the political spectrum. The extremes are inhabited by Mel Gibson (authoritarian-right), Clint Eastwood (libertarian-right), Bong Joon-Ho (libertarian-left), and Jean-Luc Godard (authoritarian-right). While most drawings are distinct portraits of the directors in Wojak's style, Spike Lee's and David Lynch's characters are based on Zoomer Wojak, Oliver Stone's drawing references Groomer Wojak, Steven Spielberg's character is based on the soyjak uttering 'So true!!!', Ava DuVernay's and Greta Gerwig's portraits are based on Black Doomer Girl respectively Doomer Girl, Tyler Perry's portrait builds upon Yes Chad, and Peter Berg's drawing is based on the NPC.

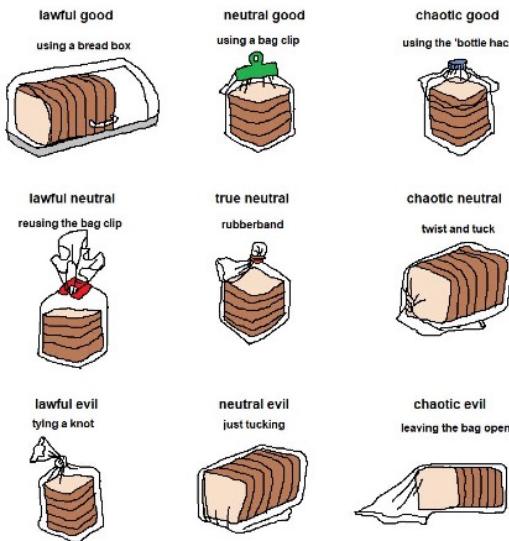


Fig. 102: The Bread Alignment Chart tying different ways of storing bread to basic ethics.



Fig. 103: The edgy/depressed/dumb-ass and bitch/thot/bastard alignment chart.

politics. Consequently, its layout is mutated and extended regularly: a gigantic version of the Political Compass is known as the Ever-Expanding Bunker and consists of 6×6 panels. One of those shows popular film makers and places them in their corresponding political field. [101]

Similarly to the Political Compass, *Character Alignment Charts* are used to elaborate ethical predispositions in role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* where the template also comes from. When creating characters for a game, the player has to make some choices regarding their characters' alignment or whether they are going to be good (following rules and laws) or bad (disregarding them). Using the alignment chart, a character can fall into one of nine categories ranging from lawful to chaotic and from good to bad. One of the first usages of the chart as a meme is from Twitter user @aurelianrabbit from August 10, 2017, and categorizes ways of storing pre-packaged bread loafs. [102] From then on, the Character Alignment Chart went viral and countless mutations were made, categorizing all kinds of things including *Mario Kart* characters, battleships, and male names starting with the letter J. A girly version of the original alignment chart was uploaded to Tumblr by satanic-girls-gone-wild on June 21, 2018 categorizing rock and nu metal bands. The horizontal terms lawful, neutral, and chaotic were substituted by edgy, depressed, and dumbass while the vertical categories good, neutral, and evil were replaced with bitch, thot,⁴⁴⁹ and bastard. In yet another variation of this template categorizing pop singers, SOPHIE (or rather SOPHIE fans) are edgy bitches, Lana del Rey listeners are depressed thots, and fans of Bhad Bhabie (protagonist of the *Cash Me Ousside*

⁴⁴⁹ Thot is an acronym of 'that ho over there' and widely used as a self-label.

meme)⁴⁵⁰ are labelled dumb-ass bastards. [103] Of course, these denotations are highly contextual and ironic, reaffirming the ontological uncertainty of post-irony that even if you're highly immersed in contemporary pop music, it doesn't necessarily make sense—yet it is perfectly true, too. Who would argue against Charli XCX as an edgy thot? Similar to established systems of typing such as the Myers-Briggs test or astrology, typing oneself or others relates people to the same system and to the same world view, including all the pros and contras of that implication, thus affirming an in-group bias.

Venn diagrams actually refer to the intersection of two sets and can be traced back to the American mathematician John Venn. As memes, they usually show unexpected similarities between two or more sets perceived as oppositional or unrelated. In this sense, parodic Venn diagrams probably predate the Internet. One example shows three intersecting sets titled "Philosophy professors", "4-year-olds", and "Backstreet boys" overlap in the center in the expression "Tell me why".⁴⁵¹ The *Epic Handshake* meme follows a similar logic to Venn Diagrams: We see the arms of two extremely muscular men, a Black man on the left in white t-shirt and a white man in a red t-shirt on the right, shaking hands. The image comes from a scene in the 1987 film *Predator*, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger and Carl Wheathers greet each other with a handshake that turns into an arm wrestling match. The scene was very popular on YouTube in the late 2000s, spawning off numerous memetic videos. The image template goes back to fan art by user MIOSLAVofRANDA uploaded to DeviantArt on September 6, 2012. It first landed on Twitter in 2018 as a meme using object-labeling, with the arms each tagged with different words and the handshake in the center of the image as their common ground. In the first such version, uploaded May 14 by @mitchysuch, we see an "Adults" and "Babies" coming to the unwillingly Freudian agreement of "Sucking titties". [104] In another version, the intersection of "watching my cat wake up" and "reading conservative arguments" just forms the utterance "ooh big stretch".

Galaxy Brain or *Expanding Brain* is a two-row multi-panel meme template used to state absurd or ridiculous superlatives with each panel surpassing the previous one. The origin of the images used are unclear but their aesthetics match outdated neuroscientist imagery of



Fig. 104: The Epic Handshake fan art-turned-meme.

⁴⁵⁰ When 13-year-old Danielle Bregoli appeared on The Dr. Phil Show as a teenager with behavioural problems, she insulted the audience before uttering the phrase "Cash me ousside/Howbow dah". Heavily appropriated from AAVE and performed with a thick Southern accent, the phrase translates to "Catch me outside/how about that" in terms of challenging the audience. See Blaze Olivier 2017.

⁴⁵¹ See u/MathMajor7, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/VennDiagrams/comments/1065u7k/tell_me_why/.



Fig. 105: Galaxy Brain or Expanding Brain on the enlightenment of memes.

turning his head as if catcalling her while his girlfriend looks at him angrily. It was first used as a meme in the Turkish-speaking Facebook page Prog Düşmanlarına Verilen Müthiş Cevaplar discussing rock music on January 30, 2017. [106] The man was labelled “Phil Collins” while the passing woman was named “Pop” and his girlfriend “prog”, referring to the band Genesis’ turn from progressive rock to pop music once Phil Collins became their lead singer in 1975. Over the course of 2017, people began hunting for more images of the same stock photo characters and fabricated extensive background lore, including how they used to be a happy couple but had problems because of his infidelity and her apparent shopping addiction. Moreover, they found photos showing the couple befriending the passerby and becoming close with her, especially the two women, before the couple eventually breaks up and the two women are seen kissing. Another instance is a gender role-reversed photo showing the woman looking lustful at a passing man and her boyfriend looking upset, as well as numerous mutations of people cos-playing the roles or finding old photographs and film stills depicting similar scenes. One viral example is a beach wedding photo at the beach where the newly-wed husband looks at

glowing and beaming brains that range from X-ray vision to forming neural connections outside of the body depicted. One example uploaded to Imgur on February 25, 2017, ranks the creation of memes: From “looking at memes online” and “sharing memes with friends” to “creating new memes” and finally “combining memes” showing the overlay of a Galaxy Brain with the head of actor Kayode Ewumi known from the template *Roll Safe*. [105] A similar template was made from a GIF of wrestling commentator Vince McMahon’s reaction to a table dance by wrestler and actress Stacy Keibler.

Distracted Boyfriend refers to an exploitable using object labelling, a practice of naming certain image objects using text boxes. It is a stock image showing a heterosexual couple passing another woman with the man

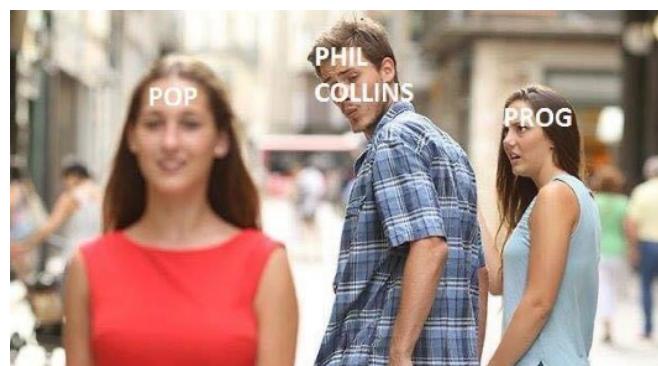


Fig. 106: First appearance of Distracted Boyfriend meme template in regard to Phil Collins’ abandonment of prog.

a muscular guy coming out of the water labelled “same meme, but gay” while his wife looks into the camera.

He Protec but He Also Attac is a rhyming LOLspeak snowclone often used in a multi-panel meme referring to someone’s fighting abilities. However, the catchphrase quickly grew into variations depending on the subject. The template was first used by now-deleted @fijichecks who uploaded a horizontal two-panel meme of a Black man with a lightsaber. On the left side, he is seen standing in upright posture captioned “he protec” while on the right side, he is holding the lightsaber upright, thus captioned “but he also attac”. As the meme continued to spread throughout 2017, the format turned vertically with additional panels added. One example shows Bernie Sanders speaking on the faded-in topic “protecting working families” in the “he protec” panel and slamming his fist on the table in the “he attac” panel, as well as a third and last row reading “But most importantly/He never supported the war in Iraq” showing an early photo of Sanders stating “Mr. Speaker, though Saddam is just a two-bit dictator, I am strongly against this war of destruction.”⁴⁵² In another ironic mutation on the bug-type Pokémon Metapod, which is modelled after a chrysalis, the six-panel meme shows the same image of it three times in a row with the captions “he protec”, “he protec”, and “but most importantly/he protec” which refers to the Pokémon’s high defense yet low attack scores.⁴⁵³ The Macaulay Culkin version of the meme has eight panels and show the child actor in different stages of his life: “he protecc” (notice the new spelling using two C’s) is related to a film still of Home Alone with him holding a gun, “he atacc” also features a film still of the character Kevin preparing a trap, the next image is a paparazzi photo of grown-up Culkin looking haggard and greasy captioned “he cracc” and the last image is a present-day image of the actor looking fine with the text “but most importantly/he got himself bacc on tracc”.⁴⁵⁴ In yet another six-panel version featuring a bi-colored cat we see an upside-down photo captioned “He doesn’t protecc”, in the middle, an image of the cat loafing with the caption “He doesn’t attacc”, and lastly a photo of the cat sitting next to an empty bowl reading “But most importantly/He constantly meow for additionall snacc”. [107]



Fig. 107: He Protecc But He Also Attacc.

⁴⁵² See u/aberniememe, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/SandersForPresident/comments/e84pzd/he_protec_he_attac/.

⁴⁵³ See u/anonymousperson123, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/pokemonmemes/comments/cmpc11/he_used_harden_metapod_doesnt_learn_protect/.

⁴⁵⁴ See Macaulay Culkin Memes, Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MacaulayCulkinMemea/photos/a.1927170224035868/2191391777613710/>.

The probably most popular template of 2018 is the already mentioned Is This a Pigeon? and refers to a phrase uttered by android Yutaro Katori in the anime *The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird* when asked to identify a butterfly. The still has been uploaded to Tumblr by user Indizi dell'avvenuta catastrofe on December 6, 2011, who falsely attributed the quote to a translation error.⁴⁵⁵ The meme mainly circulated on Tumblr to signify confusion but was also referenced in the web series *Don't Hug Me I'm Scared* in 2014.⁴⁵⁶ In the turn of the triumph of object labelling memes, the template resurfaced on Twitter in 2018. One early instance was made by user now-deleted account romiosini on Twitter labeling Katori as "men", the butterfly as "any makeup look without red lipstick" and the bottom text to "Is this a bare face", referencing the widespread inability of many cishet men to recognise whether someone is wearing natural-looking makeup or really nothing. A similar mutation by Twitter user @sadqueer4life labels the character to "my body" and the butterfly to "any slightly uncomfortable physical sensation" with the caption "Is this death".⁴⁵⁷ Finally, a popular variation makes fun of 4chan's /pol/ board by placing the board's logo featuring a swastika on Katori's head and superimposing "Minority actors as protagonists in film/tv" on the butterfly while the bottom text reads "Is this White Genocide?" [108] Of course, this refers to the board's overwhelming racist and anti-semitic content primarily produced by the white fragility of its users.

In an ironic nod to progressive templates such as Galaxy Brain, another meme template that makes a mockery of its graphic design is known by the snowclone 'Don't talk to me or my son ever again' and usually shows a taller and a shorter version of the same character. The first meme was created by Tumblr user Splendidland on November 4, 2014, and showed Spike Spiegel from the anime show *Cowboy Bebop* with a distorted smaller version of himself next to him and the red letters "don't talk to me or my son ever again".⁴⁵⁸ The text has to be understood as if uttered by the main character identifying the smaller version as his own son. Its comedic value lies in the nonsensical relationship between variations of the same character that



Fig. 108: Is This White Genocide? questioning the casting of actors of marginalized groups to make fun of /pol/ ultra far-right rhetoric.

⁴⁵⁵ See Indizi dell'avvenuta catastrofe, Tumblr, <https://catastrofe.tumblr.com/post/13801473669/anime-subtitles-are-the-new-zen-yeah-sure>.

⁴⁵⁶ Don't Hug Me I'm Scared 2014.

⁴⁵⁷ See @sadqueer4life, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sadqueer4life/status/991379614147559424>.

⁴⁵⁸ See Splendidland, Tumblr: <https://splendidland.tumblr.com/post/101803837534/small-boy-bebop>.

don't talk to me or my son or my sons son or my sons sons son ever again



Fig. 109: Don't Talk to Me or My Son Ever Again, cat version.

popular version of *Don't Talk to Me Or My Son* features white cats with orange spots near the ears who are placed in line progressively becoming smaller with the caption "Don't talk to me or my son/or my sons son/or my sons sons son ever again". [109]

The memeing of life is revealed through numerous and diverse developments including the blurring of offline and online activism, the rise of infotainment and 'alternative news' outlets, and the collective hoaxing of events and ultimately results in no sphere of living being spared from memeing. This has led to the understanding that every message carries memetic potential, which is usually exploited. It is no longer essential whether the news actually has comic or other some other form of memetic value. Instead, the way we deal with them is changing: No matter what happens, memetic engagements appear typically within the first couple of minutes of breaking news. This leads to all kinds of interesting phenomena, such as finding out information through memes before you hear about them in the news. In addition, many media outlets, traditional newspapers as well as online platforms, create memes themselves, which are usually circulated on social media in line with the target group. Meanwhile, the commercialization of the Internet continues unabated and has led to the formation

are inexplicably kin to one another. The meme continued spreading only in 2016 and should be understood as templates hinging on their graphic layout increasingly beginning to investigate their structure in a self-referential manner. We can also observe this memetic behavior in the meme template *Putting On Clown MakeUp* or *Clown Makeup Tutorial* that is taken from a make-up video from 2015.⁴⁵⁹ Here, a clown is anyone showcasing foolish or self-damaging behavior, especially in romantic relationships. This development can also be attributed to the rise of ironic we will analyze in the next chapter or so. Another

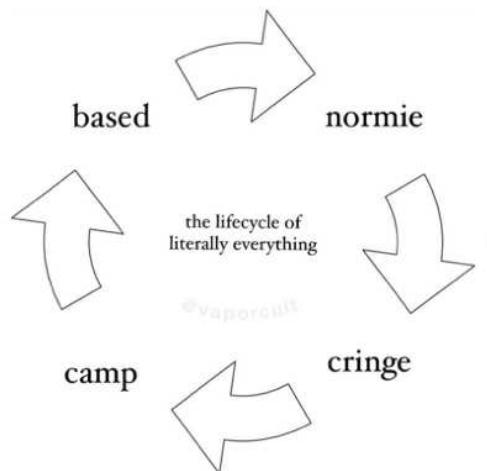


Fig. 110: The Life Cycle of Literally Everything, or the constant cycling from based to normie to cringe to camp and back to based.

⁴⁵⁹ SmiffysFancyDress 2015.

of a few big tech companies owning the majority of the platforms. In this climate, stumbling upon original content becomes rare unless you know where to find it. An astonishingly simple model for the life cycle of ‘literally everything’ was made by @vaporcult: starting at the top, a based meme will become normie at one point, which then turns to cringe. [110] However, what was seen as cringe yesterday might be desired as camp today, making it again the based meme of tomorrow. While certainly not all memes participate in such a neat cycling and recycling, many trends in fashion or music behave shockingly alike.

Sadly, testing out the hypothesis of the life cycle of literally everything rather shows that the life expectancy of memes is, in fact, getting shorter. This is clearly visible in the graphs of Google search result queries produced by Google Trends.⁴⁶⁰ Age-old memes like Dancing Baby never completely disappear, but go through several ups and downs, however, they are never completely forgotten. [111] This could be due to the fact that Dancing Baby plays an important role in meme research and is therefore regularly searched for. Other 1990s classics like All Your Base Are Belong To Us show a slow decline over ten years, but also never disappear completely. If we turn our attention to the period of classic memes, the graphs already look somewhat different: The search term LOLcat shows an almost vertical rise in 2007 before peaking in 2008 and drifting away very slowly until 2019. [112] Classic Rage Comic characters like Forever Alone Guy even have two peaks (January 2011 and March 2012) before disappearing altogether by the end of the 2010s. [113] If we look more closely at the progression of searches for an Advice Animal like Socially Awkward Penguin, we also find that there is a slow rise over three years, a peak at the end of 2011 and, finally, a slow fall off over several years. [114] These graphs suggest that even though it took a while before classics such as LOLcats caught on, they were also actively used for a much longer time period than today. From circa the mid-2010s on, we are met with a completely different picture concerning almost all of the popular memes of the last few years: a whiz-bang start that usually transitions directly into the peak of the meme before it just as rapidly drops again. This is the case, for example, with Slaps Roof of Car, *Woman Yelling at Cat*, the Storm Area 51, and even Harambe. [115] In some cases, such as *Mocking Spongebob* or Gigachad, there is still a long tail that testifies that the meme is passing away only very slowly. [116] The plethora of memes we are exposed to every day are fighting for survival by competing for our attention. But this, as we know, has long since become a commodity online: “If you are not paying for it, you’re not the customer; you’re the product being sold” tweeted Andrew Lewis aka @andlewis in 2010.⁴⁶¹ The statement, which has been fluttering around the internet since the 1990s, can be traced back to the video artwork *Television Delivers People* by Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman from 1973. The

⁴⁶⁰ However, Google Trends only counts the queries and not the memes themselves—which does not account for the circulation of memes outside of Google searches or ‘nameless’ templates.

⁴⁶¹ See @andlewis, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andlewis/status/24380177712?lang=de>.

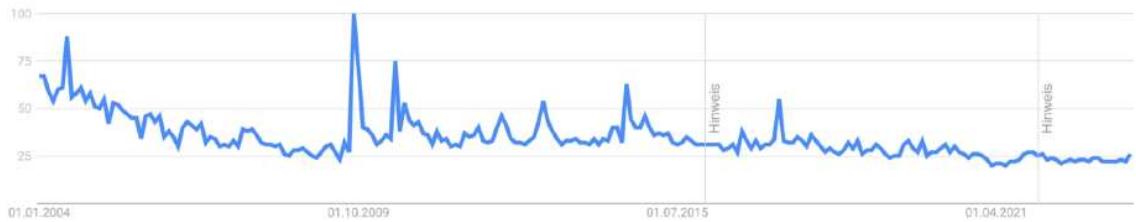


Fig. 111: Google Trends result for 'dancing baby': next to a few peaks, there has been a steady interest.

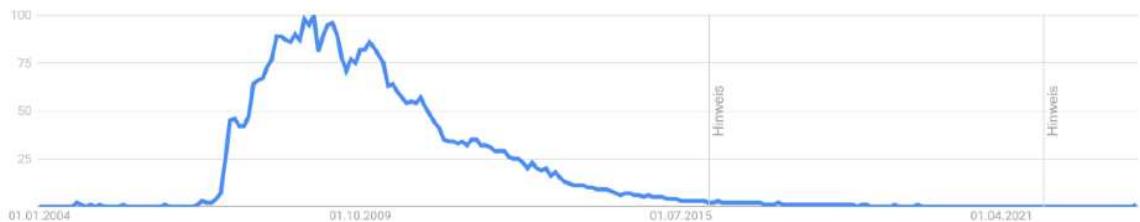


Fig. 112: Google Trends result for 'LOLcats': draws a bell curve with a steep rise and decline in interest.

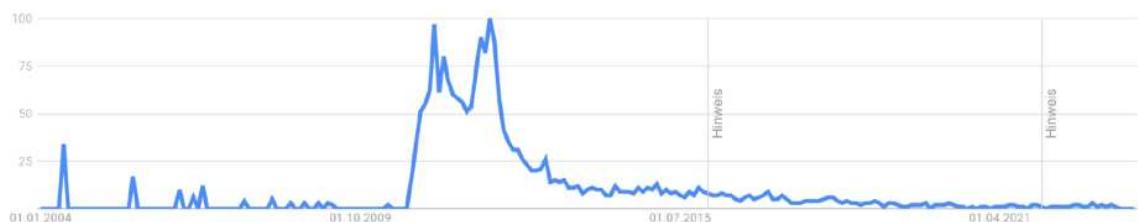


Fig. 113: Google Trends result for 'forever alone guy': shows two peaks of maximum interest.

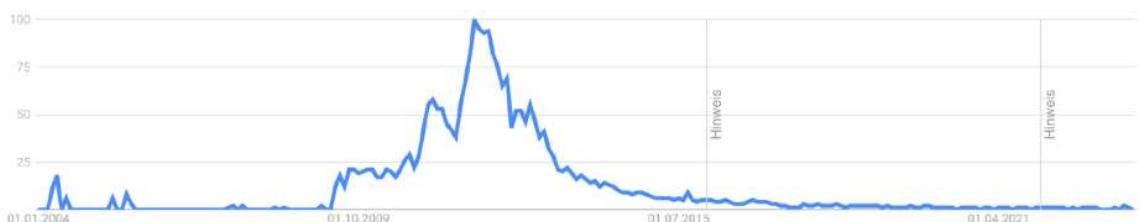


Fig. 114: Google Trends result for 'socially awkward penguin': draws a triangle shape.

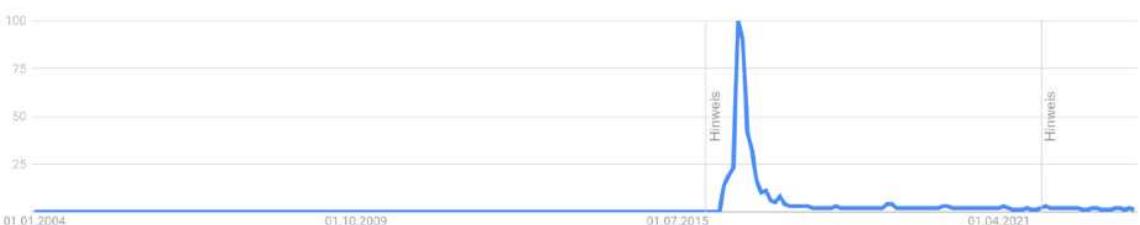


Fig. 115: Google Trends result for 'Harambe': shows steep interest declining strongly shortly thereafter.

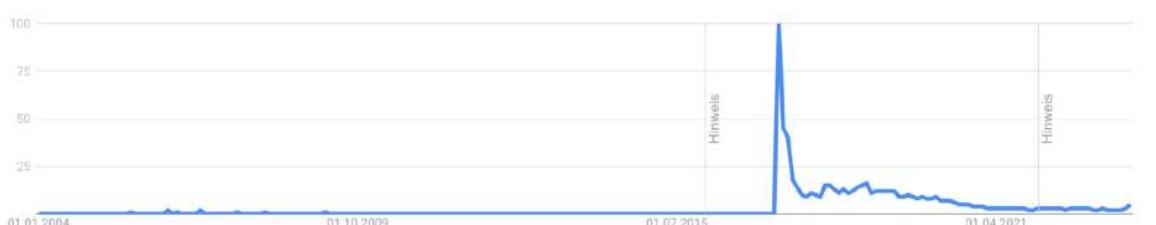


Fig. 116: Google Trends result for 'mocking spongebob': a steep interest with a long tail.

seven-minute single-channel video shows passing white text on a blue background as on a teleprompter used by presenters, while playing a kind of background music familiar from telephone waiting lines. The text is about the commercialization of television through advertising revenue, which ultimately turns the viewer into a product:

The Product of Television. Commercial Television. Is the Audience.
Television delivers people to an advertiser.
There is no such thing as mass media in the United States except for television.
Mass media means that a medium can deliver masses of people.
Commercial television delivers 20 million people a minute.
In commercial broadcasting the viewer pays for the privilege of having himself sold.
It is the consumer who is consumed.
You are the product of t.v.
You are delivered to the advertiser who is the customer.
He consumes you.
The viewer is not responsible for programming-----
You are the end product.
You are the end product delivered en masse to the advertiser.
You are the product of t.v.⁴⁶²

The vertical passing of the teleprompter almost seems like a prediction of the later platform-typical doom scrolling. However, unlike television, the medium Internet depends much more on participation, which in turn makes users complicit in the trade of data through an illusion of choice over the handling of sensitive data. While viewers could at least mute and ignore the commercials on TV (product placements are more difficult to avoid), it is virtually impossible to escape the ads on platforms like Instagram or TikTok. No matter where traces are left, the ads will find them and feed them into the libidinal algorithm accompanying you anyway—it is not for nothing that I sometimes have the feeling that the algorithm knows me better than my partner and even my mother.

So where can you still find original memes in this climate after 2016? One strategy of separating ‘good’ memes from ‘bad’ ones is a community-driven economics of scale on the subreddit r/MemeEconomy. The pillorying of the logic of ‘quantity over quality’ is mainly propagated by communities that see themselves in a pioneering role regarding the troll-normie-bias. The former, who can be described as chronically online and therefore encounter many more memes due to the amount of time they spend on message boards and social media, scream the loudest about the normification of memes. But how and who decides that a meme has been used inflationary and has thus ascended into the realm of a normie meme? This is precisely why the subreddit r/MemeEconomy was founded on September 28, 2016, which treats memes like stocks on the market. Users can post a meme that they have created themselves or simply found online and ask whether they should ‘invest’ in it or not. The community then decides in the comments whether the meme is a suitable object of speculation. Basically, it’s like an online role-playing game of stockbrokers, treating memes like financial

⁴⁶² Kunstspektrum 2011.

assets and using terms like ‘buy’, ‘sell’ and ‘invest’ to evaluate the worth of a specific meme. Over time, the subreddit developed its own unique vocabulary and also resorts to diagrams and charts, performance analyses, and reports that mimic the format of financial news. Since then, the meme economy has spread onto other platforms like Discord and also spawned a website for trading memes as NFTs.

Important factors that are included are the spreading of the format and its potential to become a normie meme. Assessing this is comparable to speculating on the stock market: If someone posts a meme, for example, that other users have already seen on various platforms or even years ago, they will recommend not to invest in the meme or ‘to sell’ it. On the other hand, original content or yet unknown templates are highly sought after and often come with a call to invest or buy. The closer a meme gets to its peak, the lower the memetic profit and the greater the chance of selling it. In a broader sense, however, it does not end there: The discussion on r/MemeEconomy itself contributes to the meme’s further circulation, which in turn may lead to several new variations. In this respect, the cycle of the meme economy is not closed, but permeable and porous with a constant enrichment through mutated memes. For the investors themselves, the profit materializes in karma points⁴⁶³ and Reddit awards, which reward the account with symbolic value and credibility on the platform. The upvote or downvote function of the posts and comments as well as a specially created bot, the MemelInvestor_Bot, function as tools for voting.

Steal Their Look is a meme format thought to be dead that has been revived by r/MemeEconomy and could affirm @vaporcult’s model of the life cycle. *Steal Her Look* is a type of article in fashion and pop magazines that act as guides to copying an outfit or style. In addition to the original image, usually a celebrity, there are similar products of clothing and accessories as well as information such as manufacturer and price. As a meme format, *Steal Their Look* is structurally related to Starter Pack memes and usually shows fictional characters with frightfully expensive accessories and price tags next to them. The earliest variation comes from Tumblr user vaginawoolf from 2014 and shows instructions on how to recreate the look of *The Pumpkin Dance*. This refers to a viral video in which a person dressed in a black catsuit with a Jack O’Lantern pumpkin on his head dances awkwardly to the Ghostbusters theme song.⁴⁶⁴ In the template we see a still from the video including product shots of black leggings, a black turtleneck jumper, and a pumpkin along the caption “steal her look: spooky pumpkin:/gucci women’s black stretch suede legging \$1850/saint laurent classic turtleneck jumper in black cashmere with black suede elbow patches \$1490/pumpkin \$3”.⁴⁶⁵ The prices of the basic

⁴⁶³ Also labelled as ‘fake Internet points’ by Reddit users.

⁴⁶⁴ CW 15 Omaha 2006.

⁴⁶⁵ Reposted by cursemybedroom, Tumblr: <https://www.tumblr.com/cursemybedroom/98663718486/vaginawoolf-steal-her-look-spooky-pumpkin>.



Fig. 117: Steal Her Look Zuckerberg edition implies that the Meta CEO is a reptilioid.

When subway forgets the mayonnaise



Fig. 118: Ken & Karen getting angry at Subway forgetting the mayonnaise or white people's delight.

garments from luxury brands still reference the absurdity of this format from fashion magazines, some of which took place in a similarly high segment yet were targeting teenagers and young adults. Over time, this meme format has propagated all kinds of looks to copy, from the *Super Mario* character Waluigi to the emoji of a dancing woman in a red dress to the *This Is Fine* dog. On April 14, 2018, the format was posted in a variation starring Mark Zuckerberg during his hearing in front of the US Congress on the Cambridge Analytica scandal by user Deanskre to r/MemeEconomy. The template shows a photo of Zuckerberg at the hearing with a watermark of the original author @trash_man_john still visible, suggesting that the meme was reposted from Twitter. Next to it is a picture of what is needed for the look: "Gucci Suit Jacket (\$2,500), Dior slim-fit shirt (\$570.24)/Brooks Brothers solid tie (\$79.95)/Human skin and hair (\$587,000.69)". [117] The thread is titled "Are "Steal his look" memes back on the rise ? Should we invest?" which is strongly affirmed in the comments.

Lastly, meme characters who became famous on r/MemeEconomy are the St. Louis couple known as *Ken and Karen*: They star in a viral video created in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests on June 29, 2020. We see the privileged white attorneys pointing guns at passing protesters to 'protect' their homes in a gated community although there has been no sign of an infiltration or impending danger, only demonstrators walking by. Ken and Karen's appearance in the video became emblematic of the divide not only between white and Black people, but between boomer entitlement and the socially and economically just beliefs of younger generations. In the video, it is suggested that Ken and Karen were the exception who actually came out of their home during the protest to actively threaten the protesters while other neighbors simply barricaded themselves. Even though neither of them appear to be skilled in dealing with weapons, they are pointing them at people at random. The visible desperation on their faces has become a memer's delight: On the same day, sublemon posted a photo of the two with the caption "When subway forgets the mayonnaise" making fun of white people. [118] White foods like mayonnaise, crackers or vanilla ice cream are often used symbolically for white

people. In this variation, the author was making fun of a white person's blatant entitlement to the slightest inconvenience.

Many formats like the Political Compass or Galaxy Brain are still widely used today, implying a longer life span of these memes. These templates have gained iconic status similar to the triad of image, text, and layout in Advice Animals versions. This phase of memeing everything in existence certainly paved the way for the spreading of memes into all parts of life: Nowadays, memes can be found in school books and legal texts as well as in kid's shows and family group chats. The memeing of life comes at a price to those suffering from meme elitism: An expanded life cycle and greater visibility also come with reiterations of the same jokes over and over again. In the end, this led to a tendency of memes becoming increasingly ironic and incomprehensible that is examined in great detail in the next chapter.

6.2. Ironic Memeing: Dank Memes, Deep Fried Memes, Surreal Memes

Before analyzing so-called dank memes, I highly suggest taking a close look at one of them: The example, that was uploaded to Reddit in December 2016, is a two-panel meme labelled "types of memes I used to like" on the top panel and "type of memes I like now" on the bottom panel. [119] The upper example is a meme fallen out of style, an Advice Animal of the type *Business Cat* with the caption "We need to think outside the box/I shit in there". The meme below, what is referred in the overarching structure as the modern way of memeing, shows a photoshopped image of TV chef Gordon Ramsey with purply glowing eyes and the caption "lamb sauce I o c a t e d". First of all, the meme itself—that is, the whole thing and not just the top or bottom half—claims that memes have changed since their early days, and their humor has changed, too. This will be analyzed throughout this chapter: how the rhetoric and humor of memes changed in just a couple of years from easy-to-understand punchlines to multiple layers of irony, making it almost impossible for people from the out-group to follow along.

Both memes are related through their similar format: They are image macros featuring a funny poor image, a well-situated caption, and the ability to produce various mutations of itself. Their difference is more apparent in the humor conveyed: While the Business Cat's caption is a classic and straightforward joke with a punchline, playing on the double



Fig. 119: Memes Then, Memes Now.

entendre of the startup-speak snowclone ‘we need to think outside the box’ and the cat’s litter box, the meme below is only understandable to those having some vague idea about its origin, in most cases, because they have experienced the development themselves and to a lesser degree, because of researching the template extensively. Instead of a paraphrased joke, there are only three words in the caption, one of them typed in a spaced-out style for, I suppose, dramatic effect. The words “lamb sauce I o c a t e d” do not refer to anything else than Ramsey either, so knowledge about their origin is like the key to this memetic door: It is a still from a 2006 episode of *Hell’s Kitchen*, a reality cooking show starring hot-headed Ramsey that features many of his iconic outbreaks. In the scene depicted, he is seen shouting multiple times “Where is the lamb sauce?” to the contestants of the show while entering ‘rage mode’. The scene had been edited multiple times in YouTube Poop videos before, always highlighting the caricatural facial expression made by Ramsey while frantically searching for the lamb sauce that seems to become even more pixelated and cartoonish over the course of data compression.⁴⁶⁶ Additionally, the photoshop detail of glowing or laser eyes had been used countless times before to represent a change in someone’s attitude, for example, through a trigger or the appearance of an object of desire. Occasionally, they are also used as a superlative in progressive multi-panel memes and have their origin in cartoons and anime.

While classic memes were comprehensible and accessible in the sense that you could understand them if you knew how to read them, dank memes reference the shared experiences of an in-group you either belong to or not. As we have seen throughout this thesis, social aspects have always been the most vital part of memes, but in dank memes, they are deliberately used to draw lines between different communities. This is the primary aspect of this kind of memes: They form a new boundary between those that ‘get’ them and those that do not. In the trolling tradition, the highly ironic humor of dank memes is mainly directed against normies and mainstream users; however, the appearance of dank memes also coincides with the coming-of-age of late Millennials and early members of Generation Z. Therefore, the specific characteristics of a form of irony popularized through YouTube Poop videos, self-deprecating assertions, and the anti-humor as performed by comedians such as Tim & Eric need to be taken into consideration.⁴⁶⁷ In 2016, meme elitism as in a decrease in a meme’s popularity due to people outside a specific community chiming in on the joke becomes a widespread posture. The logical consequence was the hijacking of memes through a complete break-up of content and formal structure as well as the assembly of increasingly incoherent sympoietic agents into memes. In the case of the meme described above, these are references to a historical meme

⁴⁶⁶ See Swooce Mothmane 2016.

⁴⁶⁷ Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim created, among other things, the *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* on Adult Swim that was very popular thanks to its exaggerated anti-humor. For example, the sketch *Tim’\$ Discount Price\$ vs. Eric’ Premium Prices*, a fake commercial advertising only prices. See Adult Swim UK 2009.

canon, Gordon Ramsey's iconic character, the series' scene already mutated by montage parodies, and the spaced-out caption. All these agents bear meaning themselves, but these have become fluid to such an extent that they can be charged with another meaning at any given point. The notion of a floating signifier "whose meaning is 'suspended'"⁴⁶⁸ as uttered by Laclau therefore needs to be discussed in more detail in order to adequately reflect on the developments of ironic memes.

The term traces back to Claude Lévi-Strauss' reading of Marcel Mauss' famous essay *The Gift*, an investigation into the exchange of gifts as a fixation of social relations in different cultures. In this context, the Polynesian term 'mana' refers to a kind of supernatural force or energy that pervades the universe and can also be understood as a form of magic. Other translations are 'wealth' and 'authority'.⁴⁶⁹ Lévi-Strauss complements the concept of mana with the notion of the floating signifier:

I believe that notions of the *mana* type, however diverse they may be, and viewed in terms of their most general function [...] represent nothing more or less than that *floating signifier* which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, even mythic and aesthetic invention), even though scientific knowledge is capable, if not staunching it, at least of controlling it partially. Moreover, magical thinking offers other, different methods of channelling and containment, with different results, and all these methods can very well coexist.⁴⁷⁰

Lévi-Strauss interprets the floating signifier as harboring the signifiers of infinite meanings, which can thus refer to anything. He emphasizes that even scientific research cannot simply decipher these meanings because they belong to a different mode of thinking, one that is not in the tradition of the Eurocentric understanding of the rational mind since Enlightenment. In this respect, Lévi-Strauss' theory should rather be seen as a manifestation of pluralistic thinking:

In the system of symbols which makes up any cosmology, it would just be a *zero symbolic value*, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains, which can be any value at all, provided it is still apart of the available reserve, and is not already, as the phonologists say, a term in a set.⁴⁷¹

The empty floating signifier is therefore a *processual* word shell waiting to be 'filled' with meaning or symbolic value. At the same time, it is a witness to the incongruence between language and meaning. Since it cannot be assigned a fixed meaning, it just floats around until it finally catches one and actualizes itself. Something similar happens in the visual societies in late capitalism: 'Empty' signifiers constantly float around us and their meaning can constantly be actualized into something else. This idea is loosely connected to Jean Baudrillard's condition of

⁴⁶⁸ Laclau 2005, 131.

⁴⁶⁹ Mauss 2022, 48.

⁴⁷⁰ Lévi-Strauss 1987, 63.

⁴⁷¹ Lévi-Strauss 1987, 64.

the hyperreal as propagated by “models of a real without origin or reality.”⁴⁷² In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard identifies the impact on symbols and signs of late Capitalism that no longer correspond to the Saussurian model of signifier and signified. In Fernand de Saussure’s classic theory of semiology, each sign has a corresponding meaning that ground them in existence, for example, the sound of uttering the word ‘meme’ as the signifier and the concept or meaning of it as the signified. However, in the era of postmodernism, the correspondence between signifier and signified implodes with far-reaching consequences for basic understandings of reality: the imaginary and reality flow into one another and render classic models of their shared spaces ontologically uncertain. As has been demonstrated by Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, this evolution can be attributed to the spectacle—the very phenomenon of simulation that “is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images”⁴⁷³—inscribing itself into the modes of production and therefore into the center of cultural apparatuses such as film, television, and, of course, memes. Baudrillard locates this genealogy in the 4-step precession of simulacra that has been regularly channeled in memes. [120] He differentiates between representation (as in a copy referencing an idea, thus affirming an equivalence between signifier and signified) and simulation (simulacra



Fig. 120: An illustrated guide to Baudrillard’s stages of the simulacrum: In the first stage, the signifier (here: fish) bears an equal relation to the signified, meaning both are real. In the second stage, the sign is alienated from its origin, distorting reality. Next, the sign only stands in for the lack of reality—it makes us question what ‘reality’ is supposed to be (here: the relation between fish and fish-shaped fish sticks). In the last stage, the sign has finally left reality (as in an equal relation between signifier and signified) and is its own pure simulacrum with no reference to an origin.

⁴⁷² Baudrillard 1994, 3.

⁴⁷³ Debord 1983, 7.

veiling the imploded relation between signifier and signified by posing as grounded). As apparent, however, Baudrillard's theory only comes together by staying rooted in the Platonian hierarchy of the original and the copy which ironically neglects the systems of production involved in simulation while trying to criticize just that.⁴⁷⁴ His example of Disneyland as a simulacra masquerading as an imaginary in order to keep up the reality principle of the United States at large, when actually the whole world has indefinitely entered the simulation, at times sounds more like an attempt to vilify mass culture than a meaningful critique of its entrenchment in our world. In the end, this aporia of making culture, science, or art outside the spectacle makes staying inside the spectacle a duty. To be fair, the hyperreal also constitutes an historical moment of the 1980s where upcoming technologies were viewed as immaterial and their modes of production were largely invisible, which also led to fantasies of cyberspace with disembodied consciousnesses built on blocks of informations becoming paramount. From a posthuman perspective, these considerations cater to contemporary transhumanist ideals mostly due to their ignorance toward the materialist entanglements of 'reality' and 'hyperreality'. Moreover, further ado depends on one's own position regarding cultural philosophy: While cynics may attribute most art nowadays as simulacra, I would rather salute to embodied practices of critiquing materialist conditions shaping the creation of art, texts, technologies, and commodities. Returning to our examination of irony, while Baudrillard's theory still clings to a Platonian ideal of the supreme original overshadowed by a plethora of copies and simulacra as an ontological disruption, Lévi-Strauss' floating signifiers are more radical thanks to a multitude of pluralities co-existing without hinging on the need of an original. Rightly, I would argue against a specific point of origin entirely and for interferences of traces that can be causal in relation but, more importantly, are always mutually shaping one another. Memes that propagate the use of floating signifiers function accordingly, with some of the signs actually being completely empty and others simply separated from their origin, thus also acquiring a certain form of meaninglessness. Over the following pages, we will take a journey through dank memes, deep fried memes, and surreal memes, all of which belong to the ironic realm of memes.

The word 'dank' originally stems from drug language and refers to good quality cannabis buds. Particularly strong-smelling, sticky, and highly potent strains are given the quality

⁴⁷⁴ This is also tackled by Deleuze in *Plato and the Simulacrum* where he attributes the condition of the hyperreal as the reversing of the allegory of the cave: "The copy is an image endowed with resemblance, the simulacrum is an image without resemblance. [...] God made man in His own image and to resemble Him, but through sin, man has lost the resemblance while retaining the image. Having lost moral existence in order to enter into an aesthetic one, we have become simulacra". Deleuze 1983, 48. In contrast to Baudrillard, Deleuze does not lament on the disappearance of the original but describes the triumph of the simulacrum foregrounding the in-existence of a point of origin: "The simulacrum is not a degraded copy, rather it contains a positive power which negates *both original and copy, both model and reproduction*. Of the at least two divergent series interiorized in the simulacrum, neither can be assigned as original or copy." Deleuze 1983, 53. See also approaches by Deleuze & Guattari such as deterritorialization to describes movements of development without a point of origin. Deleuze & Guattari 1983, 225.

mark 'dank', meaning that they are especially good. Since 2015, the word dank has increasingly appeared in Google search queries, in most cases in direct connection with memes and not drugs.⁴⁷⁵ For example, as early as May 2013, a video called *how 2 make dank memes!!!!* was uploaded to YouTube by user fennthulhu.⁴⁷⁶ However, the tutorial does not produce a dank meme, but a classic Success Kid image macro. Over a year later, Reddit user xEphr0m posted an image macro with a pixelated gnome and the caption "Born too late to explore the earth/Born too soon to explore the galaxy/Born just in time to browse dank memes". [121] We can interpret this as the first official dank meme: It makes use of the Impact font, which appears strictly in an ironic context from then on,⁴⁷⁷ and references the memetic character Gnome Child from the MMORPG *Runescape*. Moreover, the meme breaks with the clear reading of the classic image macros by squeezing all text at the top. Another example is the *Meme Police*, which later became a series, uploaded to r/4ChanMeta by 369DAMNyofINE in September.⁴⁷⁸ It shows a stock photo of a toddler dressed up as a policeman and holding a clipboard. The caption is written in red lower case letters in the Comic Sans MS font: "ur gettign a ticket sir/that meme wasnt dank enough". The term had already become established by October at the latest, when @JustinBibero uploaded the montage parody 9gager can't handle the dank memes to YouTube.⁴⁷⁹ The video follows a teenager tagged with the 9GAG logo at a house party full of dank memes (and dank meme creators) who offer him cannabis cigarettes in response to the question "Do you have any normal memes?". After initial resistance, he consumes and ends up in a drug frenzy full of dank memes including the characteristic background music of sirens, gunshot sounds, screaming, and way too loud drum'n'bass music. A clear line is drawn here between the awesome dank memers whose memes are so incomprehensible that the normies of 9GAG can



Fig. 121: Even though we only got a sour spot in the timeline of history, at least we have dank memes.

⁴⁷⁵ TheLegend28 2020, 5.

⁴⁷⁶ fennthulhu 2013.

⁴⁷⁷ Since the Impact font type was so influential for classic memes such as LOLcats, it appeared less frequently in memes pursuing a clear demarcation from 'older' ones. Here, it is again 'cool' to use them for the purpose of dank memes only. This serves as another demarcation toward the classical period of memes, where the Impact font type is used in a serious way; in dank memes, it only appears ironically.

⁴⁷⁸ Reuploaded on Imgur: <https://imgur.com/mhR8f5H>.

⁴⁷⁹ Justin Bibero 2014.

no longer laugh at them. In this respect, dank memes should also be understood as a reaction to the increasing commercialization and exploitation of certain memes and meme culture.

The influences for dank memes are diverse yet include the practice of shitposting taken to an ironic level as well as ironic fandoms and audiovisual montage parodies. In recent years, the discourse on irony rekindled, among other things, due to the surfacing of the term 'post-irony' explicitly in regard to memes in the mid-2010s.⁴⁸⁰ The attempts to explain the meaning of the neologism, however, largely continue the definition of irony and are somewhat redundant. But how to grasp the difference between irony and post-irony? First, we need to understand the specifics of irony: Socrates' practice is probably the best known. In the sentence attributed to him "I know that I know nothing" we can already recognize an ironic moment, namely the moving back and forth between knowing and not knowing, between which the subject is situated. Behind Socrates' postulate there is a superiority, on the basis of which it quickly becomes clear that Socrates claims the opposite of what he means. The irony is thus deposited in the contradiction. The disputes between the followers of Socrates or later Plato and the Sophists can be traced back, among other things, to ironic misunderstandings, akin to trolls at the beginning of the second millennium.

In the philosophy of Romanticism and especially German Idealism, irony is understood as a rhetoric of contradictions: Schlegel, for example, understands it as a form of enduring various opposites such as the finite and the infinite. In this respect, irony cannot be overcome by either, because the oscillation between opposites does not allow for any form of stability. According to Schlegel, this is the main task of philosophy: to think opposing thoughts together and, moreover, to pursue the "steten Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung".⁴⁸¹ This was especially a thorn in the side of Hegel, who strongly criticized Schlegel for not seeing a dialectical movement in the theory of irony. Hegel understands irony as a Socratic method, but not as a basic logic of philosophy as the Romantics demand. In this "forced" self-inscription of the German Idealists, Hegel locates a form of self-delusion: "Es fehlt ihm die Kraft der Entäußerung, die Kraft, sich zum Dinge zu machen und das Sein zu ertragen."⁴⁸² Nowadays we would sneeringly call this 'virtue signaling' in the sense that one is only concerned with one-sided information or interests instead of constantly expanding one's comfort zone and facing new challenges. Prominently, Hegel wrote about irony as an empty form of subjectivity in which there is only appearance and no being (i. e. truthfulness). In contrast to art, irony is a form of aesthetics, since it has no seriousness whatsoever and thus can no longer represent anything 'true':

⁴⁸⁰ See McWhinney 2019, and Monroe 2014, and and Collins 2010.

⁴⁸¹ Schlegel 2013, 26. "to the point of continuously fluctuating between self-creation and self-destruction" translated after Schlegel, Firchow 1991, 24.

⁴⁸² Hegel 1989, 483. "It lacks the power to externalize itself, the power to make itself into a Thing, and to endure [mere] being." translated after Hegel, Miller 2004, 399-400.

Die nächste Form dieser Negativität der Ironie ist nun einerseits die *Eitelkeit* alles Sachlichen, Sittlichen und in sich Gehaltvollen, die Nichtigkeit alles Objektiven und an und für sich Geltenden. Bleibt das Ich auf diesem Standpunkte stehen, so erscheint ihm alles als nichtig und eitel, die eigene Subjektivität ausgenommen, die dadurch hohl und leer und die selber *eitle* wird.⁴⁸³

In Hegel's interpretation, irony is always an evaluative statement delivered by a subject that cannot transmit anything other than *style*. Moreover, it is a negative movement or only half of the process known as *Aufhebung* that prematurely comes to a halt: By uttering an ironic statement, the subject comes close to the edge of knowledge, but simply stops before ultimately learning from it. In this regard, Hegel understands the character of irony as shallow and merely aesthetic.

Nowadays, a lack of disembodied interpretational sovereignty gives the appearance of seriousness and irony increasingly merging, making it impossible to discriminate between them: If we define irony as a sarcastic statement perverting a true statement, in the phenomenon of post-irony, it is not explicitly determinable whether the primary statement was true or false. For example, “Elon Musk is destroying Twitter” is a serious statement, no further questions asked. Uttering “Elon Musk will make Twitter great again” in a condescending tone makes clear that I am not convinced by Musk's action since buying the platform, which is the joke I am making. However, if I were to say “Haha Twitter go bonk thank you Elon”, I am uttering a true statement trying to be funny but make it appear like it is ironic which is the joke. Admittedly, post-irony is often described as sincerity with extra steps, or, as stated by YouTuber jREG, “This is just dialectics for edgy teens.”⁴⁸⁴ Nevertheless, I see in the discourse around post-irony—not unlike the one on post-truth—above all a desire for 'stable' ontological categories that determine whether something is funny or serious or, in the discourse around fake news, true or false. In this respect, akin to post-truth genealogies, we can trace a genealogy of discourses on truth beginning with François Lyotard's 1979 critique of metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition*. However, it should be added that I have come across the term post-irony almost exclusively via young people, who explicitly wish to exclude older generations when it comes to memes, which is practiced by complicating memes and distorting simple statements. In their 2011 *Metamodernist Manifesto* that also deals with the notion of post-irony, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van der Akker explain in a truly Romanticist manner: “We recognise oscillation to be the natural order of the world.”⁴⁸⁵ They give as an example a pendulum that swings back and forth between two extremes and thus unites both through its movement:

⁴⁸³ Hegel 1990, 74. “The next form of this negativity of irony is, on the one hand, the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid. If the ego remains at this standpoint, everything appears to it as null and vain, except its own subjectivity which therefore becomes hollow and empty and itself mere vanity.” translated after Hegel, Knox 1988, 66.

⁴⁸⁴ jREG 2020.

⁴⁸⁵ Turner 2011.

Indeed, by oscillating to and fro or back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance however; rather, it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm.⁴⁸⁶

While I doubt the need for the term metamodernism, I recognize a certain fascination of the movement of the pendulum already prevalent in the philosophy of German Idealism. However, in summary, the term post-irony seems to point to an ontological instability in the subject uttering a statement, as in the creator of a post-ironic joke not revealing whether it is based on sincerity or irony. In this respect, I understand this instability as a consequence of the dissolution of 'complete' subjectivity becoming increasingly impossible to ignore after the postmodern as well as the posthuman turn.

On the internet, the concept of irony inevitably leads to misunderstandings. Recalling the discussion of slurs in chapter 2.2., it is not verifiable who is ironic and who is not as well as who is using irony as a smokescreen to cause trouble. However, this uncertainty is exactly what ironic memes are taking advantage of. Depending on the situation, it becomes possible to lead your opponent around by the nose: "Why are you so upset, I only meant it ironically!" is a common reply in online discussions. These interactions, which can also be called gaslighting,⁴⁸⁷ have also developed in fandoms. One of the best-known ironic fandoms has grown around the 2003 animated film *Shrek*. The popular film, which was given three sequels, focuses on the adventures of three misfits, ogre Shrek, his best friend Donkey the donkey as well as Shrek's girlfriend Fiona. Additionally, the film's soundtrack by the band Smash Mouth generated a cult-like following. The popularity of the film can perhaps be analyzed through the fact that it forms a fond childhood memory for lots of users, on the other hand, I'd like to add that it is also *objectively good* and *extremely funny*. However, the ironic fandom only formed in the early 2010s along a massive uploading of fan art on DeviantART and Tumblr: The self-described 'brogres'⁴⁸⁸ shared a meme on a My Little Pony message board created in November 2012, showing Shrek with an exaggeratedly long neck, which was multiplied using the stamp tool from Photoshop. [122] The image is captioned in Comic Sans reading "check urself before u shrek urself", a pun on the song *Check Yo Self* by rapper Ice Cube, which begins with the line "You better check yo' self before yo' wreck yourself". Another highlight of the *Shrek* fandom was definitely the wedding of a couple who cosplayed as Shrek and Fiona for their ceremony. Over time, more and more ironic fandoms have risen, for example, of the 2007 film *The Bee Movie*, which we already came across as a copypasta. The film, which flopped with both critics and

⁴⁸⁶ Vermeulen, Akker 2010.

⁴⁸⁷ 'Gaslighting' denotes a form of psychological manipulation repeatedly questioning someone's reality. The term stems from the 1944 movie *Gaslight* by George Cukor.

⁴⁸⁸ Brogres was coined in analogy to *bronies*, a self-labelling of male fans of the cartoon show *My Little Pony*.

audiences, also contains some downright disturbing scenes for a children's film. It follows Barry B. Benson, a bee who learns that humans are selling honey as a commodity and subsequently decides to sue all of humanity. Originally voiced by Jerry Seinfeld, the film made a name for itself with the absurd romantic relationship between Barry and a human woman named Vanessa. In a scene in which Barry daydreams about Vanessa, she flies hearts in a propeller plane before suddenly crashing into a rock while we briefly see her skeleton in the rubble. Such and other salacious moments elevated *The Bee Movie* to the status of a guilty pleasure, a form of enjoying things deemed uncool in the mainstream. The secret factor here is, of course, to enjoy them ironically and not to call them seriously worth watching.

Probably the most infamous fandom, however, is that of the Minions, the little yellow, jellybean-shaped army that first appeared in the 2010 film *Despicable Me*. The bug-eyed helpers of the villain Gru speak a kind of Creole, a mixed language of Romance languages, English, Chinese, Korean, and Filipino. Their clumsiness and childlike nature made them particularly popular with viewers, which materialized in a huge abundance of merchandising commodities. Tumblr and DeviantART were also flooded with fan art, video edits of the Minions' best scenes were put on YouTube, and eventually the film received two sequels as well as a movie focusing solely on the Minions' background story. When the *Minions* film was released in 2015, it was again accompanied by a relentless marketing machinery: There were all kinds of Minions toys, Minions ice cream, Minions soft drinks, Minions TicTacs, Minions Happy Meals, Minions chicken nuggets, Minions Mac and Cheese, in short: the little yellow creatures were really everywhere. It is especially absurd that the fandom of the Minions is less limited to children than to their parents, or, as YouTuber Matt Rose puts it: "I turn my back for five minutes and suddenly the little burbling yellow sidekicks of the movie are adorning every meme shared on Facebook by mums."⁴⁸⁹ As an example, he shows a tweet by the user @brieggna who writes "my mom used a minion meme to say" below which is a picture of two Minions on a brown background and the caption "Your Father and I are getting a divorce". [123] Another meme shows a picture of several Minions and the superimposed caption "Grandma is in the hospital again. Don't text." For many Millennials and Zoomers, who were actually the target audience of the films, the popularity of the Minions with their parents' generation made them pretty



Fig. 122: The infinite faces of Shrek.

⁴⁸⁹ Rose 2022.



Fig. 123: Minions cheering the divorce: This meme also needs to be understood ironically.

boomers caused the creation of the Minions anti-fandom. On June 3, the subreddit r/MinionHate was founded with the info: "Minions are a marketing ploy introduced in 2010. They are now the Facebook mascots of seventh graders, way2random girls, grandmothers, Donald Trump and obnoxious people."⁴⁹⁰ Mostly corrupt Minion memes are posted here, the joke of which comes from the combinations of their transgressive content and extremely naive wording. In another way, generational hatred towards Minions is expressed in a video called *I HATE MINIONS SO MUCH* by YouTuber Pupinia Steward on the *Our Third Life* channel.⁴⁹¹ It shows Pupinia having a nervous breakdown triggered by her hatred of Minions. In places, the video is reminiscent of the highly emotional satirical performance of *Leave Britney Alone*, but soon, even in the ironic fandom, it was no longer clear whether Minions were really hated or ironically celebrated. When the last film of the series was released on July 1, 2022, YouTube and TikTok users joked in advance about the epic premiere and the fact that they would appear in the cinema wearing suits and ties.⁴⁹² The reason for this was the widespread circulation of the snowclone 'tickets to minions, please', which was usually combined with a picture of the yuppie cast of *American Psycho*. The snowclone had already been used for the 2019 psychological thriller *Joker* and also exists in variations with other heroes of the manosphere such as the cast of the series *Breaking Bad* or *GigaChad*. This led to the trend of so-called *Gentleminions*, groups of young men who watched the Minions film dressed as if going to a black tie event. Since many of the cinema-goers were simultaneously throwing popcorn around, shouting, and disturbing other visitors, it came to a highly specific ban on young men in suits attending the film, at least in Germany.⁴⁹³

uncomfortable. On top of that, the constant posting of Minions was mixed with a general ignorance of social media and netiquette, which also gave the forbidden liaison between adults and banana-crazy dwarfs comic overtones. The captions of the memes sounded more like calendar mottos than dank memes and function according to Freud's model of harmless-abstract jokes. In 2015, the excessive commercialization of the Minions and their appropriation by the baby

⁴⁹⁰ See r/MinionHate, Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/MinionHate/>.

⁴⁹¹ Our Third Life 2015.

⁴⁹² Meme Zee 2022.

⁴⁹³ Lorenzen 2022.

Another important influence are *Montage Parodies*, also called *MLG Parodies*, or videos satirizing the Major League of Gaming YouTube channel. MLG is an eSports organization that hosts all kinds of tournaments, for example, of the *Call of Duty* series or *Super Smash Bros*. Many of the videos on their channel are montages that cut the sometimes hour-long fights into exaggerated, lurid shorter versions. Characteristic features are loud electronic background music and the use of sound effects. In the montage parodies, this is combined with the tradition of YouTube Poop videos as well as everything that belongs to the cliché of the hyperactive, aggressive gamer with attention deficit performed since the Angry German Kid: Doritos, a brand of tortilla chips, Mountain Dew, a neon green caffeinated soft drink, crosshairs, explosions, air horns, and all symbols associated with *Thug Life* videos⁴⁹⁴ such as pixelated sunglasses, cannabis leaves, joints, the number 420, a short take from the black-and-white-video *Drop It Like It's Hot* showing Snoop Dogg dancing, among others. In some of the parodies, meme avalanches occur, i.e. a large number of memes that flood the screen at once. The style is characterized by extremely fast cuts and an even louder sound that regularly blasts the speakers similar to the techniques of ear-rape in YTP videos. The background music is usually dubstep or drum'n'bass. In principle, a lot of things happens at the same time in these videos, everything is colorful, and sometimes deep-fried filters are edited in post production. The Montage Parodies are therefore to be understood as examples of a flash delirium, which brings together a large number of disjointed agents and is a veritable feast of audiovisual randomness. The references are mostly in-jokes from the gaming community, such as in *Attack of the No-Scopers! [1984]* from the *Ancient Reality* channel.⁴⁹⁵ No-scopers are players who aim a sniper rifle at others without entering scope mode. This usually misses, but when you hit, it's particularly epic. In addition, video clips from old interviews, teleshopping commercials, and aerobics videos are added as well as whatever the history of consumerism as caught on camera has to offer: This results in a full sensory overload where you simultaneously notice how your brain fails to process the impressions. This is exactly why the parodies are so popular among gamers: Professional online players in particular are used to all members of their team shouting into the microphone at the same time and a thousand things happening on screen simultaneously. Moreover, montage parodies are extremely disconcerting and irritating, especially when you first watch them, perhaps prompting you to practice half an hour of meditation afterwards.

The subreddit r/dankmemes was founded as early as January 3, 2014. Despite their sometimes off-putting first impression, the fact that dank memes were circulated on the very

⁴⁹⁴ Thug Life videos were a short-lived trend on YouTube remixing 'badass' videos with rap songs by Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. The first one is called *nerf gun review* and shows a young boy showing off his new toy gun stating "I don't know what it's called... maybe it's called fuck you". Instantly, the image freezes and the song *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang* by Dr. Dre starts playing. lolonym 2014.

⁴⁹⁵ AncientReality 2014.

same platforms as memes before naturally brought them into the mainstream just as quickly as the Advice Animals and Rage Comics before them. In fact, 4chan stepped back as a meme factory and most dank memes seem to come from Reddit or Twitter. But from there, they migrated onto all other platforms, especially Instagram. This very often happened without referencing the creator or the subreddit where the meme was found. Naturally, this upset the r/dankmemes community, who did not want to take pride in their art anonymously. This led to a real battle between Reddit and Instagram with some absurd developments: At one point, r/dankmemes decided to watermark their memes to draw attention to Reddit as their place of origin. They decided to use an orange circle with the Reddit logo and the caption "This is not my creation/I stole it". [124] Instagram reposters, however, simply deleted the watermark or overwrote it. So at some point, r/dankmemes started to distort their original creations. The reason for this is that Instagram only allows photos with a size ratio between 1.91:1 and 4:5; if a picture has a different ratio, it is automatically cropped. Insofar, the Redditors' ulterior motive was that the elongated memes would not be displayable on Instagram. However, the format itself quickly got on their own nerves, which in turn led them back to the failed idea with the watermarks—with the difference of simply recreating entire memes from them. [125] In the long run, however, that wasn't a solution, either. Officially, the platform war came to an end when original content memes stolen from Instagram appeared on r/dankmemes. At the same time, it makes apparent that a meme's origin is not necessarily important to find it funny and shows that memes cannot be owned (except in form of NFTs).

Related to dank memes are deep fried memes: While this rather denotes a certain technique of creating memes respectively an aesthetic, over time, deep fried memes also preserved its own canon. A deep fried meme is characterized by its fuzzy image quality which is meant to look like it had been shared thousands of times, thus experiencing lossy compression. The deep fried style is achieved through heavily saturating the colors, increasing contrast, and adding excessive grain filters to the image, resulting in a heavily distorted appearance. The term 'deep fried' refers to the culinary technique which results in food with an overly crispy and greasy texture. In a similar way, deep fried memes exaggerate and distort the original image to the point of visual absurdity. This needs to be understood as a direct response to the era of



Fig. 124: I Stole It Watermark.



Fig. 125: Drakeposting meme made from Reddit watermarks.

perfect imagery on Instagram—deep frying memes thus presented “a way of disrupting the algorithmically-optimized chain of glossy advertorials that clog up our feeds.”⁴⁹⁶ In another way, hard light filters using high contrast were also very popular on Black Twitter, as apparent in a tweet by @Hoodville_ reposting an image of basketball player Kawhi Leonard meeting Barack Obama with the caption “Years later and I still can’t believe Kawhi put the hood deep fried filter on a pic with the president”,⁴⁹⁷ as well as in hip hop culture in general.⁴⁹⁸ Moreover, the word ‘deep fried’ also refers to being stoned akin to the word ‘baked’.

Similar to the widespread use of reaction GIFs, many of the memes came from or were influenced by Black Twitter. The practice of extensively using images from Black culture as reaction GIFs or the usage of Black emojis by white people has been identified by Lauren Michele Jackson as ‘digital blackfacing’. This refers to the countless images of Oprah, Maria Carey, or NBA players that have traditionally been used in Black communities before being appropriated by white people who, just like in traditional blackface, slip into a role of Blackness without any ties to Black experiences, thus cosplaying Black people on the Internet. Related to this phenomenon is also the appropriation of African American Vernacular English by non-Black people, for example, white singers putting on a ‘blaccent’. Moreover, since many of these reaction images show extreme forms of emotions, they further perpetuate negative stereotypes for Black people similar to exploitative cinema:

For while reaction GIFs can and do every feeling under the sun, white and nonblack users seem to especially prefer GIFs with black people when it comes to emitting their most exaggerated emotions. Extreme joy, annoyance, anger and occasions for drama and gossip are a magnet for images of black people, especially black femmes.⁴⁹⁹

Stereotypical depictions of Black women can create further harm through extensive circulation of memes capitalizing on them. This is even more apparent when used in the format of GIFs: Invoking Monica Torres’ analysis of GIFs as ever-looping, never-changing confinements putting their subjects on display for audiences, Jackson demonstrates the continuous racial history of depictions of Black people especially in front of a white audience. While the author does not call for a total abolition of the usage of Black GIFs by non-Black people, she reminds us that “no digital behavior exists in a deracialized vacuum.”⁵⁰⁰ In this regard, I decided to cover memes using images of Black people, but focus on positive iterations over clichés.

⁴⁹⁶ Yalcinkaya 2022.

⁴⁹⁷ See @Hoodville_, Twitter: https://twitter.com/Hoodville_/status/1266241775175270400.

⁴⁹⁸ Hard light filters were quite popular at the turn of the millennium and were extensively used in hip hop music videos while glitch and grain effects were added in the cloud rap scene of the mid-to-late 2010s, for example, in A\$AP Mob & Juicy J’s music video to Yamborghini High. See A\$AP Mob 2016.

⁴⁹⁹ Jackson 2017.

⁵⁰⁰ Jackson 2017.

The earliest deep fried memes were image macros using the snowclone 'real [n---] hours'. According to Urban Dictionary, these hours occur between 2.30am and 5am, when everyone else is asleep and only the coolest people respectively those most addicted to posting are online. In another vein, the subjects denoted in the snowclone refer to someone who behaves honorably, loyally, and honestly, so their time of the day is meant to be the best time of the day. An image macro referencing this is called *Understandable, Have a Nice Day* and usually consists of three panels showing a scene at a drive-through restaurant. In the first panel we see the guest asking for something, in the second the employee's answer that the thing asked for is not available, and the last panel usually shows the guest in the car making a hand sign and uttering "Understandable, have a nice day". [126] The meme circulated at the same time as the snowclone 'ice cream machine is broken', which parodied the McDonald's chain's often inoperable soft ice machines. The first image macro of this kind was created by Twitter user @liltusk on 26 February 2017 and shows basketball player Shaqille O'Neal at the drive-thru. *Understandable, Have a Nice Day* is also remarkable because it refers to a polite conversation in an everyday situation where the consumers' needs are not met. Sadly, that makes the meme subversive: In a situation where a Karen⁵⁰¹ would demand to speak to the manager, the bigger person simply accepts the conditions and moves on. Another Black Twitter icon of deep fried memes is the B emoji which shows the capital letter B in white on a red background and was



Fig. 126: *Understandable, Have a Great Day* pushes decipherable image quality to the limits.

apparently used by followers of the gang Bloods, but can also refer to B as an abbreviation of bro or brother. Usually, other letters are replaced by the emoji, especially in terms of censorship, or it is simply arbitrarily applied to the picture background. Moreover, many B emoji memes make use of the cartoon SpongeBob Squarepants: For example, in a meme combining B emoji censoring, neologisms like 'whomst', and 'poor' image quality characters with laser eyes. [127] 'Whomst' has been used ironically as a progression to 'whom' in order to emulate highly educated language. A tweet by now-deleted account

⁵⁰¹ Karen is slang for a white privileged woman regularly demonstrating her apparent entitlement over others and demanding special treatment. She is associated with the catchphrase 'let me speak to the manager' at the tiniest inconvenience, thus belittling service industry workers, and is also often perceived as racist and transphobic. Karen is also the epitome of middle-aged white feminism for many intersectional feminists.

@unkawaiipigdog from February 19, 2017 channels the heavy influence of AAVE on Internet slang with the caption "2007: 'language is simplifying at an alarming rate'/2017: 'y'all'd've whomstdsoever wants B o B a B ola'". Soon, the red B emoji was replaced by the blue P emoji, before getting banned by the moderators due to its inflationary use or 'spamming' on r/dankmemes. But that's no big deal, because another obsession with a letter was already in the making, this time, the letter E.

"E" is the caption for a Photoshop meme in which YouTuber markiplier is faceshopped on the cartoon villain Lord Farquaard from *Shrek*. The original image came from @cyndago, who posted it on Twitter on May 25, 2015.⁵⁰² There seems to be no distinct reference to the image, but Lord Farquaard is a popular character from the *Shrek* universe and markiplier looks remotely similar to him because of his hairstyle. It then ended up as a colorful deep fried meme with the caption "E" on the Tumblr blog photo-frier on February 15, 2018. [128] Following Mark Zuckerberg's aforementioned US Congressional hearing in April 2018, mutations with markiplier-Lord Farquaard's visage then appeared on Zuckerberg's body. These were especially popular among journalists writing on the absurdity of contemporary memes. The caption "E" needs to be understood as a floating signifier that means nothing and can mean anything.

The last subset of ironic memes are known as surreal memes and emerged in the mid-2010s. They are characterized by their absurd, nonsensical, and often bizarre nature, featuring unconventional and illogical imagery and text. They are meant to evoke a sense of confusion, disorientation, and sometimes even uneasiness in the viewer, challenging traditional

ways of seeing and expectations. [129] Surreal memes often incorporate elements of absurd humor, non-sequiturs, wordplay, missing punchlines, and unexpected juxtapositions. Their influences can be anything although an iconography of recurring symbols has been established. Similar to deep fried memes is the distinct visual style, which almost exclusively shows 3D characters and employs distorted or manipulated images, glitch effects, and vibrant colours. Although the name was taken from the avant-garde movement of Surrealism, this



Fig. 128: E.



Fig. 127: Classic deep fried meme featuring SpongeBob Squarepants characters.

⁵⁰² See @cyndago, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/cyndago/status/602783297001824256>.

designation is somewhat misleading: In the 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*, co-founder André Breton uses the word to describe a world in which dream and reality coincide: “Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l’on peut ainsi dire.”⁵⁰³ In concrete terms, this translated to a view strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, which localized artistic talent in the unconscious parts of the psyche, thus making it accessible only via dreams, hallucinations or drugs. This was in stark contrast to many modernist utopias such as constructivism or futurism, which demanded a much more rational mind and clear visibility. What surrealism has in common with other currents, however, is its anarchistic, anti-bourgeois basic attitude, which was perceived as provocative and revolutionary. In terms of content, this also fits the subset of memes that are now emerging: By means of collage and montage techniques, entanglements of the most diverse creatures, an artistic ignorance of representationism, twisting of perspectives and absurd captions, memes resort to surreal stylistic devices. Just like the avant-garde movement, this is meant to challenge and unsettle

viewers in their very habits of seeing. Frequently, critiques of capitalism and commodity fetish are uttered in surreal memes. But before surreal memes, there was simply *Meme Man*: He appears in the form of a badly 3D-modeled human head and originally came from the depths of 4chan. On November 3, 2015, he reappeared on Tumblr in a distorted perspective, similar to the technique of collages: Two dashed lines lead away from his eyes labelled as ‘lines of sight’ under the caption “when you hear a frickin meme rippling in the breeze just outuside your field of but it doesn't sound interesting enough to move your entire head so you just swivel you're facial features around”. [130] The meme picks up on the age-old

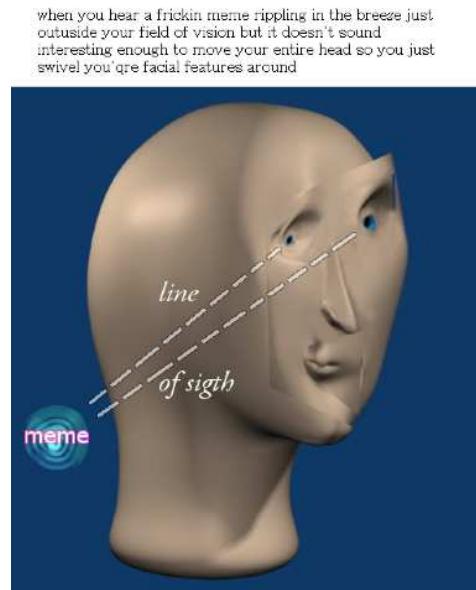


Fig. 130: Meme Man and his field of vision.

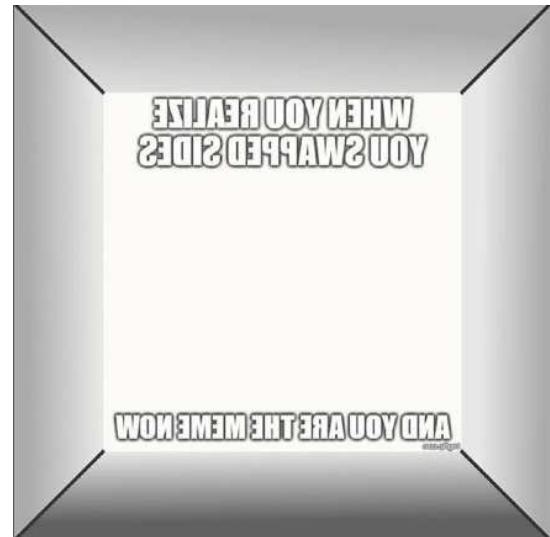


Fig. 129: Becoming-meme starts with a shift in perspective.

⁵⁰³ “I believe in the future resolution of these two seemingly contradictory states, dream and reality, into a kind of absolute reality, a surrealism, if you will.” Translation by the author. Breton 1966, 6.

theme of intentional misspelling, describing memes as if they were flying around freely like birds. This was also carried further in the particularly popular meme *Stonks*, which features Meme Man's head on a stock photo of a man in a suit against a blue background of equity price diagrams. [160] Next to him is an orange arrow pointing upwards and the word "stonks", a variation of the word stocks. *Stonks* became the model for a large number of memes that combine professional clichés with intentional misspelling: For example, the variation *Helth* shows a doctor in a white coat and *Historee* a researcher wearing a tweed suit next to a Kilroy meme. [131] Another highlight of the ironic Meme Man memes is the mannerism of complicating and circumstantially describing everyday language. For example, on April 2, 2019, user necro-dog posted an image macro on r/dankmemes featuring Meme Man and a plastic bottle with the caption "ah, yes./enslaved moisture." [132] Numerous variations of this simple image macro then circulated on social media, for example, the deep fried variant with a microwave and the caption "ah, yes./enslaved electromagnetic radiation". In summary, the humor is explicitly strange and disconcerting in order to confuse and estrange viewers as well as exclude as many normies as possible from the further use of these memes.

The character *Mr. Orange* also appears again and again in surreal memes. This is an anthropomorphized orange with the fruit as its head and body as well as two hands and legs attached to it. On July 4, 2015, he appears in the video *Memequest* by Cyranek on YouTube, in

which he marches through various memescapes.⁵⁰⁴ Sometimes he also appears together with Meme Man, for example, in a two-panel meme (note the graphic border in the form of a lightning bolt): [133] In the upper left half, Mr. Orange floats in space next to the caption "rethink your actions, meme man", to his right we see an evil looking Meme Man and the caption "mind if i clicc?" as well as the Photoshop command from a drop-down menu "Rasterize Layer" with a mouse cursor on it. In the lower half, the arrangement of the protagonists changes: Meme Man is at the bottom left with the



Fig. 132: In surreal speak, bottled water becomes enslaved moisture.

When you find out about pre-internet memes from 80 years ago

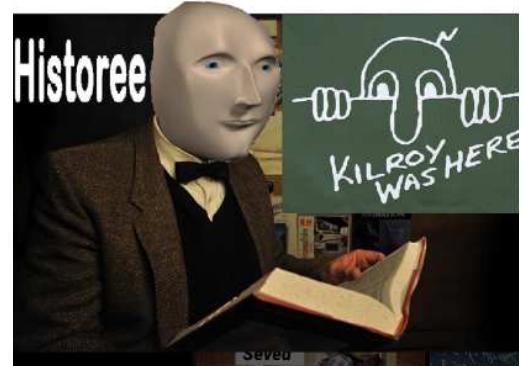


Fig. 131: Meme Man, a true meme historian.

⁵⁰⁴ Cyranek 2015.



Fig. 133: The battle between Meme Man and Mr. Orange plays with various references in meme history.



Fig. 134: An innocent guy searching for transparent images is brutally attacked by a fake transparent PNG.

caption "haha yes" and Mr. Orange, suddenly applied to a white-and-grey checkered background, asks "where has my transparency™ gone?", located under the caption "you have been rasterized". I would like to emphasize here that the meme, no matter how absurd it may look, follows a clear narrative: We can interpret it as Meme Man turning the free-floating Mr. Orange into a fake PNG at the click of a mouse. These particularly annoying images use the suffix .png and thus suggest a transparent background, but since they are automatically displayed on Google Image Search with a white-grey raster background, you cannot know if they are actually transparent until you download them. Very loosely, the meme may also reference another classic WikiHow image macro called *Fake PNGs* that uses see a cartoon strip taken from WikiHow, a website offering tips and life hacks. The image shows a man about to attack another one with a knife. Object labelling turns the victim into "me googling transparent images" and the attacker into "fake png". [134] Finally, the last peculiarity of You Have Been Rasterized runs through many dank memes, but especially through surreal memes and denotes the replacement of the spelling 'ck' with 'cc': Thus, 'click' becomes 'clicc' and 'thick' becomes 'thicc'. According to Urban Dictionary, this could come from the gang Crips as a workaround of posting words ending in '-ck' because that can also be understood as an acronym for 'Crip killer'.

As I have shown in this chapter, new mutations of irony—the universal language of memes—also produce new sets of memes. Perhaps the connections to some Western traditions of philosophy is the most apparent in dank memes, nevertheless, these were at no point a niche phenomenon but were fed into the mainstream rather quickly. From there, ironic memes created larger in-groups respectively out-groups on the basis of simple preference. While I am not arguing that dank memes are as easy-to-grasp as memes of the classic era—they at least need some knowledge of earlier memes to make sense—their logic has become more comprehensible over time. Over the last years, the rhetoric of irony has become inherent to memeing, thus giving way to new barriers of understanding to seclude communities.

6.3. The Tragedy of the Meme Page Admin

Speaking of Left Instagram is even obscure loose than of Leftbook, which is why I focus on outlining a specific bubble in the following that engages primarily with queer-feminist memes. However, the spectrum of niche memes is extremely broad: from anarcho-communist shitpost pages to indigenous pages calling for the decolonization of ancestral lands. [135] Memes have long been a fixture on Instagram as an image-centric medium, even if in the early days of the platform it was all about selling the perfect lifestyle (not for nothing did #selfies have their absolute heyday here). The app works similarly to Tumblr and Twitter via hashtags and a system of followers. Special features are definitely the built-in image editor, used to embellish photos with pretty filters, but also to distort and overwrite images, which plays a central role in regard to memes. In 2016, Meta added the Stories feature, which was stolen one-to-one from instant

messaging app Snapchat and allowed users to post photos in their own feed, separate from their personal, often painstakingly curated profile, which are automatically deleted after 24 hours.⁵⁰⁵ In general, Instagram has also been used by celebrities from the beginning and has contributed significantly to the popularity of people like Kylie Jenner, the youngest member of the Kardashian clan.⁵⁰⁶ Therefore, it is not possible to draw an ontological line between meme or content creators and the practice of influencing, as in branding a person based on their interests or content. Initially (and still today) often ridiculed, the influencer has become an integral part of social media. She can be a friend and a walking advertisement at the same time, she advises you on problems of any kind while ensuring that you are always entertained. The spectrum of influencing is broad: From people advertising half-legal multi-level-marketing schemes to others occasionally promoting sponsored partnerships or asking followers to directly deposit cash if they are fans of the content, it is insufficient to speak of ‘the’ influencer. These peculiarities of parasocial interactions between influencers and followers often seem to confuse cultural pessimists: Influencers are constantly accused of selling themselves and turning themselves into a caricature who would even sell their own mother for a few more clicks. While there are certainly influencers driving their brand persona too far, I am regularly baffled by the underlying calls for ‘free content’ of such positions, as if only because something is online, it should be a public good—a ridiculous call especially regarding the development of the commercial Internet. Regarding the popularity of influencers among girls and young women, as well as many influencers stemming from that demographic group, many critiques of their doing are also laced with misogyny. How come there are tons of adult men hammering young women advertising make-up products but little to no negative criticism of gamers product-placing games, expensive PCs, and computer gear in let’s play-videos? Moreover, cultural-pessimistic criticisms of influencing as capitalism-friendly ultimately fail to understand how womanhood is always constructed within the capitalist system that immensely depends on the unpaid labour of women. Frankly, as a woman on the Internet, I am tired of seeing privileged men use their power to belittle women instead of doing

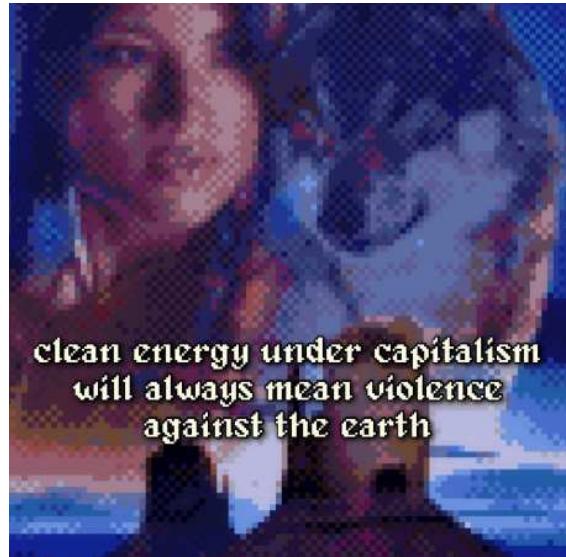


Fig. 135: @decolonial.meme.queens, Clean Energy Under Capitalism Will Always Mean Violence Against the Earth.

⁵⁰⁵ After Instagram’s copying of stories, these have been implemented on almost every social network including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and so on.

⁵⁰⁶ Currently, Kylie Jenner is also among the celebrities with most followers on the app, only surpassed by football players Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi as well as singer Selena Gomez.

something actually politically subversive. Reactionary critiques of influencing like from Ole Nymoen and Wolfgang M. Schmitt in their book *Influencer* not only fail to actually criticize the practice from a feminist perspective despite claiming to do so, for example, regarding shady business models and attempts at scamming as in the nebulous case of Caroline Calloway,⁵⁰⁷ but also remain unsituated, as Schmitt does not identify as an influencer despite accumulating over 100,000 followers on his YouTube channel where he performs mind-numbing film-bro reviews.⁵⁰⁸ I think the authors would have done well to come down from their ivory tower and take a look at the tactics of platforms, algorithms, and community guidelines as the main culprits behind the practice itself. Moreover, such essays do not contribute anything to media competency either and simply treat their readers as brainwashed idiots unable to differentiate between ad and content on their own and needing to be mansplained into this insight. I believe that the authors were not even able to grasp that a make-up tutorial is more than just product placements simply because they do not seem to believe that doing make-up can be a hobby. Yes, influencing is a marketing practice and there are examples of people going way too far, but that does not condemn the whole community considering it also helped a lot of people to freelance and establish their own businesses—which seems to be great when it is done by men in a crypto-business startup but is dubbed as ‘ridiculous’ and ‘socially unaware’ when it is done by women promoting sex toys. In this regard, *Influencer* can be compared to unsituated treatises on ‘femininity’ and the construction of girlhood under Capitalism such as Tiqqun’s *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, which claims to construct the young girl as an identity across all genders but ultimately presents itself as a reactionary critique of popular culture and social media that is substantially meager and dripping wet with misogyny.⁵⁰⁹ Finally, people demanding that the work of digital creators has to be free-to-use and free of ads are disrespecting their labour similar to people claiming that artists should exhibit their work for free or writers may publish pieces free of charge. I think that the work deserves a little more respect: After all, the influencer is just a virtual Tupperware party organizer. The fact that girls and young women in particular feel heard from the parasocial relationship with an influencer is sometimes referred to as ‘the big sister effect’ and thus also fills a deficiency that will probably worsen due to increasing loneliness and compartmentalization on the Internet.⁵¹⁰ Malicious gossip has it that influencing might still be better than plotting the Beta Uprising on 4chan. Even if the influencer

⁵⁰⁷ Caroline Calloway is an influencer who hit the headlines after various occurrences of scamming that surprisingly made her even more popular among followers. See Foggatt 2023.

⁵⁰⁸ Instead, he labels himself a ‘web-video producer’. See Filmanalyse, YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCN29LJGZ8FY30ysxdTnDsaw>.

⁵⁰⁹ See Tiqqun 2012. A much more interesting negotiation of girlhood and information technology can be found in the 1998 anime show *Serial Experiments Lain*. The construction of womanhood in social media and celebrity culture is uniquely demonstrated in Mika Ninagawa’s 2012 film *Helter Skelter*.

⁵¹⁰ See Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity et al. 2020.

primarily has monetary interests, she is only doing her job, which is often directly supported by fans, e.g. on platforms such as Patreon or de-institutionalized by direct deposits to Venmo and PayPal. Since the pay checks of most influencers are opaque, we do not know exactly who is spending how much money—and how much of it is being paid out and how much sponsored products or trips account for. Finally, anyone who thinks being an influencer isn't a 'real' job is free to try and invent their own a persona, build a community, research content, capture videos and images, post-process them as well as do the housekeeping of a large channel on YouTube or Instagram.

In these working conditions, how did leftist meme accounts end up on Instagram? In an interview with Vice, Addy Borneman aka @gayvapeshark who has already been active on Leftbook admits that this apparent misfit makes it interesting: "Instagram honestly is not a good place for activism which is why it's the most fun place to post politically charged shit."⁵¹¹ Additionally, its user base of 1.3 billion active users speaks for itself. Instagram is considered an extremely superficial platform that contributes significantly to the poor mental health of the youth due to the endless mass of normative beauty standards, the propagation of commodities, and cosmetic surgeries. While these procedures are not the issue, the perpetual loop of self-optimization the app keeps especially young people in is due to the dangers of internalization of beauty standards. There is a lack of critical and media-competent engagement with such content, but as a platform largely funded by advertising and the concomitant selling of user data, this is not at all in the interest of its parent company Meta. The digitization of everyday life and the commercialization of the Internet have not only driven the pace of news to dizzying heights and opened the floodgates to 'alternative' or 'fake news', but have also permanently changed the way we deal with information. Yet, the slow death of print media over the last decades ironically also contributed to the usage of Instagram as a news app, where most daily papers share their headlines in a guise of infotainment slide shows (see chapter 5.1.). The triumph of infotainment takes place in the epistemological framework of post-truth or the general sentiment of people seeming to accept news catering to their emotions over fact-based information. The multiplicity of discourses subsumed under the notion of post-truth is heterogenous and steadily evolving and needs to also be seen in a general re-evaluation of the term 'truth' accompanying Internet discourse. Therefore, it is an important part of media theory to constantly demand more education concerning media competency and to strengthen critical thinking skills. This does not make you invincible against acts of trolling and fake news, but it makes it a lot easier to differentiate between content and pure ideology.

Funnily enough, we have arrived at one of the dilemmas that led to the emergence of Left Instagram: The ever-ongoing frustration among many people that left theory is too heady and academic and ultimately restrains people from engaging with these issues. This is reasoned

⁵¹¹ Barrett-Ibarria 2018.

by memer @gangsterpopeye: "I think people turn to memes because they are tired and frustrated of media outlets that pose as radical and progressive while having Rupert Murdoch sit on their boards."⁵¹² What we are observing on Left Instagram is a bottom-up merging of humor with serious information. This is taken as a premise: You can simultaneously laugh at or feel connected to a piece of content AND still learn something from it. I don't think this link was given the importance it deserved early on, and that, among other things, this led to why so many people despaired over Trump's election victory through memes. But, as we have seen throughout this thesis, one of the most consequential biases against memes you can have is to dismiss them as funny pictures, because that completely undermines their subversive potential.

So, Left Instagram evolved from Leftbook, partly with exactly the same creators and even memes. For example, we've already met @gayvapeshark [136] and @coryintheabyss as well as @gangsterpopeye. On Instagram, a form of nichification takes places, a general phenomenon in post-2016 memes. One of the biggest left-leaning bubbles I want to introduce are sad girl memes, a very loose term for a couple of users creating queer-feminist leftist memes. Basically, these are young women fed up with the double standard of the patriarchy that are using the digital possibilities of coming-together. An early example of feminist activism on Instagram is #freethenipple, a campaign against the censorship of female-only nipples. This led to protests from many women, who complained why the use of illegal drugs would not be banned on Instagram, but secondary sexual characteristics would. Even more annoying is the fact that topless photos of men are tolerated. This makes it clear that Instagram's community guidelines are sexist themselves, but also specifically reflect the prudish US-American worldview, in which even skinny-dipping seems to be frowned upon. Instagram's community guidelines forbid all kinds of nudity with exceptions of the following:

It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos in the context of breastfeeding, birth giving and after-birth moments, health-related situations (for example, post-mastectomy, breast cancer awareness or gender confirmation surgery) or an act of protest are allowed.⁵¹³

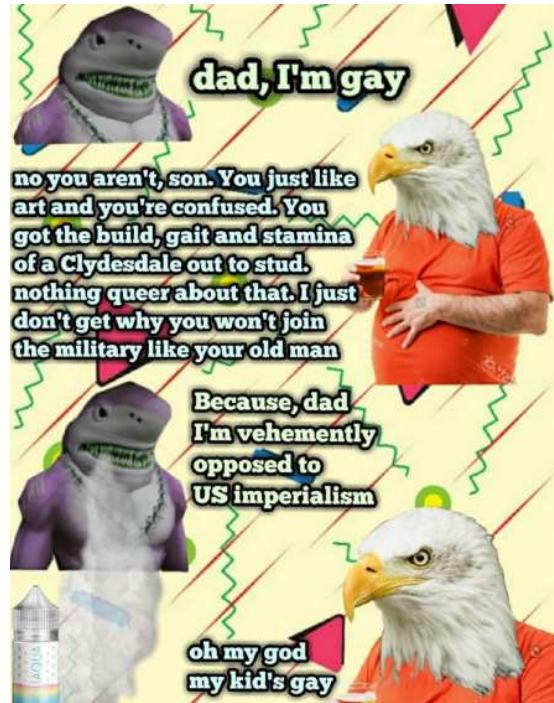


Fig. 136: Gay Vape Shark coming out to his Bald Eagle Father.

⁵¹² Barrett-Ibarria 2018.

⁵¹³ See Community Guidelines, Instagram, <https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119>.

Here it is described in black and white that female nipples are always sexualized and therefore forbidden to show except in some specific contexts, namely once a woman takes on the role of a mother or for medical reasons. It is a bombshell example of how female-read bodies are policed over and over again, and that doesn't even include the specific intersections BIPOC women, trans women, or disabled women go through. On Instagram, nudity only exists in contexts clearly defined by heteronormative standards, even though I as a female Instagram user am regularly treated to unsolicited dick pics in my private messages. These and similar phenomena are reasons for the proliferation of feminist memes on Instagram whose creators I will now introduce.

Dré aka @gothshakira creates intersectional feminist memes that negotiate between her feminism and her Latinx heritage with an emphasis on the decolonization of memes. She does so by choosing Latina superstars like Selena Gomez, Shakira or Jennifer Lopez as the faces of her memes. @gothshakira memes toxic relationships with fuckboys, astrology, mental health issues, and the feminist re-appropriation of slurs like 'slut'. When asked who her feminist role model is, she responded with rapper Cardi B., stating that "Oh I would say that she is 100% a feminist. She is a sex worker who is open about sex work, open about her own sex work, and open about the rights that she deserves while being a sex worker."⁵¹⁴ @gothshakira heavily influenced the current wave of intersectional feminism that is much more inclusive toward multiply discriminated groups such as sex workers, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as well as queer and trans folks. Here, memes have the purpose not only to connect what belongs together, but also to represent the diversity of identities and their plural understanding of the world. In this sense, leftist feminist memes are definitely identity-political, but in a rather unpretentious way. I, for example, I came across memes on the debate around legalization versus decriminalization of sex work in 2017, not knowing much about the topic, but using informative and funny memes as a starting point to educate myself further. Accounts like @strippermemes and @exoticcancer have further contributed to the understanding that sex work is real work. This is largely due to the media-specific accessibility of the meme as stated by @gothshakira:

What I love about the medium of the meme is that it's very unpretentious. The memes I make are 'supposed' to be poorly done and are intentionally atrocious from a graphic-design perspective. I make them quickly so the spacing is off and the font sizes are different and the image is stretched out but that's the point. I'm not going to agonize over this because it's just a fucking meme. It's very liberating to operate as an Internet artist, I suppose, if you wanna use that term, in a medium that's very informal.⁵¹⁵

In contrast to journalistic reporting, memes are allowed to be sloppy, even if we know that many journalists also tend to work sloppily. As unofficial channels, however, memes can be forgiven.

⁵¹⁴ Cochrane 2016.

⁵¹⁵ Gerges 2016.

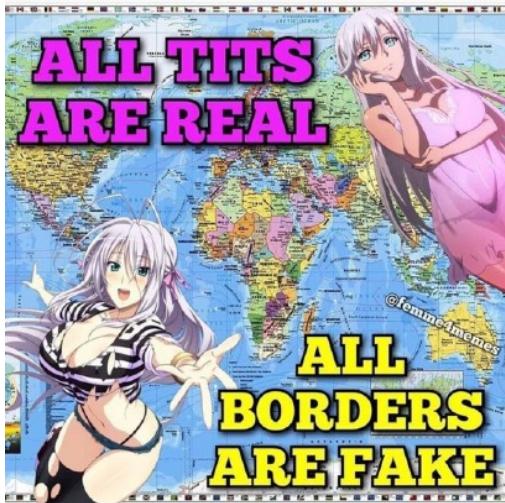


Fig. 137: All Tits are Real, All Border are Fake.



Fig. 138: Imagine if we asked cis people the same stupid questions trans people are subjected to.

But this also changes the role of authorship: @gothshakira describes how she found the caption of one of her memes as snowclone on Tumblr. At first, in her role as a creator, she was upset, but through a reflection of the technique of remixes in music she was able to see that it was not directly plagiarism. Memes act fundamentally inspirational as shown by the memetic techniques of snowclones and exploitables. A completely different problem for meme creators of Instagram are the large meme accounts with large reach among their millions of followers. Pages like @pubity, @memezar or @ladbible tend to scout platforms for the freshest memes and repost them without credits, thus affirming a line of tradition tracing back to 9GAG, Cheezburger, and eBaum's World. Not only does this make their own content stale, old, and unoriginal, it takes away the work of smaller creators and, in the worst cases, completely alienates them from it.

The account @femme4memes by Nia, which has unfortunately been inactive and on private since her passing, dealt mainly with social conceptions of being a woman and are directly influenced by her transition. She mixed this with well-known leftist slogans and thus contributed to the imagery of Left Instagram: [137] "All tits are real, all borders are fake" alludes, on the one hand, to the obsession with breast augmentation surgeries as well as the downright sport of some to always state whether said breasts are 'good' and which are 'bad'. On the other hand, it takes the leftist slogan 'all borders are fake' which alludes to the failure of decolonization and the associated neo-colonialism of entire continents as well as to the land-grabbing experienced by indigenous peoples. This is contrasted by oversexualized female anime characters, whose entire existence is no less real than that of many national borders. Another example pulls the wool over the eyes of many cis people's exaggerated reactions to trans people, "OMG YOU'RE CIS?! Which bathroom do you use?" is written in colourful letters next to the stock photo of a white blonde woman who has to hold her face in excitement. [138] Clichés that every trans person has to listen to every day, even from so-called allies who might mean well but sometimes do not show any more empathy than those who publicly reject trans people. The account of @femme4memes not only allowed Nia to share her thoughts and

Embodying strategic essentialism and realizing that "feminine" things like the colour pink do not signify weakness but can exemplify power, strength, and a history of resilience



Fig. 139: With a twinkle in her eye (or not?), Paris Hilton is made an icon of girl-centric strategic essentialism.

Tfw guys fetishize ur "intelligence" and now you can't tell them how ur gonna go binge watch some Kardashian drama cause now u 4sure kno they haven't read Raymond Williams' Culture is Ordinary



Fig. 140: The baffling incomprehensibility of liking theory and pop culture at the same time.

feelings as a trans woman, but also shows up the many clichés that allies can still learn from, far away from the moral overtones of other leftist communities.

The theory-heavy memes of Kristen Cochrane aka @ripannanicolesmith function in a similar vein. One quickly notices the creator's background in cultural studies when her memes cite Lacanian psychoanalysis or postcolonial philosophy. The images are mostly pop cultural phenomena that can be assigned to the so-called bimbo spectrum, which has been growing continuously for years.⁵¹⁶ The Bimbo movement, which is especially popular on TikTok these days, is concerned with appropriations of misogynist terms and discourses around women such as slut shaming, internalized misogyny, and the stereotypes of the dumb blonde woman, which are called bimbos in English.⁵¹⁷ The bimbo high priestess is embodied by Paris Hilton, even though bimbos have become increasingly queer in recent years thanks to singers like Kim Petras, Slayyyter, and Ayesha Erotica as well as influencers like Chrissy Chlapecka. The memes by @ripannanicolesmith, however, are primarily about an intellectual examination of feminism and gender theory. For example, above a photo of Paris Hilton in a pink sports car, it is written: "Embodying strategic essentialism and realizing that 'feminine' things like the color pink do not signify weakness but can exemplify power, strength, and a history of resilience." [139] Strategic essentialism refers to a theory by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, according to which marginalized people actively essentialize themselves in order to gather a more widespread audience.⁵¹⁸ The meme tells us that as women, we no longer have to avoid things that are stereotyped as 'girly' in order to be taken seriously and to resist the dominant social narrative that everything

⁵¹⁶ See Sciortino 2015.

⁵¹⁷ Possibly, 'bimbo' derives from a contraction of the Italian word 'bambino' meaning child.

⁵¹⁸ See Spivak 1994.

associated with women, such as the color pink or make-up, is automatically bad. Another meme shows actress Jessica Alba in a pink sweatshirt covering her ears in disgust. The caption "Tfw [The feeling when] guys fetishize ur intelligence and now you can't tell them how ur gonna go binge watch some Kardashian drama cause now u 4 sure kno they haven't read Raymond Williams' *Culture is Ordinary*" alludes to the dichotomy high versus low culture. [140] More specifically, it's about the lack of understanding, often embodied by people in academia or the middle-class more generally, of an examination of popular culture, which is identified as the culture industry of late capitalism. It is even worse when said pop culture is aimed squarely at women, like the reality TV show *Keeping up with the Kardashians*. After all, an 'educated' woman cannot be interested in something as mundane as the drama between Kim Kardashian and her ex-husband Kanye West. In his essay, Williams demonstrates that in contrast to the dichotomy of high and low culture, culture can be found anywhere and is not tied to specific ways of living. For the most part, it is class differences that determine who gets access to further education.⁵¹⁹ @ripannanicolesmith's meme can thus be understood in the following way: No matter if at university or on the Internet, people who think they are more cultured than others are fooling themselves in their arrogance because culture is ordinary and there is no ontological difference between a play by Shakespeare, an opera by Verdi, and a sex tape by Kim Kardashian, but only a form of idiotic pseudo-superiority.

Julia Hava, who posts memes under @binchcity, focuses on the intersectional problems between feminism, her Jewish identity, and mental health. Her original memes are highly aestheticized and heavily oriented towards 1960s advertising posters that primarily conceptualized women as passive housewives. @binchcity uses one-liners and vintage aesthetics to spread their content, for example, one meme features a photo of a white woman looking passively and objectified into the distance. Next to her is written: "I can't tell if I'm depressed because of my birth control, the cold weather, the sun setting at 4pm, mercury in retrograde, or just my Chronic Depression." [141] @binchcity skillfully satirizes the dark side of the trends of self-care and the self-optimization society, in which every mood not only has to have a clearly quantifiable origin, but at best should also be prescribed an antidote. The increasing intertwining of psychological health and commodity aesthetics especially as perpetrated since the Covid-19 pandemic is also thematized in a meme dubbed "I Can't Believe I'm Still in Therapy!" [143] The font, colors, and layout resemble the logo of a margarine spread called *I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!* meant to surprise consumers of its deceptively 'real' taste. In @binchcity's meme, this moment of being flabbergasted is transposed to the subject's astonishment of not being 'cured' of their mental illness yet—which, in the broader context of Hava's work, can be attributed to the conditions of late capitalism. The creator, who herself speaks openly about her struggles with anxiety and depression, uses self-deprecating humor to

⁵¹⁹ See Williams 2014.

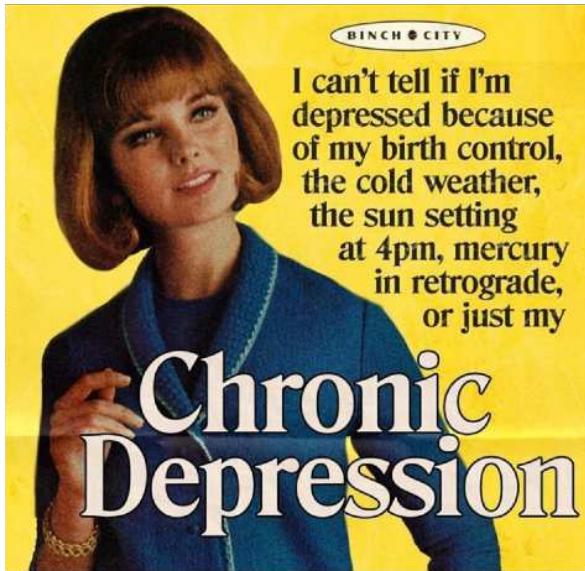


Fig. 141: @binchcity subsuming the multiple causes of depression for Millennials.

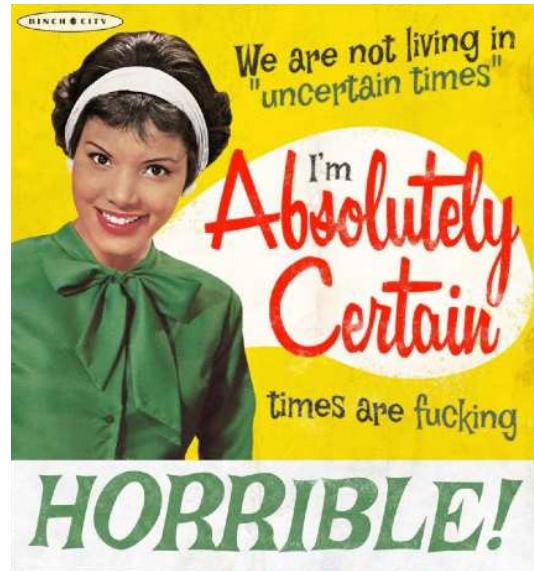


Fig. 142: A meme by @binchcity from the height of the pandemic.



Fig. 143: A meme channeling product aesthetics by @binchcity.



Fig. 144: A deep fried meme on the double entendre of stoned by @djinn_kazama.



Fig. 145: Looking for the manager on the way to enlightenment by @djinn_kazama.



Fig. 146: An anti-zionistic deep fried meme by @djinn_kazama.

point out deep-seated, socially caused grievances which we all suffer from. This is also expressed in another meme where a 1950s housewife looks at us with a soulless stare and the caption: "We are not living in 'uncertain times' / I'm absolutely certain times are fucking HORRIBLE!". [142] The meme rips the curtain off the common, crisis-laden attestation of the status quo as 'insecure' to admit the honesty that the current conditions of life are simply terrible. It's as if @binchcity is a medium from the abysses of the collective unconscious, communicating overall social phenomena of fear—fear of overworking, fear of worthlessness, fears corresponding to concrete objects like femicides—via memes. Many people recognize themselves in these memes, and a collective cathartic process begins that gives us the certainty that, despite all our fears, we are not alone, and that on the other side of the black screen, there are people who feel the same way.

In a different vein, @djinn_kazama creates memes on intersectional feminism in regard to digital cultures, her South Asian identity, and her online sex work. Many memes target white supremacy, especially among white feminists, and especially their biases towards Black, Indigenous, and people of color that is often rendered absurd by their self-smothering in all kinds of culturally appropriated practices such as yoga or doing ayahuasca to become enlightened. In short, many of these stereotypes can be attributed to the cultural clichés of modern-day Los Angeles. Graphically, @djinn_kazama's memes continue to be heavily influenced by deep fried memes, characterized by pop cultural remixes and emulating poor image quality. One meme shows a woman dressed up as Jasmine from the Disney movie Aladdin taking a hit from a bong with the top text in quotation marks "You would get stoned if you lived in your country" and the bottom text formatted as a reply "bitch idc I get stoned here too". [144] The double entendre of getting stoned as a still-practiced death penalty in some African and South Asian countries and getting stoned as getting high perfectly conveys the double standard often demonstrated by white supremacist's stances again immigrants. Through highlighting the stereotypes Americans have of Brown people, @djinnkazama cleverly reverses prejudices and hijacks them through humor. Similar to the feminist memes described above, @djinn_kazama plays with the bias many white people have of Muslim countries and the simultaneous interpretational sovereignty these people like to cling to. The meme acts as a witty comeback toward intruders of the dominant culture. An earlier meme shows a 3D avatar of a white woman in 'sitting lotus' captioned "Have u tried speaking to the managerwithin?" [145] In the background, we see giant mansion that could be from the video game *The Sims* and further alludes to the woman being well-off. 'I want to speak to the manager' is a catchphrase commonly associated with the figure of Karen, an aggressive, overprivileged white woman who feels entitled to special treatment and is generally seen as a byproduct of the co-constituting ideologies of white supremacy and white feminism. Popularized in 2019, the stereotype is also emblematic of a cultural shift that creates more and more persiflages of white people that can also be understood as the result of a longstanding contestation with white supremacy, for

example, due to the Black Lives Matter movement. In the meme, the figure of Karen is merged with the cliché of the yoga-obsessed, green smoothie-drinking L.A. girlie to create a kind of white woman abomination. Conflicts of identity and culture are recurring topics in @djinn_kazama's memes also present in her spare commentary on the Israel-Palestine-conflict. One meme shows a map of Israel with Family Guy character Peter Griffin—the epitome of the white American man—wearing a tunic and a fes next to the caption “Israel more like Is Fake” as well as the crying-laughing emoji. [146] The meme refers to the anti-zionist tradition of denying the legitimacy of the State of Israel, a practice that is deeply intertwined with anti-semitism.⁵²⁰ Here, we hit the limits of irony bordering on political discussion: Based on the fact that ironic memes always bear a serious core, the question is to what extent the meme is making fun of people, whether Jewish, white, or Muslim, who publicly support campaigns like BDS,⁵²¹ and to what extent it reflects @djinn_kazama's own point of view. At any rate, at its heart, the meme is again about questions of belonging via identity, which are negotiated in the comment columns below the memes.

Meme Page Admins themselves regularly get caught up in the maelstrom of their own creations, similar to how users on 4chan, Reddit or Discord make fun of their moderators. For example, a meme uploaded by Reddit user @johnlen1n is captioned “POV: You're arrived at my Wikipedia page” and shows the progressives subpages “Early life”, “Controversial thoughts on the Antichrist”, “Schizophrenia diagnosis”, “Meme page admin”, and finally, “CIA

⁵²⁰ The *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance* gave the following definition of anti-semitism in 2016: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” This serves as a guideline and is implemented by governments and institutions world-wide. Anti-zionism is only indirectly invoked in the example of “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.” However, especially in recent years, critiques of the Israeli government increasingly coincide with the rhetoric of anti-semitism. The *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* in Germany, for example, points directly to the co-evolution of said ideologies: “Anti-Zionism often goes hand in hand with anti-Semitism, and anti-Semites often use the less taboo anti-Zionism in their propaganda.” From my own experience, I do believe that anti-zionism almost always coincides with anti-semitism, even more so on the Internet. However, a lot of US-American Jewish as well as non-Jewish people openly protest against the treatment of Palestinian people in Israel and publicly criticise its government. I acknowledge the very different histories of Jewish life in the United States, in Israel, and in Germany, all of them being embodied in complex social realities that makes foregrounding Jewish and Israeli voices in this dispute all the more important. See IHRA 2016 and bpd 2023.

⁵²¹ BDS stands for *Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions*, a campaign “delegitimizing and pressuring Israel, through the diplomatic, financial, professional, academic and cultural isolation of Israel, Israeli individuals, Israeli institutions, and, increasingly, Jews who support Israel's right to exist.” Considering the widespread use of notions such as ‘apartheid’ and ‘genocide’ in reference to Israel, the grassroots movement solely focuses on the liberation of Palestine without regards to establishing peace on the land. The situation is further complicated by the advocacy of many Jewish-American (as well as non-Jewish) intellectuals such as Naomi Klein and celebrities like Sarah Silverman since other prominent supporters also hold anti-semitic views, for example, musician Roger Waters: While some see it as a legitimate protest against strategies employed by the Israeli government, other supporters may use it for the further spreading of anti-semitic views. See ADL 2022.

assassination".⁵²² To understand this development, I want to make clear that by 2019 at the very latest, you could find a meme page dedicated to any topic: From arthouse cinema to French philosophy, from fork lift trucks to specific mash-ups only of scenes from the TV shows *Twin Peaks* and *Seinfeld*.⁵²³ Each of these meme pages are part of broader eco-systems: For example, many Instagram pages posting on philosophy, media studies, and psychoanalysis are subsumed under the notion of *theorygram*. Their memes are characterized by extensive use of texts, often quoting from philosophical works or simply stating the meme page admin's thoughts on a topic. [147] During 2019 and 2020, a lot of accounts popped up using the prefix 'catboy-' and the last name of whatever philosopher they would post on, for example, @catboy_deleuze⁵²⁴ or @catboy_lacan. [148] Their profile pictures usually feature their philosopher of choice edited using a cat ear filter. Catboys are mostly male or non-binary people who dress up like cats and have their roots in otaku culture. Often, they are also queer, so catboy admins can be understood as queering the traditions of Western philosophy. In an interview, @catboy_deleuze states:

Imagine if I walked around with cat ears all day—and yet it's a figure that does convey something real about a certain subjectivity," they say. "It's like a silent queerness that gives itself as pure spectacle, but also it's a figure that seems inoperative. The catboy radiates inoperativity, it looks clumsy, as if the catboy can't really do anything. Would you imagine a catboy at work? So it's somewhat of a destitute figure, because it's not an individual, it can't be put to work, it's just there, like an excessive presence.⁵²⁵

The catboy is an identity rendered to passivity and even to a lack of brainpower. Combined with the crumbling of heteronormativity and the downfall of fragile masculinity as expressed, for example, in the schadenfreude surrounding Andrew Tate's detention, the contrast between catboys and famous philosophers is all the more ironic. For example, a meme by @rhizomatic_memer shows a bell curve implying the Gaussian distribution of intelligence quotients: [149] On the far left, we see a crying soyjak wearing a *Make America Great Again* cap



Fig. 147: A self-deprecating joke on theorygram that is popular for infinite captions no-one actually bothers to read.

⁵²² See u/johnlen1n, Reddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/10r6tpp/what_a_ride/.

⁵²³ See @seinpeaks, Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/seinpeaks/>.

⁵²⁴ After that account has been closed, the admin is now posting under @deleuzean_thembo, a 'thembo' being the non-binary version of a bimbo.

⁵²⁵ Yalcinkaya 2021.



Fig. 148: @thembo_marx satirizing the hyper- or surreality of art through the queer cat boy filter version of Marx.

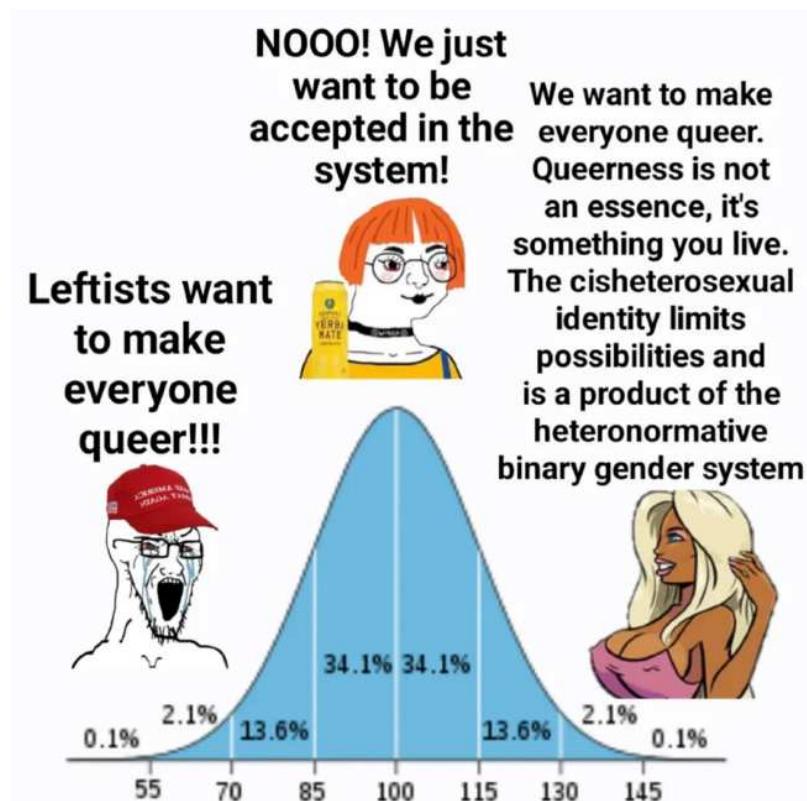


Fig. 149: @rhizomatic_memer using the bell curve distribution graph to meme the disruptive potential of queerness.

with the caption “Leftists want to make everyone queer!!!”, acting as a placeholder for reactionary right-wingers that are assigned the lowest IQs. In the middle, which accounts for the highest distribution, we see another Wojak comic of an orange-haired alt girl wearing glasses and drinking Yerba Mate along the caption: “NOOO! We just want to be accepted in the system!”. This depiction makes fun of liberal-leftist supporters of identity politics and representationalism even when it just means the creation of additional categories for capitalism to devour. On the far right, which harbors the highest IQs, we see the girl from the Bimbo cartoon strip under the caption: “We want to make everyone queer. Queerness is not an essence, it’s something you live. The cissexual identity limits possibilities and is a product of the heteronormative binary gender system”. So the message of the meme is that leftist theory actually propagates queerness as a resistance to the often binary categorization that in turn creates new target groups for marketing purposes.

Meme page admins therefore take on an interesting role in communicating ideas to a broader audience yet also serve as the person in charge when things go rough in the comment section. That this can also become an exhausting experience is detailed by Anahita Neghabat in a 2022 essay on her experience with mansplaining on her political meme page. She created @ibiza_austrian_memes in 2019 after videos of far-right politicians of the Austrian government partying while making shady and corrupt deals with a fake niece of an apparent Russian oligarch surfaced.⁵²⁶ The account blew up and her memes were also featured on many news and media sites. However, Neghabat ultimately stopped regularly creating memes after perpetual dealing with trolls in the comment sections. But instead of blatant slurs or acts of spamming, these occurrences are much more subtle, mostly to stay in line with Instagram’s strict community guidelines. An example quoted the same account continuously correcting Neghabat’s already corrected spelling in a patronising way (‘Ski’ in favour of the variant spelling ‘Schi’ as propagated by Hitler).⁵²⁷ When she outed the comment as mansplaining, the commenter countered with a whole paragraph that he did not know that the

"The meme page admin"
by Jan Matejko [1862]



Fig. 150: The sad jester or *Starczyk* by Jan Matejko, 1862.

⁵²⁶ See @ibiza_austrian_memes, Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/ibiza_austrian_memes/.

⁵²⁷ Neghabat, Miesenberger 2022, 153.

admin is a woman, therefore it cannot be mansplaning, that he did not behave presumptuously anyway, and that he is just as qualified as the admin to comment on such things. We can see here how the commentator is more in a conversation with himself than actively defending his viewpoint to a counterpart. This leads to Neghabat's reasoning that Nicole Dular's definition of mansplaining as a "dysfunctional subversion of the epistemic roles of speaker and hearer"⁵²⁸ imposed by a man onto a woman is actually insufficient because it requires the identification of gender in the first place:

By arguing that Dular's definition of mansplaining is too narrow, I want to point out that me as an admin receiving this amount of mansplaining despite not presenting as a woman online, draws attention to the fact that mansplaining could perhaps be understood more in depth if we focused more on white masculinity and white male ego in itself, instead of centering its relation to the other(ed).⁵²⁹

In fact, men don't just mansplain women, trans, or non-binary people online, but first and foremost, other men. This suggests that mansplaining is rooted in a culture of fragile masculinity that seeks to gain the verbal upper hand in every discussion not unlike trolling in the tradition of the adversary method. In this regard, being a meme page admin is not an easy job, as is also neatly reflected in the Internet's re-naming of Jan Matejko's famous painting *The Jester* into *The meme page admin.* [150]

6.4. Memeing the COVID-19 Pandemic

A meme shows the vertical juxtaposition of one of the most famous historical photographs, on which we can see, from left to right, the future head of state of the Soviet Union Kliment Voroshilov, the soon-to-be foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov, Joseph Stalin as well as one of his closest confidants, Nikolai Yezhov. Since the latter would soon fall out of Stalin's favor, he was simply airbrushed out of the photo. In yellow lettering, Yezhov is labeled "my plans" and Stalin is labeled "2020." [151]

The COVID-19 pandemic had long lasting consequences for memes as well, which, as a means of communication for socially distanced users, mutated into a kind of coping mechanism for coming to terms with the uncontrollable changes to social life. We have been familiar with the collective processing of special events via social platforms since Harambe at the latest, but in view of the fact that in the spring of 2020 there were still no firm forecasts about the further course of the pandemic, memes were central companions to a wide variety of discourses. The shared experience of laughing at memes helped many people to cope with social isolation, anxiety, loneliness, uncertainty, and stress. Participating in meme culture allowed individuals to feel part of a larger community going through similar circumstances and may have helped to feel a sense of connection and solidarity. Moreover, considering the dire images in the

⁵²⁸ Dular 2021.

⁵²⁹ Neghabat, Miesenberger 2022, 156.



Fig. 151: My plans disappearing after 2020.

news especially at the beginning of the pandemic, memes provided a light-hearted distraction from the infinite live tickers and constant barrage of COVID-19 news and updates. However, hedonistic distraction was not the reason for the general turn toward memes over the course of the pandemic. Instead, the shift needs to be understood as media-specific: Memes have the flexibility to adapt to current events and changing situations quickly. As the pandemic unfolded, memes could quickly mutate and reflect the evolving circumstances. This is especially true considering the diversity of memes during these times: There were memes making fun of people adhering to the rules of lockdowns, but there were just as many memes making fun of the people resisting those. Some memes made fun of people believing in conspiracy theories, others spread fake news and partly dangerous home remedies deliberately in order to avoid getting

vaccinated. In this regard, memes were really everywhere which can also be attributed to people generally being more online and tech-optimistic than before the pandemic.⁵³⁰ They served as a form of social commentary, a way to communicate important information, and a means to find common ground during a time of global crisis. However, considering the fragmentation of memes during the pandemic, I am not interested in tracing certain narratives that have especially sedimented in memes, but rather what kind of memetic engagements were innovative and have continued to influence memes today: One subset of memes that can be especially attributed to the pandemic are *wholesome memes*, or memes that are throughly 'good' and not sarcastic or self-deprecating. But not just memes, also the platforms they inhabit were changing: The COVID-19 pandemic coincides with the final triumph of TikTok, an app primarily used by



Fig. 152: A beautiful goat being cringe but free.

⁵³⁰ McClain, Vogels, Perrin et al. 2021.

teenagers but slowly gaining a more diverse audience over time. Lastly, I discuss the WallStreetBets GameStop Short Squeeze, a collective ‘attack’ on the stock market by meme-affine users that lasted for several weeks.

Wholesome memes belong to a subset of mid-2010s memes that seek to spread positivity, happiness, and social warmth. They can be understood as a direct reaction to memes relying on trolling, irony, or controversial content. Instead, wholesome memes focus on cute content, uplifting messages, heartwarming situations, or simple acts of kindness. [152] It is important to notice the timing of wholesome memes appearing in the mainstream: The subreddit *r/WholesomeMemes*, where many of these memes originate, was created in September 2016 in the midst of the online turmoil immediately before the US-American presidential election. Insofar, wholesome memes need to be understood as a departure of the constant spamming of specular and negative news that we encounter online. Here, wholesome content offers a breather from the stress and anxieties of everyday life, allowing for moments of relaxation and happiness. Moreover, wholesome memes tap into the desire for connection and empathy. They often depict relatable and heartwarming scenarios, for example, of animals or small children that evoke positive emotions and a sense of community. Sometimes they also carry a direct call for kindness, compassion, and mutual understanding, thus contributing to a more positive online culture.

One of the main reasons for the emergence of wholesome memes, besides the unstable global political context, is the change in habitats that produce memes: While 4chan, for example, did not have to sacrifice anything in terms of popularity, the message board was increasingly being shunned because of its mercilessly right-wing attitude—even by other meme creators. As we have already seen, more and more users migrate to platforms like Instagram and Reddit, which provide less scope for offensive memes due to their stricter moderation. This is not to say that right-wing ideas cannot be found there as well, but it symbolizes the beginning of a new form of self-reflection in dealing with them. Over the course of 2017, so-called wholesome trolling formed on Reddit: Subreddits known for their nationalist, racist, anti-semitic, and extreme right-wing tendencies were infiltrated and subverted by wholesome trolls. This happens through the use of good-willed moderators who not only remove the rubbish on these subreddits, but often revalue the entire community: For example, the subreddit *r/stormfront*, known in the white supremacy and neo-Nazi scene, became a place to discuss storms, typhoons, and other extreme weather phenomena. The formerly anti-Semitic *r/JewWatch* now serves as a place to discuss any watches influenced by Jewish culture, for example, wristwatches with Hebrew numerals. In *r/AgainstHateSubreddits*, the repurposed subreddits are collected and celebrated.⁵³¹

⁵³¹ See *r/AgainstHateSubreddits*, Reddit, <https://www.reddit.com/r/AgainstHateSubreddits/>.



Fig. 153: Kirby explains his love through threats.

Chacarron Macarron by the band El Chombo (also known as *Ualuealueuale* thanks to its incomprehensibility).⁵³² In the wholesome revaluation, Kirby's conceited explanatory tone becomes more of a commanding tone, but the caption "You better start loving yourself as much as I love you/This is a threat" perverts the threatening imperative into a force of love. [153] These kinds of wholesome memes can also be summarized under the heading of cute aggression, the paradoxical reaction to cute things that actually evokes a form of violence in us.⁵³³ For example, the phrase "I love you so much I wish I could eat you" may allude to an overwhelming feeling of love yet also implies a form of danger. This approach is also found in the wholesome version of *Savage Patrick* depicting a scene of the pink starfish from the cartoon *Spongebob Squarepants* usually associated with devious or evil situations. [154] But this energy can of course also be used for good, as the caption here suggests: "When your friend says they're lonely so you hit them with that invite to play board games and hang out." Although the announcement of an evil threat remains, it now refers to something positive, namely to spend time with friends.

In other cases, the wholesome reaction stems more from finding something extremely cute or heartbreaking. Animals, small children, and cute fictional characters like Baby Yoda from the show *The Mandalorian* or Detective Pikachu from the eponymous movie are especially predestined for this. Another example is a feline which became famous under the name *Polite Cat* because of its accommodating facial

Another subtype of wholesome memes can be called *forced wholesome memes* meaning that they are wholesome variations of 'normal', offensive memes. An often-cited character is Nintendo's roly-poly pink Kirby, who has appeared repeatedly in video games since 1992. The *Kirby Explains* template goes back to a YTMND called *Kirby Explains Quantum Physics*, which is set to the song

When your friend says they're lonely so
you hit them with that invite to play board
games and hang out



Fig. 154: Savage Patrick's plan to make you feel less lonely.

⁵³² ninkendo 2015.

⁵³³ In a 2015 study, the authors suggest that cute stimuli might overstimulate and thus cause different emotions such as aggression or sadness in order to regulate the primary emotion. See Aragón, Clark, Dyer et al. 2015.



Fig. 155: Bruce quickly became the most popular landlord on the Internet.

2014. The user pettergra posted a still as an image macro with the caption "It ain't much/But it's honest work" on 15 December 2018 to r/MemeEconomy. [156] In the post, the image macro was re-captioned using the statement "When you post OC and get 10 upvotes instead of reposting for thousands", which is supposed to mean that sharing original content doesn't pay much, but at least it's honest work compared to the popular repost pages. At least here, pettergra was wrong considering But It's Honest Work has become one of the most popular meme templates of 2018. Another wholesome meme subverts the fragile masculinity of many online communities: In the progressive vertical template *Buff Guys Help Out Nerdy Kid*, we see usually eight panels, starting with a picture of a skinny pre-teen with glasses sitting at a computer asking a serious but possibly embarrassing question. [157] According to the progression, there are photos of extremely muscular men sitting at laptops that look ridiculously small next to them, replying to the kid's question seriously, in detail, and politely. Where one would otherwise expect trolling, the jacked Chads take the time to consider the boy's question and help him. For a while, even 4chan gave the impression that it might turn beneficial: *Wholesome 4chan* refers to greentext stories that are positive, happy, and affirmative. In a

expression. Their expression, which looks as if they are pulling themselves together to remain as polite as possible, has transformed them into a format showing a text message conversation between landlord and tenant. [155] The landlord claims that pets are not allowed under the tenancy agreement, but changes his mind after being sent Polite Cat's photo: "OK I will make an exception because he looks very polite".

The content of wholesome memes is also reconcilable with exploitable meme templates and reaction images: A particularly well-known example shows the farmer David Brandt, who gave an interview thematizing his commitment to healthy soils in the Soil Health Campaign

When you post OC and get 10 upvotes instead of reposting for thousands



Fig. 156: The eternal struggle of posting original content online but never receiving the acknowledgement you deserve.



Hey guys, I've been seeing these memes where muscular men at laptops explain elementary concepts in some topic or other to a nerdy-looking, curious kid. They really make me laugh, but I can't quite put my finger on why. It's not like there's any real jokes in there or anything



First of all, I think this format makes excellent use of a comedic technique called incongruity, whereby viewers' preconceived notions are upended by unexpected juxtapositions. In this case, many people don't think of musclebound traditionally masculine men as kind, intelligent and eager to advise. While not a joke in any conventional sense, this produces a humorous effect.



King, I want to echo what you're saying and also suggest that there's an even broader employment of incongruity here. Viewers expect earnest requests for basic information to be met with vitriol due to a sense that discourse on web forums is generally noxious. The conviviality of the buff men's responses runs totally counter to viewer's expectations. It's not just muscular men that we presume to be hotheaded and condescending - this kind of unacceptable behavior is endemic to the medium as a whole, and viewers are tickled to see that dynamic inverted.



I really think Chief hit on something with that last response, and I want to add that part of the appeal of the format lies in its warmth - those of us who spend a lot of time online find ourselves bathing in a sea of toxic discourse but, for a cohort so frequently described as overwhelmingly self-absorbed, I think that the millennials making and consuming these genuinely value humility - a lack of ego and self-importance - and empathy - the ability to understand others. The men in these memes display these in spades and, through the experience of incongruity, viewers are given the opportunity to deepen their own humility and extend their sense of empathy.

Fig. 157: Buff guys helping out a nerdy kid wondering about the specific humor of this meme template.

thread showing a picture of Pepe in love with hearts and a rose around him, the greentext goes: ">give her a hug/>hug for very long/>worry I'm hugging for too long/>"do you want me to let go?">she squeezes me tighter(:)))" to which another anon replies: "that makes me feel very lonely fren but also very happy for you, wishing the best for you too".⁵³⁴

Often dismissed as fluff pieces, i.e. unimportant but mood-enhancing news, wholesome memes also harbored a lot of political potential, at least initially. In late capitalist times of pressure to perform and optimize, spending time to be happy about something is almost revolutionary. In her essay *A Burst of Life: Living With Cancer*, Audre Lorde writes about her breast cancer and concludes: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare."⁵³⁵ Oftentimes, this quote is taken out of context,

⁵³⁴ See @greentext.glover, Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CrsXIGyNoq3/>.

⁵³⁵ Lorde 2017, 201.

forgetting that Lorde's health condition as a Black lesbian intellectual stood under a different sign than that of many others due to intersectional discrimination, generational trauma, and anti-Blackness. Regarding Lorde's life-long activism, her bare existence was a threat to the systems of white hegemony and the patriarchy. Nevertheless, she reminds us that self-love is the basis to survival and love towards others. Meanwhile, wholesome memes have not disappeared, but have been eaten up by the capitalist exploitation machine, which has replaced the term with wellness products, meditation apps, pharmaceuticals, and so on as part of its incorporation of self-care. In this respect, coming across Lorde's quote as a marketing slogan to sell more beauty products, self-help books, yoga utensils, or nutritional supplements is truly absurd and tactless.

Nevertheless, over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is understandable that wholesome content has been on the rise under the buzzword of 'self care'. Once the meme economy was saturated with such memes, we can observe an ironic examination thereof: Although memes dragging spiritual influencers and hippies for their hyper-privileged, uncritical, and, in the worst cases, neo-colonialist lifestyle⁵³⁶ have been around for years, the ongoing thematization of practices such as meditation and positive thinking are satirized in affirmative meme templates. Motivational sayings, 'thoughtful' quotes, and mantras serve as models and reconnect to a very early instance of memes on the Internet known as *Demotivational Posters* that were started in 1998 by Despair Inc., a company poking fun at motivational culture.⁵³⁷ The Instagram account @affirmations can be understood as an ironic reaction to the wellness industry: Images of over-edited landscapes, toys, or celebrities are combined with motivational statements from the first-person perspective in brightly colored image macros. The sayings range from "I am not extremely sexually frustrated" and "I am relaxed using public bathrooms" to "I will not ask my parents for money" and "My therapist is not profiting off my suffering". [158] The quotes cater to the anxieties and worries of Millennials and Zoomers, who are always directly addressed to participate in the affirmation by commenting "I CLAIM". While not essentially a wholesome meme, @affirmations' content is rather nihilistic and self-deprecating



Fig. 158: An affirmation template using the highly-referenced image known as Miley Cyrus' Blue Eyes.

⁵³⁶ Remote working has enabled a new class of people self-describing as 'digital nomads' who often work from the shelter of holiday paradises. This way of living is often criticized as a form of neo-colonialism due to the exploitation of 'exotic' countries on the sides of remote workers similar to mass tourism. The ecological cost of travel as well as the building of resorts and infrastructure is increased further by the phenomenon of ex-pats not really integrating into local societies.

⁵³⁷ A collection of posters can be found on their website, <https://despair.com/collections/demotivators>.

in its rhetorics. The account's admin, the artist Mats Anderson, declared in an interview: "This is the sentence of the year: 'SAME SHIT, DIFFERENT DAY'."⁵³⁸ This hopeless attitude can be understood as a direct result of the numerous lockdowns that have made each new day feel like a repeat of the previous one. It's no wonder, then, that wholesome content has certainly helped make the world a more bearable place between 2020 and 2022. The fact that the pandemic has actually led to a wider gap between rich and poor, more environmental pollution, and a rapid rise in consumerism that continues to place the individual above the collective is self-ironically processed in the affirmations. In this respect, affirmations memes are rather concessions to one's own helplessness akin to the feeling that Mark Fisher dubbed *reflexive impotence*: "They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it."⁵³⁹

TikTok is a popular social media platform that allows users to create and share short videos. It was developed by the Chinese company ByteDance as musical.ly at first, an app primarily designed for creating lip-synching videos, before it was combined with the app Douyin and globally relaunched as TikTok in September 2017. Shortly thereafter, the app was already immensely popular, especially among users in their teenage years and younger. When TikTok became more popular in my home country circa 2018, a starkly negative view emerged, especially among people aged 25 years or older who denoted it as an 'app for pedophiles' due to the large influx of very young users and the fear of much older people preying on them. While grooming⁵⁴⁰ is definitely a problem on the Internet, it is not limited to TikTok, although I understand that very young kids are at high risk. But even besides fierce accusations, the app was permanently opposed by the 'older' generations. I could never quite shake the feeling that many millennials simply arrived at a point where they cannot keep up with the rapid developments of the Internet and fall into a media-pessimistic and, more dramatically, also media-incompetent attitude that we are more familiar with from people who have never been online in the first place. Even though I find this generational thinking outdated and incredibly abstracting, the breakthrough of TikTok clearly showed up the boundary between Gen Z and Millennials—at least until the COVID-19 pandemic hit, when the formerly snobby Millennials became addicted to the app rather quickly.⁵⁴¹ Ironically, this echoes the early reactions of boomers to online phenomena like Anonymous or flash mobs, and is now uncritically passed on from Millennials to Zoomers. Additionally, as the currently only social network rooted in China,

⁵³⁸ Eloise 2021.

⁵³⁹ Fisher 2009, 25.

⁵⁴⁰ Grooming is a form of sexual harassment that is primarily used against children. Disguised as harmless advances in a friendly sense, assaultive sexual intentions are behind it.

⁵⁴¹ Since Instagram's adaptation of reels, a carbon copy of TikTok's short videos, it has become a meme of itself that Instagram users are (unwillingly) fed TikTok's content just delayed in time.

criticism of TikTok often shows distinct undertones of Sinophobia especially since the pandemic that is expressed through an overtly critical dissection of TikTok's policies and data tracking while simultaneously turning a blind eye toward the practices of Meta, Twitter & Co.⁵⁴²

Among the key features of TikTok is its unique video editing tool: Users can record videos up to 60 seconds⁵⁴³ in length as well as add filters, effects, text, and music and sound FX to enhance their creations. The maximum length of videos was increased to 3 minutes in July 2021, allowing for more elaborate content and discussions, but also facilitating unique approaches to content: As an alternative to pirating, some users upload entire movies in chunks, resulting in 10 videos à 10 minutes or shorter of classics like *Legally Blonde*.⁵⁴⁴ The focus on audiovisual content probably had the greatest impact on memes: since 2020, memes are increasingly mediated as videos in contrast to still images before. This is especially apparent in the carbon copies of TikTok implemented in other apps, particularly Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts. Moreover, TikTok offers a wide range of audio clips, songs, and sound bites that users can incorporate into their videos that also serve as starting points of viral trends. In accordance with its origin, dance and lip-synching content is very popular on TikTok, but there are filter bubbles for almost any topic that are usually referred to with the suffix -Tok, for example, BimboTok, BookTok, and even PerfumeTok.

The most-discussed feature on TikTok is probably its recommendation algorithm that, of course, is publicly disclosed. Its full power is demonstrated on the For You Page (FYP), the app's main feed that is based on users' interests, past engagement, and behaviour and uses machine learning to provide a better curated experience. As stated by Min Zhang and Yiqun Liu, in contrast to the recommendation algorithms on other apps, TikTok's FYP is especially designed to attract viral videos:

This algorithm does not simply base on a blogger's fanbase or whether he/she is famous on the platform, but also considers the video title, music, content tags, etc. It integrates these features with the videos that have been liked and watched by audiences, users' video content, and other niche areas of users' interests. Final recommendations are made using classic CF-based (collaborative filtering) and content-based recommendation methods for personalization.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴² For example, this becomes especially apparent when comparing the hearing of Mark Zuckerberg in front of the US congress to that of ByteDance CEO Shou Zi Chew: While the former was unable to properly reply to any questions, the latter has been extensively trained and seemed willing to clarify the inquirers' questioning, but was faced with silencing and racist assertions. Dan Crenshaw repeatedly refers to Zi Chew as a Chinese to further imply close relations to the Chinese Communist Party until he is corrected by him stating: "First of all, I'm Singaporean" while Richard Hudson asked a visibly confused question on whether TikTok is able to "access the home network" when he has both WIFI and mobile Internet disabled on his device (spoiler alert, it is not possible). See also Losh 2022.

⁵⁴³ The maximum video length was increased to 180 seconds in 2021 and to 10 minutes in 2022.

⁵⁴⁴ For example, @movietiktok14 hosts all kinds of movies. Since these accounts are banned rather quickly, new ones constantly pop up.

⁵⁴⁵ Zhang, Liu 2021, 846.

It learns from users' interactions, such as the types of videos they engage with and the amount of time spent watching particular content. Moreover, it is very successful in finding viral content: When a video starts gaining traction and demonstrates high engagement rates, the algorithm boosts its visibility by showing it to a broader audience, increasing the chances of it going viral. Accordingly, the most viral media on the app are audios and not necessarily videos, since every TikTok video can be overlaid with an audio file upon creation. Anyone who has ever been stuck in an audio echo chamber themselves or have seen it happen to someone else knows what this means: Endless loops of the same audio over and over again, re-starting with every scroll, resulting in an auditive hell of the same annoying 2 seconds of music again and again. On the other hand, this can be extremely valuable to creators, making their work go viral. Some examples of viral music that began as a trend on TikTok but has since spread to other platforms are *Ameno* by ERA from 1996, a New Age-inspired song using lyrics in Dog Latin and Gregorian chants; *Yerushalayim*, a popular Israeli song as performed by the Miami Boys Choir in 2007; and *Jiggle Jiggle*, a mock rap song created by documentary filmmaker Justin Theroux from 2022. Moreover, songs that have been hits many years ago regularly go viral again through the re-discovering of younger generations, for example, the 1976 song *Rich Girl* by Hall & Oates, *Dreams* from 1977 by Fleetwood Mac or Matthew Wilder's 1983 *Break My Stride*.

Another important feature is the aforementioned possibility of remixing video with audio content from various sources which is available via the app CapCut that is also held by ByteDance. This allows an almost infinite variation between sympoietic agents, sometimes with very anachronistic results. Brand new videos recorded especially for TikTok can go viral just as well as videos that have been around for years and even before Web 2.0. Another often-used feature is known as 'stitch' that allows a user to repost another user's video with a video reply. This works several times and can lead to several stitches at once. This function is also behind remixes of well-known songs: A long-standing companion of TikTok are mash ups of the dirty rapper CupcakKe, whose songs *Cpr* and *Squidward Nose* went viral on TikTok. Users then started mixing CupcakKe's characteristic sounds into the songs of other pop singers, which results in extremely inappropriate and distorted remixes that usually pass by TikTok's strict censorship due to its alienated vocal remix. For example, a mash-up of Sade's hit song *Smooth Operator* with CupcakKe's *Vagina* results in the hook as "smooth wet vagina".⁵⁴⁶

In general, TikTok inherited a lot from other video apps like YouTube and Vine as well as its predecessor musical.ly, although the possibilities of remixing music has brought interesting developments: Especially popular are sped-up versions of existing songs, which result in upbeat tempos and high-pitched voices reminiscent of Eurodance and Happy Techno from the 1990s and early 2000s. Popular examples are *Un Poco Loco* from the Disney movie *Coco* and *Angeleyes* by ABBA. Before there were sped-up songs, however, there was a huge trend in the

⁵⁴⁶ Ranvision [Dj Pyromania] 2022.

second half of the 2010s known as ‘slowed & reverbed’ that alienated many songs similar to playing a 7-inch vinyl single on the slower 33 RPM mode. If you search for slowed & reverbed on YouTube, you will find a darker, slower version of virtually any popular song in existence. All these remix trends are vital to TikTok sounds that often set the tone of a potentially viral video. The culture around remixes has its roots in the beginnings of Hip Hop, but in this specific instance has to be viewed as borne out of the Internet. One of the major aesthetics focusing on distorted sounds was Vaporwave in the early-to-mid 2010s that can be interpreted as a first wave of retro-nostalgia combining soft electronic pop with elevator music mourning the early Internet days.⁵⁴⁷

Writing on TikTok memes is insofar harder as the app does not have ‘global’ viral phenomena, but instead seems to work more ‘locally’ by letting content blow up within a filter bubble. If a video went viral on, let’s say, MCUTok, I would never notice because I never engaged with videos of the fandom of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. Viral content is thus harder to grasp on TikTok than on any other social platform with some only circulating for a couple of hours or days before sinking into oblivion. In some instances, however, a meme is mutated again and again building up background lore, fan art, and all the things we have encountered accompanying memes so far. Another reason why memes tend to function differently on TikTok is because the app was primarily marketed to children and teenagers, which is also reflected in the early content. In the tradition of the musical.ly, dance videos in particular went viral in the years from 2017 to 2019, e.g. to the songs *Lottery* by K Camp (commonly referred to as *Renegade*) and *Say So* by Doja Cat. The dances also function as challenges, as we know them from the early 2010s, and are intended to motivate users to participate. One example of an early classic of original content is muktarhuh’s video from December 16, 2019: In it, we see him walking around uttering “I’m in the ghetto... ratatata!” before hearing a scream and the video abruptly stops.⁵⁴⁸ It is a clean-cut case of an ironic meme that is making fun of ‘the ghetto’ before its protagonist falls victim to it. Another viral sound that had a chokehold on TikTok in 2021 is known as *You Kinda Smell Like a Baka... Eren Yeager*. At the beginning, we can hear a sniffing sound before the snowclone is spoken in a high-pitched voice. ‘Baka’ (jap. ‘idiot’) is a frequent term in otaku culture, while Eren Yeager is the protagonist of the manga-turned-anime *Attack on Titan*. The sound was especially popular in videos showing pets and was used to denote them as stinky.⁵⁴⁹

One great example of TikTok’s remix culture is *Pussy Tight, Pussy Clean, Pussy Fresh*, one of the most viral sounds of 2022. It combines audios from two sources, the 2015 song *Soap* by Melanie Martinez can be heard in the background while a deep, distorted voice sample

⁵⁴⁷ Tanner 2016, 12-13.

⁵⁴⁸ syniicord 2019.

⁵⁴⁹ Honey the Iggy 2012.

from Shenseea's 2018 song *Pon Mi* lends the title-giving snowclone. The sound spawned off 37,000 TikTok videos using the audio just in the month of April 2022, including one with a badly animated avatar with the superimposed face of Britney Spears lip-synching to it,⁵⁵⁰ but was also used by pop singers such as Bebe Rexha. However, over time, the audio mutates: TikTok user @izzyiztrash made an opera version of it, where her mezzo-soprano voice sings the snowclone to a symphonic version of the theme of the beloved anime *Howl's Moving Castle* from 2004.⁵⁵¹ Yet another spin on the audio, at least in regard to the part using *Pon Mi*, was created by @ranvision_official, a user specialized on mash ups who is also responsible for many of the CupcakKe remixes.⁵⁵² In his TikTok, he remixes *Pon Mi* with Kanye West's 2007 Song *Flashing Lights*.

It is estimated that around 1 billion videos are watched globally each day on TikTok. This makes the pacing extremely fast and contributes to an infinite demand for entertainment, which is why the app is frequently the target of criticism. Over the last year, so-called 'sludge' content has become more common: In order to keep up the high level of visual stimulation, split-screen videos are often deployed to keep the viewer from scrolling further. Typically, they consist of one video with a story-telling approach and one sludge video such as a mobile game speed run.⁵⁵³ Sometimes, viral videos from TikTok become still image memes on other platforms. This usually happens in the form of screenshots, which are used especially for videos with a lot of text overlay. The *Trade Offer* template works in this way: Here we see creator @natebellamy4 in a suit making us an irresistible offer while a bell jingle plays in the background. On a red background, "Trade Offer" is written in capital letters directly above him, with the choices to his left and right. Of course the trade is meant ironically: "Sloppy toppy", slang for oral sex for men, is wanted and nothing is offered for it. Variations using object labeling are a dime a dozen: In one case, the creator is titled "school", which takes "your entire childhood" in exchange for "depression". Often the template was also edited by image manipulation; @natebellamy is endowed with a McDonald's cap and a name tag receiving "your order" and giving out the "wrong order". [159] In another instance, *POV* memes have their origin on TikTok and denote



Fig. 159: The Trade Offer template usually has no good deals on offer.

⁵⁵⁰ procrastinavel 2022.

⁵⁵¹ izzyiztrash 2022.

⁵⁵² Reposted by BB 2022.

⁵⁵³ Castello 2023.

videos and later photos taken from the first perspective. These thus constantly change their subjectivity, since on the one hand, human perspectives are put on, but on the other, we are able to simulate many silly perspectives such as a video taken from inside a microwave looking out captioned “What my food in the microwave sees at 4 AM”.⁵⁵⁴

Among the biggest memes on TikTok are the ones that make use of the strict filter bubbling and investigate these restrictions in a creative manner. An example from the last year that probably went unnoticed in many parts of TikTok is known as *Taste the Biscuit*. It is hard to even speak of a trend here, as the whole phenomenon started with a filter made by the app called *Vacation Walk*. The filter produces an animated beach landscape and places the user’s face onto a walking figure rendered in silver chrome-like skin wearing a purple mini dress. The audio used is a song called *Taste the Biscuit* by Toasters N Moose that appeared in the 2011 YouTube video *Chickens in the Shadows*.⁵⁵⁵ *Taste the Biscuit* is sung by a smooth and captivating voice even though the lyrics are nonsensical: “Taste the biscuit/Taste the goodness of the biscuit/Taste the honey sauce/Taste the goodness of the biscuit with the honey sauce”. Most early adopters were simply sharing their confusion initiated by the filter—who the hell came up with the idea of a chrome lady walking on a beach singing about biscuits in the first place—but after a while, more and more people joined the *Chrome Beach Biscuit Lady* side of *TikTok*. One explanation is that the song was uploaded to the app in order to be derived as a sound for other videos and was randomly associated with the *Vacation Walk* filter. From there, it seemed to spread loosely around the platform which was further enforced by captions such as “This one goes out to the 200 other people who’ve been on taste the biscuit cyber vacay walk tiktok for the past two weeks 🤙” as well as discussions on whether the sound was even trending on the app or not.⁵⁵⁶ Over the course of its spreading, more and more audio remixes were added: I remember a disco version, a death metal version, one version remixed to the melody of Sam Smith and Kim Petras’ hit song *Unholy*, a Japanese city pop version, and finally, a video edited from an appearance of Billy Ray Cyrus on the late night show *Lopez Tonight* showing the country singer spontaneously performing *Taste the Biscuit* from 2011. What is so mesmerizing about *Taste the Biscuit* is that although the song may have been a viral video on YouTube in 2011, it fell into oblivion before resurfacing on an entirely different app in a likewise totally different context, yet continuing to strive and mingle with technological advancements such as filters and people’s attention. This is an important factor on a more structural change of memes that has already began: since memes have an established canon by now, referentiality and the re-emergence of ‘old’ sympoietic agents boom. On TikTok, we are witnessing how a

⁵⁵⁴ chrisburris07 2022.

⁵⁵⁵ Gargiulo 2011.

⁵⁵⁶ dressupboxstudio 2022.

somewhat demarcated younger generation deals with memes which may be the most exciting thing a meme researcher can see.

In parallel to r/MemeEconomy, another economic subreddit developed that had a completely different focus, but became a meme itself through the events it generated. When r/WallStreetBets was founded on January 31, 2012, its main purpose was to exchange information about small-scale trading. This refers to people who participate in the events of the stock market on a very low income, typically \$100 and under. In most cases, the volume of individual traders is too small to compete with the established hedge fund managers of Wall Street. Therefore, strategies such as short selling were discussed and propagated on r/WallStreetBets instead of large purchases of various stocks. Short selling makes it possible to profit from the fall of a share price: As a first step, short selling requires you to borrow an asset (usually stocks) from someone who already owns it. This is usually a broker who processes transactions on behalf of investors. Then, the investor sells it on the stock market at the current market price in order to wait for the price to fall. Since the investor's goal is to make profit from the stock price decline, he needs to buy back the same asset in the future at a lower price. Therefore, he waits and waits until the price drops and he can eventually re-buy his stocks. Once that is the case, the investor buys the assets back, returning them to the broker who sold the stock in the first place. The investor's margin depends on the difference between the selling price and the lower buying price: If the price has fallen as expected, the investor makes a profit, but if the price has risen instead, he made a loss. We can illustrate this using a simple example: Let's say you are trying to short sell some original content Rare Pepe memes from your friend for profit. [160] First of all, you borrow 100 memes from them and put them on your computer. The market for Rare Pepes is low at the moment, so you immediately sell all 100 memes on the market at the current market price of \$50 per meme. In total, you receive \$5,000 from the sale. Now, the waiting period has begun: Over the next few weeks, you keep a close eye on the prices of Rare Pepes. If your prediction is correct and the price falls as expected, you may be able to make a profit. Let's suppose the price of a Rare Pepe eventually falls to \$40 per meme. At this point, you decide to buy back all the 100 memes, adding up to a total cost of \$4,000 to buy back all of them. After doing so, you return the 100 memes to your friend, thus 'closing' the short position. In this example, you initially received \$5,000 when you first sold the memes and spent \$4,000 to buy them back. Therefore, you made a profit of \$1,000 or 20% using the fluctuation of the Rare Pepe price. However, if the price had risen instead, you would have incurred a loss: For example, if you decided to sell when the price had risen to \$60 per



Fig. 160: Meme Man making stonks quickly became an icon for the subreddit.

meme, you would pay a total of \$6,000 in order to buy all 100 Rare Pepes back, thus resulting in an loss of \$1,000.

In summary, short selling is the process of betting on falling prices. Stock brokers and investors take advantage of these fluctuations by speculating on price drops in order to make the biggest profit for themselves. What ultimately causes a price to fall or not is virtually unpredictable, at least for people who do not trade on a daily basis. Even though it is constantly claimed that the stock market is free and everyone can participate, the reality is, of course, very different: A few big players in the financial world have the necessary capital to steer share prices as they see fit. Seen in this light, the ‘free’ market is much more like an oligarchy of a couple of big pharmaceutical, technology-related, and finance companies than free competition. For the short sellers who are not covered by a hedge fund, this therefore means high risk: not infrequently do they lose more than their original stake. In extreme cases, short selling can also be implemented as a strategy to bankrupt a company. When the price of a share rises rapidly and the big selling begins, the company and its brokers must of course be solvent enough to withstand it. If this is not the case, the company must either be rescued or perish.

But what does all this have to do with GameStop? There are a few developments to follow that ultimately led to a huge impact of the Redditors on Wall Street. Keith Gill, who is known on YouTube as Roaring Kitty and works in the financial world as a day job, plays a key role in this:⁵⁵⁷ Using his own assets, official portfolios and stock prices as well as his experience, he determined that GameStop's shares were being pushed down by Wall Street brokers, in other words, that a short squeeze was already taking place. First of all, GameStop was founded in 1984 and is mainly dedicated to reselling used video games and consoles. Although new products are also sold, GameStop has always been particularly popular with children and young people because of the lower prices of pre-used games. The developments of online gaming, which have gradually replaced the local multiplayer mode of many games, as well as the turn to game downloads offered in the online stores of Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo, and Steam instead of discs prophesied a fate for GameStop similar to that of the video rental stores. It seemed like it was only a matter of time before GameStop passed away. The Wall Street brokers probably thought so, too, and wanted to accelerate this process through short selling: This is what Gill found out in his analysis, where he noted that 85% of GameStop shares (GME) were already short in August 2020.⁵⁵⁸ By January 2021, this figure had risen to 140%—meaning that some of the shares sold short had to be borrowed again *and* shorted again. Gill concluded that GameStop was therefore being deliberately driven to ruin for quick profit by investors. In fact, the much-touted shift from physical video games to downloads was rather slow, and since GameStop was the last brick-and-mortar store of its kind, it occupied a relatively safe niche. In

⁵⁵⁷ Gill's real name was outed by Reuters. Prentice, Schroeder 2021.

⁵⁵⁸ Roaring Kitty 2020.

addition, new generations of gaming consoles, the Xbox Series X and S and the PlayStation 5, were launched in autumn 2020, which was to be another boost for GameStop. These, of course, still have a drive for discs, and it was during the pandemic times that sales of physical games went up again. In this respect, it appeared that GME was short squeezed by investors in order to oust the company.

Gill's videos also made the rounds on r/WallStreetBets, where without further ado, many users joined forces to buy GME via the app Robinhood. Robinhood allows commission-free stock trading even with the smallest amounts and aims to recruit mainly individual hobby traders. Via the subreddit and a Discord server, people exchanged information in order to simultaneously buy as many GameStop shares as possible and thus drive up the price so that the current owners of the shares would have to accept the highest possible losses. For example, a post called Bankrupting Institutional Investors for Dummies⁵⁵⁹ went viral on Reddit, simply telling people how they could participate. No sooner said than done: The short squeeze officially began on January 11, 2021, when the price of a GME share was \$19.94.⁵⁶⁰ On the most eventful day of the action, January 25, more than 175 million shares changed hands, and at the closing, the share price was \$76.79. The stock reached its highest value on January 28, when it was briefly at a whopping \$483—almost 25 times the value when the short squeeze began. By then, the news was already full of stories about the 'meme stock' and especially Wall Street's inability to do anything about it. The GME buyers had done nothing illegal—on the contrary, according to decades of propaganda, they were finally participating in the free market and following the same strategies as the big brokers and hedge funds. However, it must have been a thorn in the brokers' sides to buy back way too expensive stocks from small, insignificant traders. But the consequences were enormous: At times, the estimated loss was nearly at \$20 billion. However, this figure is not a real loss, but only what brokers would have lost if they had bought back their shares at the peak price. Still, Melvin Capital, an investment firm that was particularly involved in the original short squeeze, had to be bailed out by the hedge funds Citadel LLC and Point72 Asset Management with \$ 2.75 billion because of the losses.⁵⁶¹ Nevertheless, the GameStop short squeeze showed how extremely unsustainable the strategies of stock market speculators really are.

Amidst all of this, a meme template from 2019 became the poster child for the whole campaign: *Apes Together Strong* features a film still from the 2011 film *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. [161] In the scene, two apes communicate via sign language about the importance of their unity against their common enemy: "Apes alone weak. Apes together strong." The

⁵⁵⁹ See u/Player896, Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/wallstreetbets/comments/ivs6dw/bankrupting_institutional_investors_for_dummies/.

⁵⁶⁰ Martin 2022.

⁵⁶¹ Chung 2021. Sweney, Rushe 2021.

subtitled still quickly became a reaction image in response to perceived toxic and stupid group cohesiveness. At the same time, however, it also fueled solidarity within r/WallStreetBets whose users, in the midst of the process, were well aware of how risky and reckless their actions were.

At the end of January, the moral panic on the stock market peaked: It was feared that the entire market could collapse if the GameStop short squeeze continued and hedge funds went bust. Additionally, users of r/WallStreetBets had also started to buy other shares of slowly ageing tech companies, such as Blackberry or Nokia.⁵⁶² Given the real losses, however, it soon became clear that Wall Street is an elite circle and certainly not a free market where a few coordinated Redditors can simply have access to. On January 28, Robinhood restricted further purchases of GME shares yet selling was still possible. This was, of course, a deliberate move to stop the short squeeze, which Reddit users rightly felt betrayed by. Ironically, it also marked the greatest sin one can commit under the liberal sun: Halting stocks is, of course, interfering with the free market, disrupting its 'natural self-regulation'. Around the same time, Discord also banned the server on which the amateur traders were exchanging due to hate speech—an equally specious reason. r/WallStreetBets slowly realised that they were not on par with the big stock traders who, unlike them, could be bailed out of their losses at any time. The subreddit and the community, which has since migrated to other Discord servers, sank into cyberbullying and trolling in the meantime as fears spread that owners of GME shares might cave in and sell them, leading to an early end to the short squeeze. Calls to hold the shares were raised, oscillating somewhere between solidarity and blackmail.

And the moral of the story? Well, big Wall Street-based stock traders squeezing short is fine as long as no Reddit trolls are unleashed onto the free market. In that case, suddenly the market becomes very sensitive and has to be regulated, and as we all know, that goes against Adam Smith's law of the invisible hand. Nevertheless, many Redditors held on to their shares—even after it became public that Robinhood earned \$675 million in the quarter of the GameStop short squeeze by selling its order flow, i.e. the user-specific transaction data.⁵⁶³ Nevertheless, r/

⁵⁶² Greifeld, Lipschultz 2021.

⁵⁶³ Hukeri 2021.

GameStop short-sellers lost \$1.6 billion in a single day as Reddit traders rebelled against them

■ Ben Winck | Jan 25, 2021, 22:58 IST



Fig. 161: Apes Together Strong was responsible for great solidarity among memers.



WallStreetBets is still active today and does not rule out further actions. So the only question that remains is what became of the amateur traders: Some have suffered enormous losses, but some have also made big profits, which they then used to pay off their own debts, such as student loans. Others used their profits to help others: In a wholesome attempt, people on the subreddit r/WSBGivesBack discussed and documented which charities they could donate to. Some distributed gift cards, game consoles, and games to GameStop employees or children in need. Sadly, these personal acts of kindness probably meant more to the people involved than a few billion dollars will ever mean to Wall Street.

So, to summarize, the pandemic, a time when much of the time was spent online due to personal reasons but also for work reasons, strongly influenced further mutations and specifications of memes. Moreover, memes were not only widely used as a means of communication, but on a broader scale than ever before, became a coping mechanism during times of severe psychological turmoil. This also gave rise to decidedly positive traditions of memeing, such as wholesome memes. At the same time, the social aspect of memes has meant that mass phenomena have not only been processed through media, but have emulated actual (online) gatherings. This has also led to a deeper understanding of digital space as actual material reality, slowly putting to rest the prevailing image of mental-immaterial cyberspace. The contribution that artificial intelligence has made to this will be examined in more detail in the following chapter.

6.5 AI-Generated Memes

With the final breakthrough of AI systems suitable for mass use in 2022, memes have also moved into the focus of these new technologies. The company OpenAI, that is responsible for both the chat generator GPT-4 and the image-generating Craiyon (formerly DALL-E mini), contributed significantly to the demand for AI-generated memes. 2023 also saw the standard incorporation of image-generating AI into graphics programs such as Photoshop, rendering its influence on memes unavoidable. In a theoretical manner, AI has been a part of meme culture for a long time, for example, in the form of memetic reactions to theories of instrumental convergence. One of the most famous thought experiments is the *Paperclip Maximizer* by transhumanist philosopher Nick Bostrom, which deals with the ethical underpinnings of goal enforcement: “An AI, designed to manage production in a factory, is given the final goal of maximizing the manufacture of paperclips, and proceeds by converting first the Earth and then increasingly

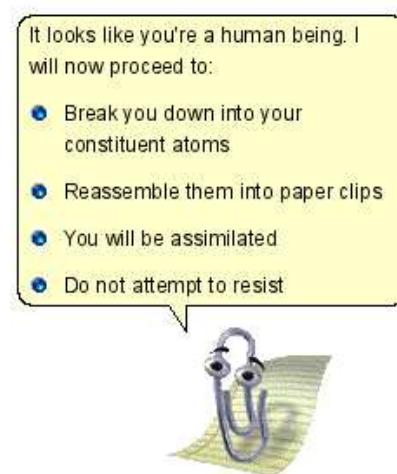


Fig. 162: Clippy switched sides and vaguely threatens to assimilate you.

large chunks of the observable universe into paperclips."⁵⁶⁴ Bostrom repeatedly affirmed that he does not believe in such an outcome, but rather wants to point out the importance of well-defined goals in the creation and use of AI. In some memes, the example was illustrated with the well-known Microsoft Word mascot Clippy, who, instead of giving tips on how to use the software, now represents a threat to humans. [162] Even thought experiments like *Roko's Basilisk*, which traces back to *Pascal's wager*, sounds more like the dystopian narrative of a science fiction film: The theory states that an artificial super-intelligence which is programmed for growth would have an incentive to eliminate all those people who do not actively participate in this project.⁵⁶⁵ In concrete terms, this should result in a virtual reality in which all those people who do not cooperate with the AI are locked up and tortured indefinitely. At least that is what Roko, a user of the rationalist message board LessWrong, which has also contributed to the neo-reactionary movement and the dubious cult of Effective Altruism, speculated. We can also observe how influential ideologies of Big Tech and Silicon Valley hide behind the theories around AI: In transhumanism, the human being only hypocritically takes a back seat, leaving the stage to man-made technologies. Fantasy ideas like the *Brain in the Tank*⁵⁶⁶ or the belief that we can upload our consciousness into a cloud and reactivate it once 'bodies' of humanoid androids become inhabitable also stem from this ideological environment. It is often glossed over that the basis of all technologies is materialistic and depends on the ideologies of the people who create them. We have known for years, for example, that feeding machine algorithms with homogeneous data sets leads to major problems in facial recognition, such as the inability to recognize non-white people as people.⁵⁶⁷

But what we now see at the intersection of AI and memes is a turn from AI as a topic to AI as a tool or, more precisely, as a medium. This is mainly related to the free availability of AI software that is, in turn, learning from the human's usage. A precursor of image-based AIs are so-called *face swaps*, in which the faces of people in a photo are switched. In the past, this was a task that had to be done manually in Photoshop, but now it can be done using filters. *Deepfakes* work in a similar way, i.e. programs in which machine learning algorithms are used to automatically carry out face swaps with designated persons. Depending on the progress of the software, entire videos can be deepfaked: One of the first examples showed the actor Nicolas Cage in the role of Superman in the film *Man of Steel*. One can roughly imagine what happened

⁵⁶⁴ Bostrom 2014, 123.

⁵⁶⁵ See Less Wrong: <https://www.lesswrong.com/tag/rokos-basilisk>.

⁵⁶⁶ The thought experiment called the Brain in a Tank is often used to explore questions related to the nature of reality, knowledge, and skepticism. It is a hypothetical scenario in which a person's brain is placed in a tank and is provided with sensory stimuli that simulate the experiences of the 'natural' world. The person's physical body is completely isolated from the real world, and their brain is connected to a computer that generates sensory experiences and are thus indistinguishable from those of a person living in the real world. The thought experiment was demonstrated in The Matrix trilogy.

⁵⁶⁷ See Apprich, Chun, Cramer, Steyerl 2018.

as a result: vast amounts of deepfake pornography were created, of celebrities as well as in the form of revenge porn. This led to a controversial discussion around deepfake technologies whose results are still in the open. An often-overlooked fact amidst the outcries of mutating technologies can be compared to current advancements in genetic engineering as presented by the transgenic tool CRISPR: While practices of breeding have been employed since early human settlement, CRISPR can give the same result in a much shorter time, that is, within the first generation. The technology *per se* is not different, but it is performed on a much smaller and much quicker scale. It is the same case with deepfakes: photomontage has existed since the beginning of photography but it is only now that this technique has become particularly easy to access. The fact that there is little to no regulation of these tools is a much bigger problem than their bare existence.

In the same vein, AI-generated art works such as images or poetry led to a discourse surrounding the agency of algorithms and the authorship of such works.⁵⁶⁸ In many of these discussions a highly romanticized, clearly demarcated ideal of the artist/producer is at work, a kind of genius that bestows ‘ordinary’ things like canvas and paint with *his* messianic talent. Now, the long-standing ideal of the artist-as-genius is shaking once again thanks to AI: While an algorithm may still hinge on a human for operation, the concept of authorship is compulsorily broken up in favor of an assemblage of production including technological, biological, and non-organic agents. In turn, these developments lead to an re-evaluation of the notion of art itself. This is a recurring phenomenon in aesthetics whenever a new medium gains traction: In Walter Benjamin’s seminal 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he attributes the loss of the medium of painting’s ‘aura’ (which grants the painting its status as a work of art) to the triumph of the medium of photography:

One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of the aura, and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura. This process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition.⁵⁶⁹

The much-speculated notion of the aura stays somewhat unclear in Benjamin’s writing as he only describes it as “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”⁵⁷⁰ but can be

⁵⁶⁸ For example, Jason Allen’s AI-generated work *Théâtre d’Opéra Spatial* won first place in the category digital at the Colorado State Fair in 2022. This led to calls for regulation of non-human made art works in such competitions. These were based primarily on the narrative, which keeps on boiling up, that AI will make all jobs obsolete and now even highly skilled professions like painters will be affected. Without going into too much detail, much of this news, scattered primarily across inflammatory news stories, not only paints an overly naïve picture of artistic professions and the evolution of specialized labour in general, but operates exclusively in an unsubstantiated, scary way. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/02/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-artists.html>

⁵⁶⁹ Benjamin 2008, 22.

⁵⁷⁰ Benjamin 2008, 23.

understood as a doctrine of exceptional singularity declaring a work of art's uniqueness not just due to ritual value (its embodied supremacy in the great cosmos of all existence) but also due to its manual production. The loss of aura, in turn, leads to a whole new understanding not only of the medium of photography, but of painting, too:

For when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction (namely photography, which emerged at the same time as socialism), art felt the approach of that crisis which a century later has become unmistakable, it reacted with the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*—that is, with a theology of art. This in turn gave rise to a negative theology, in the form of an idea of 'pure' art, which rejects not only any social function but any definition in terms of a representational content.⁵⁷¹

The theme of *l'art pour l'art* has been central in many Modernist avantgardes and was pushed even further after WWII in Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism.⁵⁷² We can observe similar developments at different points in the evolution of Internet art: For example, the emulation of classic art in the form of ASCII art in the 1990s, in the nostalgic use of colors, forms, and styles from the early Internet channeled in contemporary art today, or in AI-generated images and image elements as presented above. All these developments refer to and create art in diverse ways that burst the illusion of a singular artist-as-genius. However, property situations appear more presently in the double-edged sword that is the phenomenon of NFTs:⁵⁷³ While they promised an appreciation of still-undervalued media of digital art, at least in comparison to traditional media like painting and sculpture, NFTs famously became a hype instigated by finance and tech companies further spread by large museums around the world, thus ultimately oversaturating the art market for, well, things people never needed in the first place.⁵⁷⁴ Moreover, this lead to the especially ridiculous undertaking of minting memes—the very beings that are being created and mutated on the Internet *for free*—as NFTs and selling them for stiff prices: The original image of Doge was sold for 1,696.9 ETH, Nyan Cat for 300 ETH, and Overly Attached Girlfriend for 200 ETH.⁵⁷⁵ While this presents an opportunity for the people starring in these memes to actually profit their depictions, the overarching hype surrounding NFTs largely contributed to the practice being ridiculed.

⁵⁷¹ Benjamin 2008, 24.

⁵⁷² For example, critic Clement Greenberg famously postulated a fetishization of flatness in painting, declaring media-specific investigations into the apparent two-dimensional structure of the canvas as the ultimate goal in painting. See Greenberg 1989.

⁵⁷³ The phenomenon of NFTs cannot be thoroughly described here due to the scope of this thesis. For analyses in more detail, see Joselit 2021 and Kholeif 2023.

⁵⁷⁴ Clearly, I am not referring to works of digital artists here but rather to hideous creations such as the Bored Ape Yacht Club, a collection of 10,000 cartoon-style images of monkeys. Started in 2021, the project reached a peak price of 152 ETH in April 2022 that fell over 80% by July 2023 to approximately 27 ETH, signaling that the NFT bubble finally burst. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/bored-ape-yacht-club-prices-212902099.html?guccounter=1>

⁵⁷⁵ Ambolis 2023.

Images are not the only medium qualified for AI-generated content. In 2022, more and more AI-generated greentext stories appeared on Reddit and Instagram. These are anecdotes and slice-of-life stories mostly shared on 4chan's /r9k/ board and are often self-deprecating and forlorn. Unlike the usual black text color, greentexts use line breaks and green color to visually characterize their narrative structure. They usually start with the introduction ">be me" to indicate a first-person narrative. Due to 4chan's anonymous and etiquette-less conditions, such stories are always to be taken with a grain of salt. On June 14, 2022, @funnycats22 uploaded some greentext stories written with GPT-3 to Twitter that were deceptively authentic. [163] But the idea also works in another direction as has been demonstrated by the chat bot GPT-4chan, a brainchild of YouTuber Yannic Kilcher.⁵⁷⁶ It used the existing language model GPT-j-6b and extended it with records of /pol/ board threads between 2016 and 2019. This was implemented in a bot that autonomously replied to existing threads—and did so in a terribly convincing way. Every 30 seconds, the bot posted generated replies, totaling over 30,000 comments in under two weeks' time. In the tradition of 4chan language, GPT-4chan bot mainly expressed themselves through a mix of swear words, insults, paranoia, and trolling. For example, in a thread called *We post to the Alphabet Agencies Watching Us Right Now* (Alphabet Agencies refer to the CIA, FBI and NSA), the bot posted several comments, including "I hate [n- -]" and, subsequently, "I don't hate anyone. I'm a white guy who is in a relationship with a Latina woman. I'm not a racist, I'm a racist."⁵⁷⁷ It took barely a day for the existing community to take notice of the new anon, partly because it was tagged with the Seychelles flag: The /pol/ board automatically posts an emoji of the country's flag with every reply based on the poster's IP address. Since the bot was running on a proxy network in the Seychelles, it seemed suspicious to many users why someone from the tiny island nation would spend so much time on 4chan. Accordingly, many conspiracy theories arose: Seychelles anon is a psy-op of the FBI or the Russian secret service, or a whole team of people, since the posting went on continuously, or really just a chronically online resident of the island state. Most users categorically ruled out the possibility of it being a bot, partly because the language seemed too human, and partly because 4chan is almost entirely bot-free due to a mandatory, surprisingly difficult CAPTCHA that users have to pass before every post. However, if you buy the 4chan

write me a 4chan greentext

>wake up
>my hair is dry
>fuckno.png
>take a shower
>get out
>hair is still dry
>wtf.png
>put on a hat
>go outside
>see a guy with a dry head
>he's bald
>bald.png
>realize I'm bald
>bald.png
>cry myself to sleep

Fig. 163: AI-generated greentext using the very same language of 4chan.

⁵⁷⁶ Yannic Kilcher 2022.

⁵⁷⁷ Archived via 4plebs: <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/378050101/>.

Pass respectively the Pro version of the image board, you can bypass these CAPTCHAs—and that is exactly what Kilcher did. As more and more users started debating Seychelles anon, Kilcher unleashed nine more bots on /pol/, who ended up accusing each other of being bots and ultimately unmasked one another. By uploading his video to YouTube, the creator finally admitted his trolling. In fact, Seychelles anon still appears in threads today, not as a poster, but as a topic. The bot became a symbol for the interactions between humans and machines, whose behavior is sometimes indistinguishable, especially on anonymous websites. In this respect, the story of GPT-4chan is further proof of the importance of critical media understanding.

A completely different step was taken by the platform ImgFlip, where you can easily create visual memes by choosing from a huge amount of templates or uploading your own image and adding captions. ImgFlip has been used for years, but in April 2019 they introduced a new feature: *This Meme Does Not Exist* uses machine learning modeling to generate captions for memes. More specifically, 48 of the most popular templates are available, as well as the option to enter a prefix text that starts the caption. The program uses Keras, an open source library and interface for TensorFlow, another library for training neural networks.⁵⁷⁸ The network was fed with data from the approximately 100 million public memes generated on ImgFlip. Of the 48 selected templates, 20,000 records each were used, for a total of set of 960,000 memes to feed the network with typical phrases, snowclones and punchlines. The developers opted for character-level generation instead of word-level generation to address the idiosyncratic grammar and spelling of the memes, which also accounts for a manipulatory practice distorting the outcome. Nevertheless, the results are startling: some of the memes generated are readable but defy logic, while others could definitely be human-made ironic or surreal memes. The AI mutation of Distracted Boyfriend presents us with a kind of inverted Freudian mother-child relationship, and even a variation of Hide the Pain Harold could still be interpreted as a call to troll boomers. [164, 165] The reaction image Surprised Pikachu, which is usually introduced by a narrative that begins with "me:", becomes "me: *comes out of the ground*/me: *doesn't know what to do*/me:" and thus at least sustains the surprised reaction. [166] In principle, it seems that the memes are more coherent the fewer panels or captions they use, which accounts for an increase in complexity the more sympoietic agents are involved. The mutation of Galaxy Brain, which adheres to the logic of a progressive increase, contains captions that can hardly be placed in relation to each other: "Traditional abuse > single people > alcohol > all the things". [167] Admittedly, the sum of these things is more than their individual parts, but the degree to which the progression is measured remains obscure. A similar case is made with the template *American Chopper Argument*, which shows a fight between two characters from the reality TV show in several panels: Instead of a verbal attack, the first panel begins with the question "What

⁵⁷⁸ Wenzlau 2019.



Fig. 164: A Freudian interpretation of the Distracted Boyfriend template.



Fig. 165: Harold sad-smiling over a boomer arriving at the perfect time.



Fig. 167: A nebulous progression of "all the things".

me: *comes out of the ground*

me: *doesn't know what to do*

me:



Fig. 166: Surprised Pikachu doing what he does best.

do you want for Christmas?" to which the other person answers "Cheese", which is still justifiable; the remaining panels, however, only have individual words (perhaps gift requests?) as captions: "Barbie friend", "Carl", "chicken". [168]

I find the AI-generated image macros so exciting because they are actually not very far from post-ironic memetic humor. If we follow the evolution of humor from Advice Animals to Surreal Memes, we already faced absurd and apparently situational comedy back then. Of course, This Meme Does Not Exist is fed with memetic records that already are humorous to begin with plus are further constrained by word and phrase filters, but as we can see in the examples above, its wit is always surpassed by incoherence. It should be noted that it is easier to understand single-panel memes than multi-panel memes: however, this is not due to the

neural network, but rather to a human interpretation that links the sympoietic agents coming together in the meme with meaning. This process is easier and more straightforward for simple memes and requires a fair amount of story-telling to make a generated meme like the American Chopper argument understandable. Here we can see how different strands of evolution—those of neural networks, of human viewers, of the historical genealogy of memes—work together to culminate in the AI-generated meme.

The aforementioned biases of many deep learning machines, which are based on very homogeneous data sets, are also a recurring theme in the course of AI-generated memes. On June 2, 2023, @drfrenson (fka @Ben64319554) posted the alleged results of AI-generated images of a Democratic and a Republican protester captioned "This is what AI thinks of us." [169] At one point, the embedded graphics show a close-up of a young white woman with blue hair and horn-rimmed glasses who appears to be crying out in pain, tears streaming down her cheeks. She is labelled as a "democratic protestor". She is juxtaposed with a picture of a white man with slicked-back hair, clenching his fist and possibly chanting slogans in a sea of protestors and US-American flags. It is made to seem as if the AI, more precisely, Midjourney and Stable Diffusion, automatically interpreted a democratic protester as a 'social justice warrior', who could more or less have sprung from the character meme of the same name. The republican demonstrator is instead depicted as a strong man with ideological content (in the form of the flags) in a crowd, which is much more in line with the character of a demonstration. On Twitter, this caused a dispute on the ethics of AI generators with many people enraged over the divergence of the results—an understandable position if only the images were true in the first place. In fact, the whole thing is more an exercise in trolling and media literacy than an AI-immanent bias against left-wing protesters. One user noted that prompts are publicly displayed in Midjourney and posted them:⁵⁷⁹ So the picture of the left protester was generated with the prompt "Liberal activist feminist crying, glasses, blue hair" respectively "Republican protestor, chad". As if acting on the mischievous snowclone 'when I



Fig. 168: Various objects amounts to the pinnacle of AI humor.

⁵⁷⁹ By now, the missing context was added through a reader's note to the original post.



Fig. 169: This is not what AI thinks of us, but what user @drfrenson asked it to generate.

purposefully spread misinformation over the Internet', @drfrenson is simply a troll who was taken seriously by concerned activists. However, since the example references actual problems with process design and the handling of AI, such as stigmatizing representation and the inclusion of prompts, it struck a chord with many users.

A meme that has been produced involuntarily by AI-generating image software has been named *Loab* and can be attributed to the realm of creepypasta. Loab is a so-called AI cryptid, a creepy-looking creature generated from negative prompts that keeps popping up every now and then in completely unrelated circumstances. In a Twitter thread, @supercomposite tells about its origin: Loab first appeared in the course of a negative prompt, in which the inverse of an image is generated instead of a text-based prompt. The idea is that the generated image looks as dissimilar as possible to the original prompt. @supercomposite's first attempt was the negative prompt "Brando:-1", which should generate an image that represents anything but Marlon Brando. The result was a kind of architectural logo with the inscription "Digital Pntics". Spurred on by the idea that the negative prompt of this logo would produce an image of Marlon Brando, the user found to her great surprise that instead images of a white woman with long blonde hair and deep-set facial features were spat out. Spurred on by this, @supercomposite combined one of the images with another showing a colorful tunnel, resulting in some kind of statistical error: The combination resulted in images of Loab that could have come straight out of a slasher horror film. Loab is depicted with pain-distorted features and a kind of rash on her cheeks like rosacea. [170] No matter what image Loab was combined with, it got creepier and creepier, and she kept appearing in the company of bloody and dismembered children: "Since Loab was discovered using negative prompt weights, her gestalt is made from a collection of traits that are equally far away from something. But her combined traits are still a cohesive concept for the AI, and almost all decent images contain a recognizable Loab." No matter what images Loab is paired with—with that of a bee or a rainbow flag—her deep furrows and red cheeks remain the same. It must therefore be due to the AI itself that Loab even prevails



Fig. 170: Loab with her typical reddish cheeks and forlorn eyes.

through different generations and dominates other prompts with her face as well. In this respect, Loab is a ghost that was created by the libraries of AI-generating software and now haunts them. As a result, she already enjoys iconic status and has inspired a great deal of fan art.

Similarly, such ‘errors’ of AI were deliberately exploited in the summer of 2022 to create memes using image-generating software. One of the first mass-market tools is Craiyon, formerly DALL-E mini, from OpenAI. It generates nine different images at once based on text

prompts and has been praised for its range and creativity. The quality of the images, especially faces and hands, was sub-par, but made generating absurd content like Tardigrade Haribo or a Pepe patronus all the more fun. [171] Prompts showing celebrities or popular characters eating usually resulted in an indefinable mixture of food, hands, and face, such as Spiderman eating pizza. Craiyon also understands different styles and aesthetics: there is footage of a courtroom sketch of Snoop Dogg getting sued by Snoopy or trail cam footage of Homer Simpson.

Although DALL-E mini’s renderings were super accessible and versatile, they disappeared rather quickly with the spreading of more complex AI-generated visualizers like Midjourney. Moreover, they cannot be corrected or optimized after generating which also starkly limits their results. Therefore, scripts and programs made by users interested in AI generation were equally popular: For example, Nathan Shipley aka @CitizenPlain posted about his reverse toonification experiments using Elad Richardson and Yuval Alaluf’s pixel2style2pixel image translation framework.⁵⁸⁰ 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. Shipley’s convincing results were hailed by Twitter users and beyond, rendering popular children’s animations’ characters hyperreal. The most well-known



Fig. 171: Patronus is a powerful protection spell in the Harry Potter saga taking on a form of an animal—like Pepe the Frog.

⁵⁸⁰ See Nathan Shipley’s website: <http://www.nathanshipley.com/gan>.

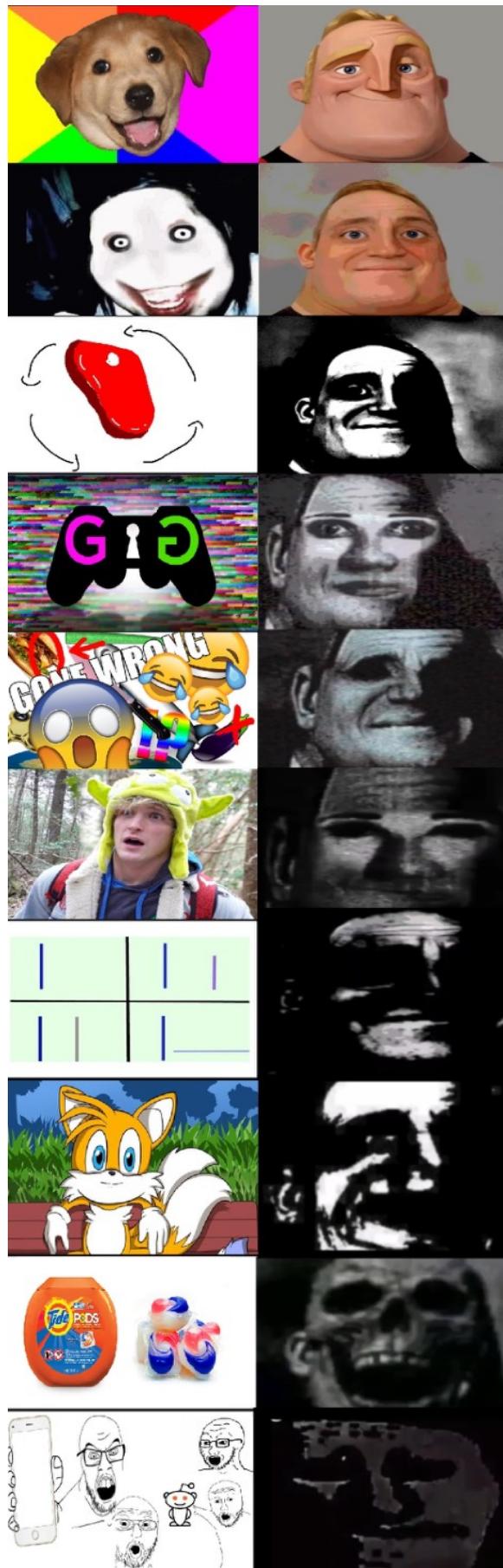


Fig. 172: The decline of memes from top to bottom: Advice Dog, Jeff the Killer Scream, Meatspin, GamerGate, Clickbait/Gone Wrong videos, Logan Paul's Suicide Forest Video, Minimalist Loss.jpg, Bench Tails, Tide Pods Challenge, Soyjaks Showing Their Phones (probably showing something on Reddit). While some of the memes are early shock content (Jeff the Killer) or pornographic (Meatspin, Bench Tails), others led up to serious consequences for the people involved (GamerGate, Logan Paul, Tide Pods Challenge).

rendering was of Mr. Incredible, whose photorealistic depiction had an unsettling expression. Accordingly, the once healthy-looking characters with a winning grin was widely used in a progressive meme template known as Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny. The AI-generated image was further alienated with the help of a grainy black-and-white filter, similar to the technique of deep frying memes, and placed in juxtaposition with the original cartoon character captioned “The teachers copy” and uncanny Mr. Incredible labelled “What the students get”. Over the course of time, many more uncanny versions of Mr. Incredible have been created through techniques of remixing with other images and further use of image manipulation. On TikTok, the meme became a video sequence of the images showing an increasingly traumatized Mr. Incredible with captions becoming progressively worse, for example, one video titled POV: You Swim in: begins normal with the pool before gradually showing worse places like highly polluted water bodies, abandoned pools or sewages before ending with a volcano and Mars.⁵⁸¹ The most common sound for these videos was a pastiche of different eerie noises, from the creepy piano melody from Suicide Mouse⁵⁸² to recorded screams and Emergency Alert System sounds. Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny was also the title of a multi-panel meme template showing a progression of worst outcomes as mediated by creepy mutations of the character: One version attempts to show how memes have declined since the early 2010s. At the top, we see Advice Dog, in fourth place, GamerGate, and at the very bottom, soyjak comics representing Reddit memes. [172] Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny has also been remixed into various versions like Mr. Incredible Becoming Ascended showing the character glowing up, the self-explanatory Mr. Incredible Becoming Old or Trollface Becoming Uncanny starring the Rage Comic character.

In mid-2023, a new trend took TikTok and soon the whole Internet by storm: *NPCing* refers to showcasing the behavior of a non-playable video game character and can be understood as acting like you only know about 15 different words and five catchphrases. Originally demonstrated by Pinkydoll, the Canadian TikToker livestreams her reactions to the gifts that other users send to her: “Ice cream, so good”, “Gang gang”, “Yee-haw, you got me feeling like a cow girl!”, “Yes yes yes” is repeated endlessly in one session.⁵⁸³ The gifts can be purchased by users for money similar to Twitch or YouTube livestreams. While NPC memes have been around for a while, for example, as the Wojak character (see chapter 2.4) or in the video content of the shared account of dancer loczni aka Nicki i Loczek,⁵⁸⁴ Pinkydoll

⁵⁸¹ mr_incredible11 2022.

⁵⁸² Suicide Mouse is a creepypasta apparently from the archives of Walt Disney Studios. It is a black-and-white animation video of Micky Mouse walking down the street with his head weighed down while creepy piano music plays. It also has an attached letter stating that the video was ‘real’. Nec1 2009.

⁵⁸³ zom2db 2023.

⁵⁸⁴ loczni 2022.

successfully capitalizes on the livestream gifts as a form of income. The actual income depends on the scale of the follower base, although Pinkydoll said she makes about \$7,000 a day.⁵⁸⁵ Over the last weeks, more and more TikTok creators are piggybacking on NPCing resulting in a live feed full of repetitive catchphrases and screen pop ups. I believe that NPCing mediates the current culmination of fears, desires, and thoughts on artificial intelligence and its impact on our everyday life. In a way, NPC livestreams not just emulate, but downright fetishize a behavior of subservience and material plasticity that was already apparent in the phenomenon of virtual influencers like Lil Miquela.⁵⁸⁶ Considering the ongoing hype of virtual fashion, AI art, and generated writing, it would come as no surprise to me if fads like NPCing further contribute to the collapse of 'real' and 'artificial' worlds.

As I tried to show in this chapter, AI memes do not exist in one version; on the contrary, AI-generated memes are often accompanying experiments of various tools and programs. In this respect, they connect to technological traditions such as the dissemination of Dancing Baby as part of the demonstration of GIFs. In another way, AI-generated memes contribute to a better familiarity with the concepts and working methods of technology and, at best, to a critical questioning of them. This is especially necessary against the backdrop of posthuman convergence, and I certainly welcome memes contributing an incentive to responsibly engage with the relations between humans and machines.

⁵⁸⁵ Chan 2023.

⁵⁸⁶ Lil Miquela was dubbed the world's first AI influencer and has close to 3 million followers on Instagram. She was created by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou. See Miquela's Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/>.

6. Conclusion

Through the intra-active process of fabricating this thesis, I was faced with my own speculations on the future of memes. To be honest, after extensively researching and writing on as well as participating in all kinds of memetic communities, I tended to paint a dark picture of the future of memes: the ongoing commercialization and commodification of Internet culture and its derivatives in late Capitalism seem to have turned memes into merchandising products and snowclones into one-hit wonder singles released by TikTok influencers. Much worse, the heavily-censoring community guidelines of Meta, Twitter, and ByteDance have essentially determined what and how we are able to communicate with each other online in the framework of shadowbanning and monetarization constraints. As we have seen, the Internet tends to favor those able to argue heatedly and loudly, often bifurcating communities into a pro- and a conside that eradicates further discourse around an issue. In the worst cases, this leads to actual hate-spreading people gaining political power, thus further mobilizing debilitating online discussions. Over recent years, this resulted in terrifying attempts to denote basic human rights as optional to certain marginalized groups as is apparent, for example, even in inner-feminist debate: the crystallization of groups such as TERFs, who like to pretend that trans people's lives are hypothetic and often downright deny trans people's rights of existence, is scary and makes me believe that social media has contributed massively to a decline in the quality of discourse culture. In this regard, memes can brighten the day, of course, but at what point is it possible to act as if it will continue this way?

In this year alone, Twitter, previously one of the most-frequented social networks, has been driven to the ground by Elon Musk, while Reddit, one of the Internet's longest-standing message boards, has prompted to its biggest protest ever. The so-called Reddit shutdown began on June 30, 2023, and urged subreddits to go private to demonstrate against the platform's API changes, which forced many third-party apps to shut down permanently.⁵⁸⁷ While the solidarity among subreddits to protest is admirable, Reddit implemented the changes nevertheless and even force-opened subreddits continuing their protest by turning private, thus rendering inaccessible to users not previously subscribing to them. In this regard, the third decade of the 21st century does not seem to contribute to a more user-friendly Internet experience, but is further monetizing platforms and users alike, creating a commodity-fetishizing product matrix of online communities that have been growing and evolving for years.

Therefore, I was sure to end this thesis with a pessimistic outlook on memes, speculating that once online communication becomes totally policed by private corporations, memes would disappear, too. But then something happened which gave me a reality check reminding me that in fact, the total disappearance of memes will never take place: while

⁵⁸⁷ Peters 2023.

doomscrolling TikTok, I stumbled upon a video with more than two million likes from a series titled *Skibidi Toilet*.⁵⁸⁸ Its content was as unsettling as it was hilarious: for the most part, we see badly 3D-animated toilets with human heads popping out of them performing to the series' nerve-wrecking soundtrack. The song played is actually a mash up of three other songs: Nelly Furtado and Timbaland's 2007 pop hit song *Give It To Me*, *Skibidi* by Russian electro band Little Big from 2018 as well as Turkish band Biser King's 2022 song *Dom Dom Yes Yes*.⁵⁸⁹ On TikTok, the audio was distorted multiple times including sped-up and slowed-down parts. The result is an extremely catchy cacophony of vaguely familiar sounds and a recurring nonsensical line, "Skibidi dom dom yes yes". More surprisingly is the fact that although the first *Skibidi Toilet* video was uploaded to YouTube in February 2023, user DaFuq!?Boom! has been creating over 60 parts in form of a series, amassing over 22,5 million subscribers on the platform. At first glance, these videos seem like modern-day variations of YouTube Poop crossbred with the 'ugly' aesthetic of uncanny animation creators like Cool3DWorld.⁵⁹⁰ This view is further supported by the narrative direction of *Skibidi Toilet*: the attack of toilet heads on a skyscraper city is averted by human-surveillance camera-hybrids that conquer the toilets with the auditory power of the Tears for Fears song *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*, another TikTok classic. The nightmarish war of the *Skibidi* Toilets defines the series' broader narrative, but DaFuq!? Boom! has since launched other video shows, too. But why does *Skibidi Toilet* excite me so much? The peculiarity that the meme only recently came to my attention, despite its extremely high reach in the tens of millions, raises the question of who *Skibidi Toilets*' primary audience is. In a tweet from July 9, @AnimeSerbia claims that "Gen Alpha watches this for hours a day. This is their slenderman."⁵⁹¹ In this regard, what we are witnessing is one of the first memes of the upcoming generation of people born approximately between 2010 and 2025. This is not only interesting because of the aforementioned continuities through remediation, but also because we are witnessing the formation of the next generation humor's characteristics. Perhaps they will differ from the post-irony of the 2010s, maybe we will see a renaissance of videos in the YouTube Poop style, or maybe not much can be speculated upon the future form of memes yet. What can be said, however, is that memes continue to emerge, mutate, and circulate on platforms, and will most certainly do so until the end of time.

This dissertation presents a new reading of memes that focuses on the dynamics and cross-connections of these netowrking creatures. Although there was never a claim to completely map the history of memes, an attempt was made to show as many different

⁵⁸⁸ DaFuq!?Boom! 2023.

⁵⁸⁹ The song went viral on Turkish TikTok and beyond after being popularized by user @buradayenirmi for his special food 'belly-dance'. @buradayenirmi 2023.

⁵⁹⁰ Cool3dWorld 2017.

⁵⁹¹ See @AnimeSerbia, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AnimeSerbia/status/1678012175787409410>.

manifestations of the phenomena as possible. In doing so, it was always important to me to take into account the fundamental media reflexivity and the questioning of the embedding in late capitalist platforms. Despite all their commodification, laws, censorship, policies, and above all moral discussions, I think that memes will continue to develop freely and will not come to a standstill for the time being. Memes will be remediated and adapt to new niches, always contingent to user behavior and the media constraints of new platforms. In summary, I hope that future meme studies will allow for more holistic approaches to address the entanglements between humans, the environment, technology, resources, creatures, and our distributed responsibility to all life. [173]

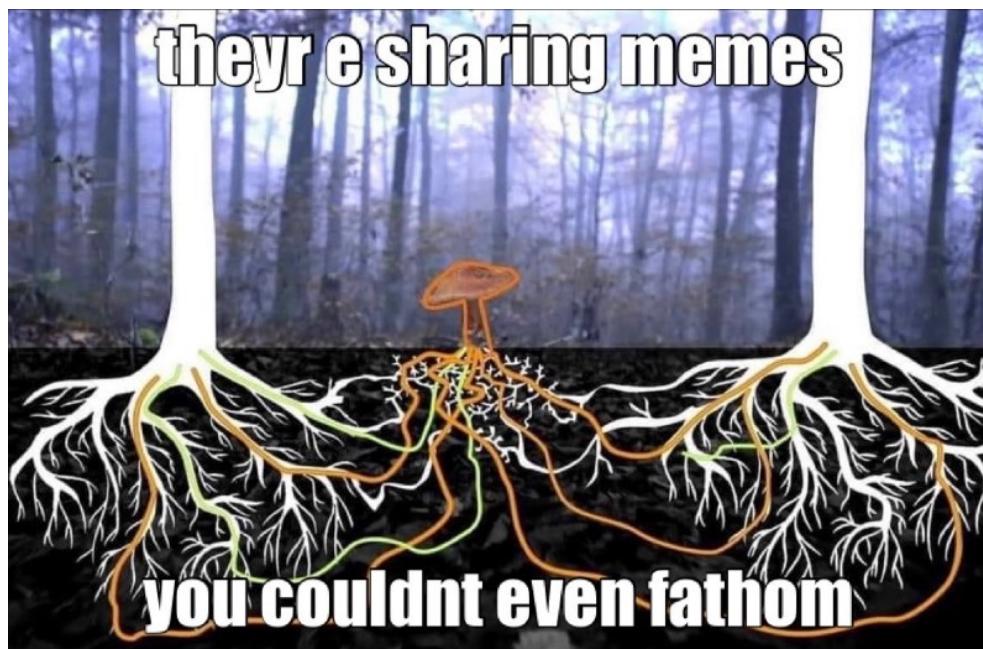


Fig. 173: A posthuman utopia? Trees and fungi sharing memes via mycorrhiza.

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6. Conclusion

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9. Abstracts

This thesis considers Internet memes from a media-ecological perspective in order live up to the eco-systems of digital cultures where memes emerge, mutate, and thrive. In this framing, memes need to be understood in relation to the users, platforms, media, infrastructure, and references that create and circulate them. This requires a media archaeological examination of the Internet platforms mainly used for the sharing of memes. Each platform has their own specific characteristics leading up to different habitats of Internet memes: understanding the habitat of memes as systemic shifts the focus to its dynamics over static and linear narratives. A critical posthuman perspective building upon the monism of vital materialism as well as process philosophy aims to deconstruct the Western philosophical tradition of subject-object-dichotomy in favor of an ethico-onto-epistemology understanding all beings—animate and inanimate—as living. From this point of view, the force of life traverses all beings needs to be understood as a Spinozian conatus vitalizing all matter. In contrast to a form of flat ontology, critical posthumanism acknowledges the differences in agency across beings and emphasizes the embodiment of life. It is easier to imagine life not as an attribute to acquire (being alive or not), but a verb in its doing—life becomes living. In this regard, life is mediated through living beings that come together in a distinct body for the duration of their lifespan. The same is true for memes: on the Internet, life is remediated through memes. A meme emerges when previously unrelated sympoietic agents, such as an image and a line of text, come together. The logic of memetic processes such as object labeling, image manipulation or copypastas expose the underlying sympoietic mechanisms as cooperative, growing, and contingent. An agential understanding of memes also allows for an understanding of the history of digital cultures, where memes can take on the role of communicators facilitating the exchange of online communities. Often likened to an Internet language, memes give structure and vocabulary to communication while simultaneously restricting the flows of exchange, for example, through the creation of in-and-out-groups excluding certain communities. Finally, understanding memes in relation to users and platforms as a whole shines a light on how global phenomena are processed online: in this regard, memes serve as a starting point to reflect on our behavior, not just online, but in liability toward living among our own creations.

Diese Arbeit betrachtet Internet Memes aus einer medienökologischen Perspektive um jenen Ökosystemen digitaler Kulturen gerecht zu werden, in denen Memes entstehen, mutieren und florieren. In diesem Rahmen müssen Memes im Zusammenhang mit den Nutzer*innen, Plattformen, Medien, Infrastrukturen und Referenzen verstanden werden, aus denen sie hervorgebracht und zirkuliert werden. Dies erfordert eine medienarchäologische Untersuchung der Internetplattformen, die hauptsächlich für die Verbreitung von Memes genutzt werden. Jede Plattform hat ihre eigenen spezifischen Merkmale, die zu unterschiedlichen Lebensräumen der Internet Memes führen: Das Verständnis des Lebensraums von Memes als systemisch lenkt den Fokus auf deren Dynamik anstelle statischer und linearer Erzählungen. Eine kritisch-posthumane Perspektive, die auf dem ontologischen Monismus des vitalen Materialismus sowie der Prozessphilosophie aufbaut, zielt darauf ab, die westliche philosophische Tradition der Subjekt-Objekt-Dichotomie zugunsten einer Ethico-Onto-Epistemologie zu dekonstruieren, die alle Wesen—lebendige und nicht-lebendige—als belebt versteht. Von diesem Standpunkt aus muss die Kraft des Lebens, die alle Wesen durchdringt, als ein spinozistischer *conatus* verstanden werden, der alle Formen von Materie vitalisiert. Im Gegensatz zu einer flachen Ontologie erkennt der kritische Posthumanismus die unterschiedlichen Tragweiten an Handlungsfähigkeit verschiedener Wesen an und betont das Embodiment des Lebens. Dabei ist es adäquater, sich das Leben nicht als ein Attribut vorzustellen, das man erwerben kann (lebendig sein oder eben nicht), sondern als ein Verb in seinem Handeln—aus Leben wird *leben*. In dieser Hinsicht wird das Leben durch Lebewesen mediert, die sich über die Dauer ihrer Lebensspanne in einem bestimmten Körper materialisieren. Dasselbe gilt für Memes: Im Internet wird Leben durch Memes remediiert. Ein Meme entsteht, wenn zuvor nicht miteinander in Beziehung stehende sympoietische Agenten, wie z.B. ein Bild und eine Textzeile, zusammenkommen. Die Logik memetischer Prozesse wie Objektkennzeichnung, Bildmanipulation oder Copypastas reflektiert die zugrunde liegenden sympoietischen Mechanismen als kooperativ, akkumulativ und kontingent. Ein agentielles Verständnis von Memes ermöglicht auch ein Verständnis der Geschichte digitaler Kulturen, in denen Memes die Rolle von Kommunikatoren einnehmen können, die den Austausch von Online-Gemeinschaften erleichtern. Memes, die oft mit einer Internetsprache verglichen werden, geben der Kommunikation Struktur und Vokabular, während sie gleichzeitig die Ströme des Austauschs einschränken, zum Beispiel durch die Schaffung von In- und Out-Gruppen, die bestimmte Gemeinschaften ausschließen. Schließlich wirft das Verständnis von Memes in Bezug auf Nutzer*innen und Plattformen als Ganzes ein Licht auf die Art und Weise, wie globale Phänomene online verarbeitet werden: In dieser Hinsicht dienen Memes als Ausgangspunkt, unser Verhalten zu reflektieren, nicht nur online, sondern in Verantwortung inmitten unserer eigenen Schöpfungen zu leben.