# Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniël de Zeeuw

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

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

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

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fig. 1 <https://giphy.com/gifs/pipe-einstein-s5z4Oy4xrezm0>



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The significance of circulation and exchange in memes—their evolutionary function as asignifying network symbionts—is precisely because they mediate signifying content with impersonal scales. The particular quality of the online memetic ecology is its inclusion of both registers. Meme culture is a process of mediation latticing the gulf between the scales of affect and identity, information, and social system. (add page no. in final reader)

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

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

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

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

Memetic terror is an affective, networked fear of breaching. It replicates itself through exposure to repeated information, reverberating throughout digital infrastructures, as it interacts with personal devices, policy, and regulation, as well as users’ bodies. (add page no. in final reader)

These moments get their affective charge from witnessing—however briefly—the seething incomprehensibility from which the meme emerges and suffuses our being-in-the-world. In many ways, then, the manner in which the meme covers—or reveals—an apparatus of pure terror is analogous to the function of the spectres, zombies, and demons who emerge with the arrival of the deterritorializing forces of global capitalism.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, this is precisely the thesis of Leslie Braun’s reflection on how infrastructures of networked communication, extractive capitalism, and myth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo come to be articulated together in a viral video of the mystical siren Mami Wata, apparently captured by Chinese workers laying submarine internet cable.

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

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

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Fig. 4

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

The alt-right [...] have molded their image into that of an underdog – a convenient ploy to justify aggressive tactics such as spamming pro-choice Facebook groups with images of aborted fetuses, raiding subreddits and shitposting cringe compilations of angry feminists and liberals appearing to ‘cancel free speech’. Their outreach was far and wide – no corner of the internet was spared. (add page no. in final reader)

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

These counter-strategies, however, are not wholly bound to the online domain and can have concrete, real-world effects. In ‘Your Feed is a Battleground: A Field Report of Memetic Warefare in Turkey’, Särp Ozer explains that memes portraying the former Minister of Finance and Treasury—Berat Albayrak—as an incompetent dummy caused him so much humiliation that it prompted his resignation. Memes, like those made by Anahita Neghabat, a meme maker and activist who criticizes the right-wing climate of Austria with her Instagram page @ibiza\_austrian\_memes, highlights how memes are an essential aspect of collective empowerment strategies that are used by marginalized actors to build resilience through a process of self-affirmation.

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

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

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

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

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

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