# Wojak’s lament: Excess and Voyeurism Under Platform Capitalism Anthony Glyn Burton

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

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

On one hand, these extractive processes are the primary engine by which the circulation that makes up platformed experience functions, and their infrastructures shape both the possibility of what can be said, how one can reply, and what content is fit for circulation. On the other hand, there is a trace left over by those memes that articulate something beyond homophilic formatting and data capture. There is the impression of there being someone else out there, someone who is like me but not me. Instead of being reified into the commodity form through the capture, extraction, and storage of information, the circulation of memes articulates the presence of an other. This other goes beyond the cardboard cutout version of the social world and leaves the affective impression of belonging. By exceeding its capture, memery points to a potential avenue for transcending the formatting and freezing of digital life into mere bunker data.

## The Phantasmagoric Social: Excess, Memes, and Affective Identification

In an aside of Chapter 2 in Platform Capitalism, Nick Srnicek contests Tiziana Terranova’s view that user output is labor, claiming that since ‘most of our social interactions do not enter into a valorization process… it is hard to make the case that what they do is labor, properly speaking… [instead] advertising platforms appropriate data as a raw material’.[[1]](#footnote-1) But this view of what constitutes valorization assumes all that can enter into this process is only labor itself, freely brought to market. While commodity capital self-valorizes through the extraction built into alienated labor, Srnicek’s note opens the question of what alienation, if not labor’s, constitutes this ‘raw material’ from which the phantasmagoric social is constructed? True to its ghostly presence, this raw material is mined from the iterative production of affect. With the ‘anxiety of enjoyment’, Jodi Dean names the compulsion to continually post that is engineered by platforms and their construction of the phantasmagoric social. Activity on social platforms provides a facsimile of sociality that, instead of leaving us with the sense of accomplishment of furthering social bonds, postpones this very drive in a masturbatory, junkish enjoyment.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is this very deferral of affective closure—the neverending loop of alienated utterance and activity—that constitutes the ‘raw material’ valorized by platforms. In this sense, then, these platforms are machines that circulate affect yet cancel the potential for activation. The circulation of affect is the stream from which platforms extract surplus value. Despite it not being an instance of exploitation in the classical sense, there remains a valorization with a one-sided benefit. The extraction of user data from platform activity gets something from us that we ourselves have no use for, and relies on the continual construction of something new to observe, something activating to react to, and in turn new data to hoard in the bunker, to justify its own subterranean existence. Called upon to reanimate the very process that once gave it life, this data creates an closed loop that informs the boundaries that mark out platforms and their social space: hence the recommendation systems, sharing, nudges to circulate, and a resulting homophily that signifies a welcome into an enclosed space.[[3]](#footnote-3)

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

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

Figure 1: Wojak himself

Figure 2: Wojak wall

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

But there’s conflicting information. Part of the NPC genre, the ‘I wish I was at home’ meme illustrating the inner monologue of a person at a party, can be found first posted on the Wayback Machine from December 2009 on the website ’Sad and Useless.’ This is an image reposting website that describes itself as the ‘The Most Depressive Site on the Internet’, and likely not the original source of the image.[[8]](#footnote-8) Wojak, likewise, makes it clear in his AmA that he found the picture at some point before he posted it on Krautchan’s /int/. Yet short of the original MS paint virtuoso who created the Wojak face emerging (let alone being listened to!), it’s likely that these traces are the closest that we’ll get to knowing the origin.[[9]](#footnote-9) From here, the concept of wireframe MS paint figures that represent a particular affect, monologue, or personality exploded into the many variations we know today.

## NPCs and the Games They Play

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

Take Chad. ‘Chad’ is the name given to an NPC-style character who represents the archetype of a man who supposedly receives a disproportionate share of women’s attention and sexuality. He is used to represent the ultimate alpha male, the synthesis of the highest point on each of the hierarchies that grow out of neoliberalism’s reconfiguration of the social into the realm of the homo economicus[[11]](#footnote-11). With Popeye biceps, a Clark Kent jaw and a browline to block out the sun, he represents an archetype of a person who is purportedly encountered day-to-day, yet never exists within the communities to which he is called to account. Chad is especially popular in digital incel communities, whose chief ideology, the scientific black pill, articulates a victimization complex and rank misogyny based on a rigidly Manichean system of social value that locates themselves at the bottom. The iterative and enclosed nature of the community (a nature of its own making) prevents, by necessity, the existence of an *actual* Chad in its midst, for the incel’s reflexive difference from Chad-types is how they define their social existence. Yet Chad the *meme* appears both in language and image as a sort of summoned Godhead among self-identified incels. What is the function of this representation? By existing outside the mass of players in the community, he becomes an imagined extension of the incel’s own existence. Memetically, he rejects the bounding of a particular system. Thus the construction and iteration of Chad is the summoning of a spectre whose presence acts as a constant reminder of an outside to the concatenated, homophilic image of the social world presented by platform capitalism. On the one hand this mechanized body compacts the mass whose culture he reflects into a ‘molar’ framework, a mass of totalities, discrete and atomized aggregates that make up the incel’s idea of his own experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet this very molarity marks out a metastability under which the individual acts of communities can themselves flourish as unstable, changing, and possessing the potential for generative activity as opposed to being frozen in time and place as the imagified, extracted object. Chad posits an outside that remains after the engineering of sameness and voyeuristic extraction has run its course. And while network capitalism is explicitly marked by this valorization circuit, this very circulation continually produces an excess that remains outside of its momentary capture.

If there is such a thing as meme magic, it is this: the combination of individual identification and collective iterability present in the Wojak meme makes apparent the simulated nature of the platform’s social. By being unstable in their ability to be remixed, reiterated, and reposted, the not-quite-humans of NPC-style memes become part of a metastability that represents those elements of the social world. This reality, of course, being that which affect machines and their engineering of homophily try so hard to avoid. The 𝕩 of white wojak becomes the 𝕪 of Chad, before it turns into n𝕫 of Stacy, coomer, doomer, doomer gf, that grid where all the female wojaks are matched to works in feminist theory, et cetera. What is originally a normie in both presence and aesthetic becomes the normie who is such because he is busy being Chad in the normie world. The cast is outgrown as the borders of the platform itself are ever more strongly articulated as enclosing, and at every iteration ∈ the non-playable realm qua outside. Simondon calls this process transduction, a process of mutual change that allows for individuation to occur. Through the ever-evolving presence of those who exist outside the platformed social, the very idea *of* a world outside the confines of sameness takes shape as a metastability.[[13]](#footnote-13) This chain of development is causal, through the remixing and reiteration of particular expressions and affects contained within the memetic form. And in the process of this unfolding, a split happens that allows for memes to exceed the capture and circulation of capital flow. Since extraction machines deal only in the formal elements of exchange, they can only capture the act of sharing: while it relies on this exact process of remixing to sustain the project of continued capture, it cannot recognize the metastability that is articulated through the unfolding chain. Thus, the metastability that allows for the NPC to articulate shared experiences maintains itself through the refuse of platform capital: that which is left over after circulation has been captured and tracked.

## Wojak is You

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

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1. Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jodi Dean, “Affect and Drive,” in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 88-100 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, “Queering Homophily,” in *Pattern Discrimination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Of course, there’s also the specific gray, plain-expressioned ‘NPC’ meme of this same genre. I’m intentionally using NPC to describe the genre and not just the plain gray face because the idea behind the NPC—that these line drawings represent types of people one encounters offline, with no ‘inner monologue’, as one poster puts it—is crucial to how these images take form as empty signifiers, and to call them ‘Wojak’ derivatives is to undermine the ways they have iterated much beyond the original Wojak drawing. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brave of me to admit, isn’t it? [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Munster, *An Aesthesia of Networks: Conjunctive Experience in Art and Te*chnology (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I’m drawing this information from a Reddit Ask Me Anything thread made by the poster. It can be read at https://web.archive.org/web/20190414195031/https://www.reddit.com/r/datfeel/comments/p8v3d/iama\_wojakvoyack%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%8F%D0%BA\_guy\_who\_felt\_first\_feel\_amaa/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A little fuel to the fire of what, exactly, constituted the pre-platform capital internet is this idea that there was a time when everything was not stored or captured in a bunker. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. And amateur internet researchers will always be more apt at tracing these histories than any academic, because being online is being one and the same with your own archive. For a completist history of what is known about Wojak et. al., I direct the user to https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/wojak/children, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-wish-i-was-at-home-they-dont-know, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-wish-i-was-at-home-they-dont-know, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/npc-wojak>. There is also information on the Wayback’s copy of Encyclopaedia Dramatica. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It's in vogue to refer to this group as the ‘alt-right’, but neo-fascism, reactionary impulses, rigid individualism and a victim complex have been the sentiments of right-wing culture long before they found refuge online (see Mondon and Winter 2020, Robin 2012, Traverso 2016, or five random links in the ‘history’ section on the Tea Party wikipedia page). The term itself originated in a speech at the H.L Mencken club in a 2008 speech by Paul Gottfried, author of riveting books like *The Conservative Movement*, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt*, *The Strange Death of Marxism*, and *After Liberalism* (published 2001). And considering the term ‘alt-right’ was popularized by Richard Spencer, one of its self-anointed leaders (Wallace-Wells 2015; this was before he became famous for getting punched on camera), using it with regularity is playing into an ahistorical con. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books 2015), 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects,* trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017), 140; see also Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Marc Tuters, and Sal Hagen. “(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan,” *New Media & Society* 22, no. 12 (2020): 2226. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (New York: Routledge, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)