# Le Meme d’Auteur, or: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Original Content Memes. Clusterduck (Tommaso Cappelletti, Silvia Dal Dosso, Francesca Del Bono, Aria Mag, Noel Nicolaus)

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

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

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

If only it were this simple.

As Clusterduck,[[5]](#footnote-5) we’re currently working on a project called Meme Manifesto.[[6]](#footnote-6) During our research, we bumped into a cluster of images that shattered our preconceptions about memes. They looked like memes. They felt like memes. However, they presented with some important differences: while often quoting or referencing popular memetic formats, they didn’t rely on them. They weren’t playing according to the usual rules. Sure, the basic mechanics were the same: images and texts of all sorts, juxtaposed through remixing and collage. However, the thought and care given to these creations was unusual. The visuals were polished, the fonts refined. The roughness and ‘ugly’ aesthetics of these works was clearly the result of careful work, inspired by undeniable visual savviness. In more than one case, the quoting of artistic currents or famous artworks was explicit, though of course masked under the usual layers of memetic irony. Most importantly: not only could these images easily be traced back to their original author, individual authorship seemed to be one of their main hallmarks.

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

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

## PART I: A Community gets Deplatformed

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

These changes had two immediate results: firstly, Tumblr was readmitted to the App Store. Secondly, the highly influential, sex-positive queer subcultures that had chosen Tumblr as their natural habitat were forced to look for a new home. While many members of this community migrated to decentralized platforms like Discord, where they can be found to this day, and others decided to raise NSFW friendly platforms which are more or less small Tumblr clones,[[9]](#footnote-9) a considerable number decided to settle in one of the most guarded, commercialized and puritan places of the internet: Instagram. What were we to make of this conundrum?

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

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

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

It is interesting to note how, over time, Tumblr users changed their behaviour from a ‘free repost’ approach to a strict ‘quote the source’ approach. From the start, Tumblr’s platform architecture offered a backtracking system: users could travel backwards from one repost to another, in order to reach the first source. But sometimes, for the most viral images, going backwards would be a very long and perilous travel, or sometimes a ‘scumbag reposter’ would do a copy-pasta instead of a proper repost. Over time, this became a problem, leading to a slow but sure change in user behavior. As artist,performer, and active Tumblr community member since 2012 Mara Oscar Cassiani told us in a private conversation, it’s difficult to define whether this change was due to a rising awareness of the flaws of Tumblr’s reposting system, or if, instead, the shift was due to the influence that Instagram was having on the community (more on this later). Whatever the explanation, around 2015 many users that were active both on Tumblr and Instagram realized that they could easily monetize their online activity on Instagram, trading online clout for fame, followers and sometimes even financial revenues. Soon, a ‘new awareness’ spread on Tumblr. The ‘free repost’, which until then had been the standard practice on Tumblr, turned into a constant struggle for attribution: reposters started to receive numerous direct messages by the original creators of popular images, asking them to quote them properly. Soon enough, specific rules of conduct for attributions began to appear on many platforms—not just on Tumblr, but also Pinterest, for instance. As we will see in a bit, this aspect remains present in the ‘unwritten laws’ of what we will call the *meme d’auteur,* or Original Content (OC) community.

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

## PART II: A War Looms Over the Horizon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## PART III: Memers of the World, Unite!

To this day, and despite many admirable efforts, social theory has not been able to restore the concept of social class back to its old prominence. One of the most interesting attempts to update this key notion of Marxist thought was by New Media theorist McKenzie Wark in her book *A Hacker Manifesto*.[[27]](#footnote-27) According to Wark, cognitive capitalism is characterized by a new dynamic of class exploitation, determined by the control of intellectual property. The result is the emergence of a new dominating group, which she calls the vectorialist class:

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

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

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

Clearly, the presence of the hacker class on the vectoralist platforms gave rise to numerous conflicts and contradictions: from profiles being cancelled without notice under the infamous pretext of community policies violation, to the rising frictions with commercial predatory profiles which appropriate memes without crediting the original authors. However, all attempts to create some sort of unified resistance movement, whether through coordinated actions, strikes or even the creation of a ‘Memers’ Union’, so far have been unsuccessful. An excellent analysis of the underlying weaknesses of these efforts has been proposed by the meme research group *The Philosopher’s Meme*:

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

## PART IV: Money Makes the World go Around

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

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

Presently, the OC memers’ awakening into a self-counscious hacker class seems stuck in a tragic and constant struggle between the need to monetize original creations on the one hand, and the mirage of a collective hive mind on the other. On the facebook private group /tpmg/ - TPM Meme Research and Development, one of the many research groups powered by the blog The Philosopher’s Meme, user Kit Jones summarized a popular opinion of what a meme should be and why OC memes can’t (supposedly) exist:

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

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

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

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24. Usually by means of coordinated mass reporting of supposed community rules violations. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. https://femme4memes.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
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27. McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Gene Ray, “Tactical Media and the End of the End of History,” *Linksnet,* November 12, 2006, https://www.linksnet.de/artikel/20223. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. However, as Finnish philosopher Pekka Himanen observed, the influence of that original hacker ethos on today’s creative class might be best understood through the lens of Weber’s study on the relationship between protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism—meaning that, just as not all capitalists necessarily incorporated protestant ethics in their personal lives, not all creatives live according to the strictest precepts of hacker culture (see Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic: and the Spirit of the Information Age* (New York: Random House, 2001)). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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