# Deeper and Higher: Memes as Scalar Abstraction Geoffrey Hondroudakis

## How Many Layers Are You On?



Figure 1 - The 'Layers of Irony' Meme - first posted to the ‘Special Meme Fresh’ Facebook page on October 24th, 2015

This is an old meme – which is to say that it’s tired, tiresome, coopted, boring – it’s well and truly dead. But the vulture of Minerva flies at dusk, and there’s still carrion to be picked at on this .png. It’s telling—less for its structure, template, or relation to irony, post-irony, meta-irony, dada, what have you—than for its (self-derisive and irreverent) recognition of the stratifications at work in meme culture. If we (over)read this image, we find it posits a formal nesting: a fractal or sedimentary structure to memetic diffusion wherein the reader/maker/distributor exists at some indexed level or geometric strata within the memetic ecology. There are gradations and frames to parse, a whole rippling architecture of information and affect. Memes, like onions, ogres, and irony, have *layers.*

There are other memes that you could point to as examples here: the expanding brain or iceberg-tiers templates are obvious, if somewhat uninteresting candidates. These index increasing levels of complexity, abstraction, sociocultural volatility (the hotness of a take), or subcultural specificity. They’re about positing distinctions, grafting a social ladder together out of disparate positions or interests, or exploding these ladders via recursive self-parody. But beyond the relative self-reflexivity of particular meme templates, the larger question has more to do with the structure and functions of the memetic *ecology*. Surrounding the ‘layers of irony’ are the layers of *circulation* – which is not to say that memes are not about content. Yes, what memes are about is often more to do with their circulation: relative value is indexed to the number of likes, adaptations, reverberations. But this is not because content is *irrelevant,* requiring us to re-tread McLuhanite reversals. 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.

Essentially, the memetic ecology at large serves to mediate the enormous flows of information and affect, enacting a sorting, matching, and grammatizing process on public affairs. Every major event, development, or process carving space in the milieu is refigured by a memetic shadow – which in turn serves to identify politico-aesthetic lines of division and commonality, particularity and universality. This method of apprehension and address can also work to unpin existing assumptions, opening ruptures in a social fabric or igniting viral surges of discontent. So, like the cultural and political landscapes, we can expect much of the online memetic ecology to be riven by similarly endless divisions, yet marked by equally interminable rehearsals of the same. The array of memetic responses to anything at all is dizzying, kaleidoscopic, while remaining in many cases depressingly predictable. This is the problem that memes both participate in and attempt to solve: there is too much stuff and it is all the same.

## The Problem of Scale

The internet is very large. Trivial to say, but it registers important phenomenological, cognitive, infrastructural, and informatic facts. For one, information and choice overload are significant factors inflecting everyday interactions. Whether reading or watching news,

[[1]](#footnote-1) buying things,[[2]](#footnote-2) browsing a social media feed, or engaging in any number of other activities on the internet, there is a confrontation with cascading flows of activity. Adding further to this is the sense that there are not only innumerable objects and possibilities within an individual’s own ambit, but that there are also enormous numbers of *other* domains for structuring information, each with their own norms and interests and endeavors. This may go some way in explaining why people are so willing to hand over their informational selves – and control over swathes of their libidinal and attentional architectures – to platforms. Something of a Faustian bargain (or perhaps a wish upon a monkey’s paw) in which the curation and commodification of sociality is a feature, not a bug.[[3]](#footnote-3) In any case, what this overload and its subsequent (and ongoing) platformizations show is that the internet exists at extraordinarily large scales, but also contains a vast number of coextensive and competing local scales – which in turn serve to interface with us as users on scales more granular than our gestalt selves.

This granularity, as the increased specificity and sheer number of data points operationalized in digitality, is one of the primary mechanisms of digital power. This has not gone unnoticed by net critics. Jodi Dean wrote in 2010 of the fragmentation associated with internet platforms capitalizing on the partial quality of drives. By encouraging engagement at the level of drive, targeting the looping, feedback-heavy repetitions involved at this scale of the psyche, the subject is dis-articulated as a coherent scale. The drives ‘fragment and disperse as they satisfy themselves via a variety of objects’,[[4]](#footnote-4) and the amplification of this process is the very means of capture in attentional circuits. In this way, platforms avoid interfacing with an individual who has a coherent sense of self and robust powers of executive decision over their own desires. Instead, they pick at the scalar edges and discontinuities within this very subject: Zuckerberg loves nothing more than to harvest and monetize your inconstant irregularities.

Social media crested what might be considered its ideological high point in the early 2010s: recall the now naïve-seeming hyperbole surrounding the supposedly radical democratizing potential of Web 2.0 platforms. In the decade of disillusionment that has followed, the kind of net critique promulgated by Dean and others has become more widespread. Addiction, drive-based capture, and fragmentation of coherence is now widely recognized as the *modus operandi* of platforms. Social media: a kind of slot machine or neurochemical honeytrap by which Facebook or Twitter might bypass the intentionality and self-legislation of the coherent self, treating more directly with the granular scales of a fragmented, distracted user’s psychic pieces.[[5]](#footnote-5) Of course, this targeting of the molecular elements of subjectivity—its ‘pre-personal and supra-personal activities’—may indeed by the mode of domination particular to capitalism as such, only now attaining new specificity and speed. [[6]](#footnote-6) In any case, it is clear that the scales at which Web 2.0—and by extension memes—operate include those registers more elemental than identity, traversing the fragmentary drives and their social reverberations. Inasmuch as memes flow along the circuits of the platformized internet, they too participate in the whittling of attentional slivers from subjectivities, and the disassembly of interests and desires into drives and obsessions. But this granularity serves in turn to mediate back up the stack, converting into suprapersonal gestalts, vast information vectors and stocks and their material-political correlates.[[7]](#footnote-7)

While the attentional rhythms of social media are associated with a hijacking of these granular scales, they remain implicated in the linking of these granularities to larger structural layers. Brian Spitzberg identifies a multilayer structure of meme diffusion and selection, passing through the meme, the individual, the network, the society, and the geo-technical scale.[[8]](#footnote-8) These operate as identifiable scales of operation: both epistemic constructs that allow purchase upon a particular set of observable phenomena, and actual technical and communicational frames that have their own dynamics, constraints, and causal factors. Spitzberg shows, using this model, that the success or failure of individual memes is dependent on a multi-level process of selection and exchange. It passes through multiple scales, each of which feeds back into the others, while retaining a certain ontological stability and coherence that makes their own field incommensurable to the others. Put simply: memes don’t just care about individual people, but their social groups, infrastructures, protocols, and environments. Each of these things are distinct, identifiable frames of operation that make different abstractions from their mediating relations: nations care about different things to companies; people care about different things to infrastructures.

This framework is geared to target the processes of diffusion and selection (the nebulous question of meme ‘success’). Consequently, it is only part of the total picture of what memes are and do, and so might be supplemented with scalar theories targeting other aspects of computer-mediated communication. For a scalar schema more interested in geopolitics, consider the User<Interface<Address<City<Cloud<Earth structure of Benjamin Bratton’s *The Stack.[[9]](#footnote-9)* Here, the scalar frames that Spitzberg identifies as individual<network<society<geo-technical are paralleled by Bratton’s subtly different layers, addressing subtly different concerns despite their similar interest in the socio-technical architectures of digital media. If *The Stack* is a model of the model that is planetary computation, where do the memes circulate here? And, perhaps worth distinguishing, where in either of these scalar structures might we identify the difference between a particular meme, and that meme’s *template* – for example, the difference between a particular iteration of the expanding brain and the general use of the expanding brain structure in general?

All this goes to say that, while the generation of layers appears necessary, it’s a tricky and context-dependent business. It requires unifying structural analysis with careful attention to the particular under examination. Because of this delicate balance, the question of identifying the constitution and function of the particular scales implicated by memes goes beyond the scope of what I can cover here. What is clear, however, is that there is a communicational and informational function to memes that traverses multiple scales of operation. As Spitzberg argues:

memes are much more than the mere ‘inside jokes or pieces of hip underground knowledge’ spread through social media, and are instead, the fundamental feature of socially and technologically propagated knowledge.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Whether they are truly *the* fundamentalfeature may be up for debate, but there is certainly a sense in which they serve a fundamental function in mediating the affective, social, network, structural, evental, and informatic dimensions of the internet. Theorizing this involves less an identification of particular scalar registers (though it is useful to be able to heuristically speak of such things within certain contexts) and more an identification of the principles of *mediation* between scales. What does the meme ecology *do* for our social, psychic, informatic and political scales?

## Memetic Mapping

At the heart of the meme is a dialectic between specificity and fungibility, the particular and the universal, the concrete individual and the totality. The good meme must strike a balance between concrete specificity and formal legibility: it has to feel unique, innovative, speak directly to me, while at the same time relating me to the informatic milieu as a whole. The good meme makes me feel the particularity of my own being, figured (sympathetically or antagonistically, recuperatively or disruptively) in relation to general form. Historically, we could point to various systems for suturing the individual to the totality and providing them a place within it. We might speak of collective protentions as the sociocultural matrix of memory and meaning projected into a shared future; or a cosmotechnics that unifies technical process, moral action and cosmic order, the whole apparatus of religion, writing, culture or imagined community.[[11]](#footnote-11) But of course, most grand narratives withered some time in the last century,while older artistic forms like literature have diminished in their ability to cognitively map the social totality.[[12]](#footnote-12) This disjunction leaves conspiracies and fanaticisms to fill the symbolic void while the old colonial systems continue apace despite their symbolic cancellation or revision. If an individual is unwilling to imbibe such fantasies, then what options remain? Memes that are out of date almost immediately, souring and turning stale within a cultural blink. An in-advance obsolescence associated with the relentless generation of a new that remains either nostalgic or incoherent[[13]](#footnote-13). Bernard Stiegler described this inability to fix a common system of meaning as ‘the barbarism specific to the absence of epoch [which] consists in always *outstripping and overtaking* such systems, so that they seem always already futile, *vain*, the ruined remnants of what would have been only *pure vanity*, where care and attention arrive always too late – in vain.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

Still, impoverished as our possibilities may be, they bear analysis and might yet offer fruits that exceed a more old-guard critical theory pessimism. Consider a memetic encounter. I’m scrolling Facebook, and my eyes pass over an image, structured in one of the many Approval/Disapproval templates (Drake, Geordi La Forge, Kombucha Girl, etc). The negative pole: a public figure’s poor behavior; the positive pole: a rival public figure’s good behavior. Alternatively, the two poles could identify options for something intimately personal but banal – perhaps two contrasting ways of eating chips or differing sleeping habits. In either case, I might register a sense of amusement at the framing if I find it agreeable or relatable – or perhaps I might have an oppositional response, disagreeing with its structure, or feeling the poles should be reversed. I might register approval by sharing, disapproval by commenting, or indifference by lack of engagement. Whatever action is taken, it registers as feedback within various systems, while also functioning as a self-registering action for myself.

In addition to the much-discussed algorithmic data-gathering, my encounter with the meme functions as an affective, barely conscious registering of affiliation or opposition, recognition or refusal, enjoyment or indifference. A more abstract, ‘avant-garde’ meme, such as those so often peddled by pages such as Special Meme Fresh (the creator of this article’s opening example) may seem more divorced from such processes of sociocultural affiliation. Yet the legibility of such an aesthetic form always remains (at least in part) a question of its relationship to the larger aesthetic culture. Most crucially: a significant characteristic of memes, more than most other forms of cultural production, is their emphasis on shareability, emulability, and sociality. To be an internet meme, a digital object must first be *circulated* via memetic exchange, thereby engaging in the social, technical, and symbolic mediations this entails. It is then by the registering, interpretation, evaluation, and participation within this that I in turn recuperate the mediations of informatic milieu back down to general and then individual affect.

Thus the meme is neither semiotic object nor asignifying network: it is the very mediation of the two that gives the meme its *raison d'etre*. Part of the function of memetic exchange is to provide a proximate calibration of the affects and symbolic structures of individuals to the general informatic milieu. The meme indexes – but also provides specific contexts upon – ambient sociocultural forces, events, trends, and structures. We might say, somewhat provocatively, that memetic form is a codec: memes are a practice of compression and format-matching. The meme compresses an informatic soup into a more easily processed unit. It takes the inscrutable flows of global culture, politics, and sociality and renders them expressed in a format that runs on the OS of affects and emotional responses. Another analogy: memetic ecologies perform functions similar to a Hayekian notion of markets, in that they immanently calculate the emotional/affective valence of general trends in production and material events via the processes of exchange. They (proximately) solve the ‘pricing problem’ of information overload in the sphere of representations.

But, just like economic markets, meme ecologies are riddled with deceptive actors, pernicious institutions, perverse incentives. Also just like markets, meme ecologies are prone to self-destructive feedback loops: bubbles and crashes. If the meme ecology is a method for calculating the affective-personal significance of everything going on in the infosphere, then QAnon is a self-producing catastrophe of a bubble, crash, and bank run. Yet even trying to draw a simple genealogy is reductive, risking reification of partial pictures, or its own memetic backlash. A possible sequence: The meme: the election was a fraudulent attack on democratic institutions // the event: a dangerous mobbing of a major democratic seat of power // the meme: Trump attempted a coup // the event: a significant memetic player is removed from the milieu // the meme: tech giants have disappeared a president. A reasonably coherent picture internally, but hopelessly flawed. Even setting aside the question of which framings are true and which are not, it is difficult to even tell where the memes stop and the events begin. The scales are nested and interlinked, hopelessly bound up in the precession of simulacra’.[[15]](#footnote-15) You might even speak of them as hyperstitional, wherein the ideas embedded in memes serve to bring about the worlds they articulate.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The problem, here, is that in a similar fashion to the abstractions of the market, the abstractions operating at the template, community, and platform level act recursively upon meme selection according to different pressures, incentives, and structural conditions. Memes begin as individual signifying objects, but soon operate as a self-modifying and actively competing abstraction. Nowhere in an individual image, gif, or video is the meme itself – as an isolated object it is just an image, video, or file. It only begins to operate as abstraction once it becomes legible *as meme* via the material process of exchange. Users share copies and create adaptations or emulations, commenting liking, sharing, upvoting, or not; algorithms optimized for attentional harvests gather and interpret these signals, then funnel memes to eyes via a complex real-time backend. Before the meme can be understood in terms of the abstraction of the memetic, it must be sufficiently processed via exchange to attain legibility to human pattern recognition. By this point, to declare a meme a meme is to announce what has already occurred: it is an abstraction that does not have its origins in thought.

## ‘Real Shit’: Memes and Real Abstraction

It is tempting, when discussing the multiple scales or levels of an abstraction, to focus on what is most *real* in it. What is the reality that underpins the abstraction? Or, perhaps, the ideality of the abstraction is real, to the *exclusion* of all other reality: a kind of transcendental critique that takes anything outside of the abstraction as unknowably noumenal. Perhaps, as some have done, we can see in memes a sense in which the mode of their circulation is the true message: ‘the overarching role of memes as mode of propagation of culture is the ultimate cause (and driver) for engaging in this multimodal meme.’[[17]](#footnote-17) What I am trying to argue here is somewhat different to this. It is not that the affective scale of an individual’s response to a meme is unreal or irrelevant; it is not that the content of a meme’s signification, or its existence as a media(ted) object, does not matter. Rather, the point of addressing the other scales of memetic functioning is to point to the mediating process *between* these scales: it is significant for how it mediates these multiple levels of abstraction, bridging or dividing them, rupturing or uniting them, but always interacting across these systemic divisions.

It is in this sense that memes operate as *real abstractions*. They are abstractions that operate by virtue of a fundamental material process, but are not *reducible* to this process, and in fact recursively iterate and rupture the situation. The term is one originating with Alfred Sohn-Rethel, whose primary thesis was ‘that commodity exchange is an original source of abstraction’,[[18]](#footnote-18) serving to ground and inform the scientific, calculative and philosophic abstractions of (at the very least) Western modernity. There are elements of Sohn-Rethel’s argument that are less easily defended, but the primary insight with theoretical purchase today is his account of how a Marxian notion of abstraction is rooted in material processes of exchange and circulation, while recognizing that these abstractions are then *real* – they are not phantasms but properties emerging out of material organization. Of course, this materialism cuts both ways: as much as material conditions cannot be hand-waved away by a change in consciousness, so too are abstractions persistently effective themselves. As Alberto Toscano puts it, real abstraction is a view of ‘abstraction not as a mere task, fantasy, or diversion, but as a force operative in the world’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such an account gives theoretical grounding to the process of how ‘events evoke memes that generate new memes, or memes generate new events’,[[20]](#footnote-20) a dialectical picture of social-material process.

So an analogy to markets as immanent calculation and informatization mechanisms may be less speculative than it otherwise might appear. Like the principles of commodity exchange, the circulation of memes establishes a certain general abstractive principle of online cultures: an informatic indexing and cultural symbolizing that heuristically gathers and disperses the flows of affect and information. Each individual act of memetic circulation and valuation serves as signals within this system, encoding and recoding across media to produce a form of mediation that bridges the scales of the subpersonal, personal, network, community, infrastructural, and geopolitical (however you might constitute these frames). The particular architecture here varies on context, but the unchanging fact of the memetic is a mediation between otherwise incommensurable scales of abstraction – an affective, drive oriented unconscious and its subjective gestalt, to the informatic registers of technical media, communications, and material conditions. This mediation is itself active, structuring and restructuring as it recursively incorporates and adjusts to the inevitable ruptures and contingencies of billions of people and gigantic technical systems.

## Conclusion

So, what do we have? Memes are, or could be:

* An immanent calculation and iterative production of socio-cultural value, serving to mediate the scales of the personal/symbolic to the impersonal/systemic, from individual specificity to info-cultural totality.
* Consequently, a generation of recursive effects upon each of the terms involved in this mediation, whereby each scale is both fixed and disrupted as the process iterates.

Here we have abstractions that act upon, and perhaps *constitute* those things they are ostensibly abstracting. Toscano: ‘the specificity of contemporary post-Fordist capitalism… is precisely to be found in the abstract connections, or real abstractions, that make society cohere.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Our memes have weight in that they mediate the warp and weft of this coherence – and its failures. While they retain this regularizing function, it would be overstating the case to suggest that we can simply commune with the memes and achieve a reading of the totality – the difficulties of our past modes of cognitive mapping remain. The text always exceeds our grasping, and in turn it appears that memes have dreams of their own, dredged from our unconscious, spliced with informatic regularization, and perhaps injected with a shot of the immanent material outside. The stacks go deep and high here, but they are also modular and malleable. The levels of memery are made of sand – they might be furnace-blasted and soldered into regular circuitries, but they retain the memory of the dunes, and all the atomistic changeability that entails.

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