# Genes, Memes, Dreams Ivan Knapp

Genes, Memes, Dreams. Three words which, to borrow one of Theodor Adorno’s famous remarks, ‘are connected by more than phonetic association’. [[1]](#footnote-1) To give a flavour of the way I want to think about the relationship between, or rather, through these words, as well as the stakes on which our present circumstances encounter them, a few lines from William Burroughs' might help set the tone:

The word is now a virus. The flu virus may once have been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the lungs. The word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting your sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The word, in Burroughs’ idiom, is indeed like a virus, possessing its own kind of virality. In his dense and associative texts, words arrive in sequences, tripping and folding over themselves. Words infect other words, linking by long associative chains stretched out over determinedly horizontal literary structures. The word in Burroughs is thus also like the meme; often metonymic, it takes a part for the whole, mutating by association and then appropriation.

The lines I quote from Burroughs above have also recently served as an epigraph to an essay by David Joselit in which he argues that ‘it is now simply a fact—we have learnt it all too well—that ‘viral’ memes and biological viruses are coagents.’[[3]](#footnote-3) For Joselit, the Coronavirus pandemic has latched onto and become coextensive with an epidemic of fake news—a degrading of information in which memes are deeply implicated for the role they have played in assaulting the authorization of ‘information as knowledge’, for their unlinking of words from reality.[[4]](#footnote-4) In 2019, Emily Apter wrote presciently of how memes are mobilized by ‘channelling the epidemiological analogy to an aggressive virus and all that comes with it: imaginaries of disease, contamination, toxicity, and demographic incursion’.[[5]](#footnote-5) ‘The episteme of the meme’, she continued, ‘is essentially pandemic and bellicose’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For Richard Dawkins, the rhyme between gene and meme was always meant to be conceptual as well as phonetic. He was keen to emphasise that this closeness between the two words should refer to a correspondence between the biological and the social or cultural, by which any quantum of genetic or cultural material is perceptible less in a singular presentation or encounter than in a series or sequence which could be apprehended most clearly through a vast sample. But if the gene would make legible transgenerational mutations, then the meme as its ‘cultural’ corollary would write the intersubjective relations between people.

But what about the last of these three words, the dream? How does the dream make a sequence of the gene-meme coupling? Apter cites the meme’s association with mass consciousness but also its ‘negative capability’.[[7]](#footnote-7) If we take the ‘negative’ here to mean the underside of something, an underside of consciousness perhaps, then the pathway to Freud’s psychoanalytic project becomes clearer. It may be enough, to begin with, to set out some of the most striking congruences between dreams and memes that emerge from a reading of the *Interpretation of Dreams*. We learn there that dreams are composed of fragments, held together by association: they are composed of jokes, slips of the tongue, figures of speech; they are mnemonic, partial, fleeting and transitory. Dreams are bizarre, absurd, irrational, monstrous. They express the satisfaction of wishes dispelling powerful anxieties. They are formed by the operations of displacement, condensation, revision and substitution. And, like internet memes, they were first elevated to an object of critical inquiry from a derided status within the culture at large.[[8]](#footnote-8) In sum, one might go so far as to say that, at the level of vocabulary, memes speak the language of dreams.

Displacement, condensation, and revision are the three primary terms of dream-work. Each one designates a mechanism by which an unconscious wish or anxiety is given form, made representable to the dreamer in disguise.[[9]](#footnote-9) As dreams are dreamt in images before being translated to words, they are also essentially pictorial. But what I think is important to emphasize here is the stress Freud places on the notion of ‘work’ to describe the way these image-making functions also represent unconscious processes. In dreams there is always a manifest or surface content produced by these operations which covers for its hidden or latent meaning. With this terminology to hand, one can easily see how the pictorial and associative means by which memes are produced resonate with Freud’s project. But might we then ask what could be supposed by a notion of meme-work on the level of psychical dynamics from which, in dreams, these aesthetic processes are indivisible?

In the deadly context Joselit and Apter have in mind, Trump looms large. Four years of a president apparently swept to office on a wave of alt-right meme-warriors has irreversibly altered the status of the meme as an object of political and psychic agency. As the psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell puts it, ‘psychoanalytic theory uses the bright colours of pathology as seen in the clinic to grasp the duller shades of the normative.’ [[10]](#footnote-10) If this is so, might not the glimmer of possibility that alt-right examples provide be an opportunity to say something of the psychic work memes perform? In other words, can we use the alt-right meme as a pathological instance inscribed by the trace of operations also present in less extreme, more generic, examples? Certainly the alt-right’s incredulous declaration that with Trump’s ascent to the White House in 2016 they had ‘actually elected a meme’ provides a sense of the wish-fulfilling functions that memes perform. Surely the politics of anxiety and fear which undergird Trump’s electoral support would corroborate such a reading. Trump memes, in this sense, are a means of representing—giving form to, articulating—a set of collective desires and anxieties. The wish is at once dispersed and collected. For with memes, we are talking of images for and of the group, and the psychic work they perform is necessarily qua this mediation of group subjectivity—a subjectivity which, as we see daily, manifests an unremitting discordance.

One of the reasons why psychoanalytic theory isn’t particularly well represented in the literature on memes may be on account of the persistent misapprehension that it is a theory of the individual rather than the social. And perhaps this owes something to Freud’s own language when writing about groups. From *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and *Totem and Taboo* to *Moses and Monotheism* and *Civilisation and Its Discontents,* the major texts on groups strive to escape the image of the father and therefore remain beholden, figuratively at least, to the centrality of the individual circumscribed by the family unit. Unsurprisingly then, when Adorno—in his *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*, or more recently, Hal Foster, turn these ideas towards an analysis of historical or contemporary neo-fascism, the prominence of the ‘leader’, of the Fuhrerprinzip, remains intact.[[11]](#footnote-11) So, despite the revelation in *Group Psychology* that hostility and violence are integral to the very formation of the social, that the group is psychotic, regressive and sustained by illusions, such moments of radical insight remain shaded in the legacy of Freud’s work.[[12]](#footnote-12) A further problem in applying Freudian theory to more recent emanations of fascistic subjectivity arises at the level of organisation. For while Freud’s chief examples of groups—the church and the army—may have reflected the rigid hierarchical command structures of twentieth-century fascism, they resemble far less the anonymous online masses that are distinguished by their de-centered and lateral formations.

In order to escape the primacy of the individual subject as the touchstone of analysis and to more effectively address the ‘social’ quality of memes, we might look to two French analysts whose work with groups helps illuminate the social dimension of dreams. For Didier Anzieu, the group is ‘like a dream’, whilst for René Kaës not only is the unconscious structured like the group, but the group is structured like the unconscious. The psychic situation of the group is, like the dream situation, a repository of fantasies. The group, like the dream, possesses its own modes of expression, its own level of thought. The group and the dream are each ‘a place where images are transformed in interaction’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Kaës calls the group a ‘dream factory’, a site of polyphony that emerges from ‘the interdiscursivity specific to the associative chain’.[[14]](#footnote-14)

[Dream polyphony] describes how the dream is worked on by, and in, a multiplicity of spaces and times, images and voices. It integrates the idea of a plural, common, and shared dream space […] dreams are formed in relation to each other and can be interpreted in terms of their relations of reciprocal support. The hypothesis of dream polyphony leads us into a ‘dream factory’ where several dream spaces interpenetrate, where several dreamers make signs to each other and make themselves heard by several dreamers and several listeners, internal and external.[[15]](#footnote-15)

If the group is like the dream, which is itself like the meme which is, in turn, like the gene, this is a sequence which corresponds to a particular logic of Freudian psychoanalysis. Introducing the first edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud writesof how the dream ‘is the first of a series of abnormal psychic formations’ whose ‘succeeding members’ are ‘the hysterical phobias, the obsessions, the delusions’.[[16]](#footnote-16) What links these phobias, obsessions and delusions is a corresponding or shared structure—a conflict at the seat of psychic functioning whose irresolution is expressed in the form of a symptom. The logic of the dream and the dream work thus enabled Freud to see how the symptom of a pathology itself represented its cause. And it did so by revealing the subject’s psychic reality: that is, the subjective reality produced under the weight of repressed psychical structures and unconscious processes which determine the subject’s apprehension of shared reality or actuality.

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To encapsulate the psychic reality the memetic alt-right offers entry to, a well-known scene in Lana and Lilly Wachowski’s 1999 film *The Matrix* offered a neat solution. The ‘red pill’ meme harks to the juncture in the movie’s narrative where the central protagonist, the aptly named Neo, is offered a choice between two pills: one red, one blue. The latter will return Neo to his quotidian life as Thomas Anderson, a computer programmer; the former will deliver him, with no possibility of return, to a revelatory consciousness. Having chosen the red pill, Keanu Reeves’ character finds his prior life revealed as a simulation designed to hide his real existence as one nodal organism in a vast system of techno-capitalist extraction.

As a figuration, the network is an exemplary blend of the disciplinary convergences that shaped the modern internet. It has ascended to supremacy as the dominant paradigm for how we compose and give shape to the social field. It is plural, perforating, and lateral. Memes have appeared within the imaginary of the network to limn and negotiate the subgroups the network maps. As the red pill suggests, memes do not just border but create psychic realities in contrast to others. Which is to say, the network provides the figuration within which the meme, as a formation which might express psychic conflict, emerges as a symptom. For to be red pilled in the alt-right vernacular is to break from a consensus of actuality toward what is deemed from the outside as outside of sanity.

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown takes up nationalism’s present resurgence through the ‘passion for wall building’ that has accompanied the hegemony of globalisation.[[17]](#footnote-17) Walling, for Brown, manifests the tensions that attend the rise of the network as a predominant figure for the social. In the throes of its own waning, sovereignty madly reasserts itself in what Brown parses as defense mechanisms expressive of psychic resistance. She identifies tensions ‘between opening and barricading, fusion and partition, erasure and reinscription’ and, relatedly, ‘between global networks and local nationalisms, virtual power and physical power, private appropriation and open sourcing, secrecy and transparency, territorialization and deterritorialization’. These show that whilst states may act as sovereign individuals, they are comprised of groups.[[18]](#footnote-18) Responding to these tensions are fantasies Brown counts as ‘of the dangerous alien’, ‘an increasingly borderless world’, ‘containment’, ‘impermeability’, ‘purity, innocence and goodness’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

I want to pause briefly on something Anzieu says about illusions and the power of certain figurations in the group situation. He writes that the illusion ‘may be factually erroneous, nevertheless it is persuasive and effective, as high powered ideas often are, because it corresponds to the phantasised reality of the group, because it expresses, as do myths, the transformation of the images that govern underlying forces’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The illusion—the dream, in other words—is resistant to reality testing, indeed it is all the more persuasive and effective because it does not submit to actuality. This is, in effect, where Brown ends up at the end of *Walled States*, invoking Freud’s conception of illusion to account for the persistence of sovereignty’s theological dimension. Illusions in this account ‘do not die upon being disproved’ because they are not errors. [[21]](#footnote-21) They differ from anything which could be mistaken on account of being powered by a wish which they express in the imagistic form of a scene. Anzieu writes: ‘the group situation is thus perceived as anxiety-arousing with the same intensity as it is perceived as phantasy wish-fulfilment [thereby confirming] our notion that the group, like the dream and the symptom, is to be linked to both wishes and defences’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Necessarily, the group illusion sustains ‘a protective regression’ which may be both ‘bewitching’ and ‘self-destructive’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Along this path the group succumbs to projection and splitting, committing to a ‘vicious circle of repetition’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Anzieu is telling us here a crucial part of what psychoanalysts working with groups—notably Wilfred Bion and Hannnah Segal in England as well as Kaës and Anzieu in France—have long known about their object of study: namely that the group is an unstable psychic entity prone to actively pursue the conditions of its own destruction.

The physical constructions Brown surveys map the anxieties of the network as it recalibrates the imaginative geography of group violence under conditions accelerated by new media affordances.[[25]](#footnote-25) Far from the only form available for its expression, walling nonetheless indexes a condition of extreme paranoid anxiety: a behaviour, an impulse, a desire which represents the irresolution of a conflict in the social between the fantasy of sovereignty and unprecedented connectivity. Psychoanalysis tells us that the irresolution of conflicting desires and anxieties produces a pathological symptom. It is the provocation of this essay that the meme, sharing so much with the psychic condition of the group and the dream, may be usefully, if provisionally, apprehended along the same thread. So, if memes offer any sort of royal road to a more incisive appreciation of how our technological conjuncture reimagines and re-attires the pathologies of the group, they would surely do so on account of their transmission of unconscious communication. This would be as crucial a part of their transformation and transmission of affects as their explicit acts of political speech. For if memes speak not just their own polyglot vernaculars but a vast array of other languages, verbal and non-verbal, that is not to say they remain masters of their own tongue and invulnerable to it slipping. In such ways, memes un-contain fantasies as much as they contain them. And if memes also collectivise fantasy, inasmuch as they articulate the many voices which comprise the group’s unconscious, such a perspective would read the meme as a medium of peculiar susceptibility to the representation of fantasies which index the pathological dimensions of everyday life.

In the final chapter of her first major work on male hysteria (a subject whose pertinence to the alt-right meme there is, unfortunately, no space to expand on here), *Mad Men and Medusas*, Mitchell offers an intriguing, if all too brief, speculation apposite to this discussion. ‘Between the nightmare and the dream’, she writes, ‘are bad dreams’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Bad dreams, she suggests, are survival dreams, yet what haunts them originates in fantasy. They are dreams in which the subject struggles manically to cope with the threat of his annihilation, to contain that violence within the envelope of the dream. Bad dreams are also confused dreams, caught between wish fulfilment and the escape of waking up (the being allowed to ‘die safely’ that the nightmare offers its traumatised dreamer.) They feel extremely real, with the quality of those states just before we wake or fall asleep. ‘In a good dream, the ego is mobile, occupying different people in different stances’.[[27]](#footnote-27) In a bad dream, however, ‘this ego mobility is excessive, frantic and bizarre’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Bad dreams, are ‘full of incongruous juxtapositions suggesting the iterativeness and compulsiveness of the [dream’s] strategy’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The ‘ego is not mobile so much as driven from pillar to post’.[[30]](#footnote-30) The bad dream, it turns out, is a peculiarly intense and illicit dream. It is a high-stakes dream in which anxieties and desire are wrapped ever more tightly around each other to impede the work of the censor. The bad dream puts the mechanisms of dream-work into overdrive. The system, it seems, can barely cope. What is worse, from these dreams, one doesn’t wake up.

In considering what this relationship between the dream and memes might let on to, I would recommend not collapsing the differences between the two terms. Instead, any correspondence might be more helpfully directed toward the way memes could help us think about the group as a psychic object. This would be a perspective set against the algorithmic culture which fosters its own illusions about the extent to which the group can be analysed empirically, and which has now attracted around its methodologies familiar categories of the neuroses.

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1. Adorno is talking, of course, about ‘museum’ and mausoleum’. See Theodor Adorno, “Valery, Proust Museum,” in *Prisms*, trans. and ed. Shierry Weber and Samuel Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket that Exploded* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Joselit, “Virus as Metaphor,” *October* 172 (2020): 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Joselit, “Virus as Metaphor,” 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Emily Apter, “Alphabetic Memes: Caricature, Satire, and Political literacy in the Age of Trump,” *October* 170 (2019): 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Apter, “Alphabetic Memes,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Apter, “Alphabetic Memes,” 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Freud was a collector of farts and grimaces, an archaeologist of rubbish avant la lettre, as well a collector of the fading yet precious detritus of Western civilization’. John Forrester, “Collector, Naturalist, Surrealist,” in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and Its Passions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 1-627. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Juliet Mitchell, “Psychoanalysis, siblings and the social group,” *Psycho-analytic Psychotherapy in South Africa* 19 (2011): 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also, Adorno with Else Frenkel-Brunswik and others, *The Authoritarian Personality* (London: Verso, 2019), as well as Foster, “Père Trump,” *October* 159 (2017): 3-6; and his “Charisma and Catastrophe,” *October* 170 (2019): 25-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On this current in Freud’s work see Jacqueline Rose, “Mass Psychology,” in *The Last Resistance* (London: Verso, 2017), 62-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious*, trans. Benjamin Kilborne (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. René Kaës, *Linking, Alliances, and Shared Space: Groups and the Psychoanalyst*, trans. Andrew Weller (London: International Psychoanalysis Library, 2007), 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kaës, *Linking, Aliiances, and Shared Space,* 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* xxiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Brown, *Walled States*, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brown, *Walled States,* 115-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious,* 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Brown, *Walled States,* 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious,* 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Anzieu, *The Group and the Unconscious,* 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I borrow the term ‘imaginative geography’ here from Edward Said to encompass the social and political implications of spatiality in fantasy. See Said, “Orientalism,” *The Georgia Review* 31 (1977): 162-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria and the Effects of Sibling Relations on the Human Condition* (London: Penguin Press, 2000), 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas,* 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas,* 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas,* 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas,* 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)