

6EN013 – Independent Study

Shitposting; The Anti-Humour of the Internet

By Richard Rowland

May 2018

Abstract

This paper explores a sub-category of internet-based content known as “shitposting”, an indulgence into the absurd with little to no sense on the surface. The aim is to try and dive into what that sense is, what drives people to this type of humour and what correlations can be made in order to suspect what the point of it all is.

A huge thank you to the English department of The University of Wolverhampton and both classmates and outside friends alike for sticking by and giving me the motivation to keep at university in general, let alone this assignment.

Contents

Section (1) – Introduction	pg. 3
Section (2) – Literature Review	
2i – Online and Communication	pg. 4
2ii – Poe’s Law and Post Irony	pg. 5
2iii – Theories of Humour	pg. 5
2iv – Correlating Ideas	pg. 6
Section (3) – Methodology	
3i – General Outline	pg. 7
3ii – Schema Theory	pg. 7
3iii – Irony, Satire and S. Attardo	pg. 7
Section (4) – Findings and Analysis	
4i – Fandoms, Hell and Hedgehogs	pg. 9
4ii – You know I had to satire on em	pg. 10
4iii – Anti-memes	pg. 11
4iv – Art, Surrealism and the Absurd	pg. 12
4v – ShitpostBot and the Rise of the Machines ...	pg. 13
Section (5) – Conclusion	pg. 15
Appendix	pg. 16
Bibliography	pg. 37

Introduction (1)

With no hyperbole, the Internet is one of the most important inventions in the history of mankind, with almost 4 billion of the world's population having a connection to the world wide web [1]. Many struggles of the past have been streamlined exponentially thanks to the Internet; shopping and international shipping has been made easier, information on any topic is abundant and, most relevant to this project, it has enhanced how we communicate. Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison define social networks in their paper *Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship* [2] with three functions; "(1) Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". Some may argue it has done the complete opposite using the tongue-in-cheek term "anti-social networking" but it has opened a lot of opportunities that would say otherwise and helped people find a common interest, no matter how comparatively unadorned or taboo those interests may be and everyone with internet access has an individual platform to express themselves and has an opportunity to gain a large following, giving them a chance to influence others or bring groups of people together. This extends to humour. There has been a huge shift in how jokes and humour are conveyed due to the influence of Internet culture such as how they are told and how they are spread. With the rise of meme culture, humour has taken another visual and audio form and is also short and snappy, especially with the rise of platforms with limits put on users which they see as a challenge, such as Twitter restricting users with a character limit and the now defunct Vine's 7 second video limit. Some group chats consist of no word exchanges but purely the swapping of humorous images which may be alien to a certain group but has a mutual understanding that enhances those relationships. However, meme culture has been heavily denounced for playing it too safe, being lazy go-to jokes and being so overexposed to the point of becoming obnoxious. Many companies have adapted meme culture for use on their social media platforms with mostly failed results, most being criticised for using memes seen as outdated or "cringey" in an attempt to try and sell a product. There has also been a rise in referential humour, even in mainstream media, which is criticised for only pointing something out rather than use that reference for a set up or punchline. Enough people got sick of this kind of humour and started to respond to it with ironic versions of them which are objectively terrible but become funny because they are so terrible. This became known as "shitposting", a very blunt term that tells you exactly what it is.

Shitposting is the counter culture or a response to the norm. The point of it is being so unanimously unfunny on the surface to the point of it becoming humorous. It surrounds itself in the absurd, the nonsensical and the offensive and offends all the senses with a fairly frequent nihilistic attitude but has no shame and is used as a tool to deconstruct the safer humour on the internet. Many forms include ironic or offensive uses of established memes, anti-jokes, using Microsoft Paint to draw in an amateur fashion and even using AI and algorithms in order to purposefully create nonsensical content. The aim of this project is to explore the phenomenon, seeing where those who dabble in it are coming from and if there are any correlations with other movements or theories that may help explain its existence and large amount of contributors.

Literature Review (2)

2.i - Online and Communication

While there haven't been any prominent papers on shitposting specifically, there have been many to do with online communication that helps explain how the culture operates in general. In the paper *Online Chat Rooms: Virtual Spaces of Interaction for Socially Oriented People* [3], chat rooms are described as "a sort of alternative pub" (pg. 44) to illustrate the way people interact, that "cyberspace and its relational possibilities are changing the way satisfactory relationships are conceived even among people who have never met physically" (pg. 43) and "empirical evidence confirms that interpersonal communication is the dominant use of the internet" (pg. 44). Shitposting has a sense of "tribalism" as it helps create a clique of people who share the same humour. In everyday conversation, relationships are enhanced with humour as it's an understanding of the other person and also a way to express yourself to a group. This is also true of the internet but takes a more feasible form as you can compare numbers of members in a group or followers of a page that engage in a certain form of humour. This correlates with the idea of "alternative pub" as in a typical pub setting, people tend to stick to their own groups and may mix with others once a common interest is found but instead of drinks being shared, it's memes and those sharing of memes creates that "interpersonal communication" due to the resonance of the same humour the group shares.

In *Ambient affiliation: A linguistic perspective on Twitter* by Michele Zappavigna [4], she describes how communities are built with Twitter, using the term "microblogging service" (pg. 788) to describe the restrictions that Twitter sets out and how users deal with it to create a social space (Note: The paper was published in 2011, in which Twitter had a 140 character limit but as of late 2017, the character limit was doubled to 280). The paper points out the features in which people use to create a sense of community, saying that there's "a social need among users to engage with other voices in public and private feeds" which is achieved with "creative use of punctuation to reference other users and tag common topics" and by also bringing "other voices into tweets by addressing other users, republishing other tweets and flagging topics that may be adopted by multiple users" (pg. 790). The way Twitter is described here is like another language; There is a mutual understanding of what a group means and many functions as to why certain characters are used, such as # or "hashtags" being used to categorise a tweet and the @ being used to tag other users to get their attention. Memes in either video or image form are categorised like this also on Twitter, usually not adding to the character limit which means it is a more lenient way of communicating. There is a four image limit on Twitter but people take full advantage of this limitation and usually say everything they need to in one image. The exact same applies to shitposts as they also take form of a video or an image. The spread of tweets is also applied to both memes and shitposts. "Retweeting" something takes a pre-existing Tweet and puts it onto your profile with the source still intact, as sort of a projection of character. There is also the option to "quote" a retweet in which you can add a comment, most of the time used to rebuttal the original tweet, making them transformative. Memes are shareable and transformative in nature. While existing in earlier forms, the word "meme" itself was coined by Richard Dawkins [5] in which he describes it as "a unit of cultural transmission" which is basically an idea that is spread around and sticks for a long time. The Internet appropriated this term to describe the amusing images spread around on various websites as they have a similar function, akin to the retweet. Shitposting is akin to the quote a tweet, almost always designed to be a rebuttal but shared in a similar way to memes.

2ii – Poe’s Law and Post-Irony

Thanks to the rise of internet content, two fairly new principles arose from it in order to describe that content; Poe’s Law and Post-Irony.

Poe’s Law is the idea that a statement is difficult to interpret in written form on the internet on whether it is a sincere statement or tongue-in-cheek without some sort of indicator. This spawned from a comment on a Christian site from the titular Nathan Poe, in which he states; “Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humour, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that someone won’t mistake for the genuine article” [6] (pg. 64). This resonated with a lot of people as the internet has proven there are a lot of people that actually hold extremist views without any irony, which influences confusion on whether a statement is ironic or genuine.

Poe’s Law ties directly into Post-Irony, which blurs the line between on whether something is genuine or ironic. The first major figure for this idea is American writer and university instructor David Foster Wallace as he tried to explain a level of irony that ascended the association of irony and metafiction with post-modernism. In regards to American television, he explains in his paper that “the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony” and that TV “revolves off just the sorts of contradictions irony’s all about exposing” [7] (pg. 161). Other notable examples of post-irony are the TV show *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job*, the movie *Freddy Got Fingered* by Tom Green and the novel *The Circle* by David Eggers. All these are dedicated enough to be treated as serious content but also could be interpreted as really good satire or an artistic statement in a non-conventional way. When post-irony is applied with internet content, Poe’s law helps us tell between these two ideas but can still remain difficult if there is no indication of such. Shitposting has become a victim of post-irony as those who take part in it have found it difficult to distinguish whether or not the jokes they indulge in are a serious representation of their humour or if it’s still an ironic form of humour that may also comment on other forms. This has also spawned a distinction between “shitposting” and “shit posting”, where the space between “shit” and “posting” indicates an unironic and terrible joke, while “shitposting” as one word indicates the opposite.

2.iii – Theories of Humour

Theories on humour can also help illustrate the concept of shitposting. Humour in general is difficult to theorise as a general concept so there are different criteria people use in order to achieve this goal, the three most common being social, psychoanalytic and cognitive. A theory that falls under cognitive is Incongruity Theory which suggests jokes work as out of place things are brought together in a way that surprises us, such as the well-known joke “a horse walks into a bar”. Immanuel Kant [8] describes this in an early form with “In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (pg. 332). Arthur Schopenhauer [9] develops this idea further; “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity” (book 1, sec. 13). Shitposting has its own language but also uses this idea. A lot of the time, seemingly nothing is compatible but there is presupposed knowledge that helps us work out what it’s trying to say, even if the clues are miniscule. Some shitposts have a

semantic field of pop culture and fans of that would be able to easily put these ideas together despite the cryptic presentation.

Shitposting has been seen as a form of irony, a whole other kettle of fish in itself in which people have spoken about thoroughly. In an article by Josiane Boutonnet [10], she describes two different forms of irony; situational and verbal. Situational has “an observer who notices a state of affairs or event which is in some way incongruous” and verbal is “a rhetorical device” (pg. 1). Irony is also described as “a type of indirect criticism which is perhaps more blunter and personal” (pg. 2) and later on is said to be used to “express an evaluative judgment, to convey an attitude about the interlocutor, an event, or more generally about some aspect of one’s universe of belief” going off of Raehel Giora [11]. Shitposting is coaxed in this sort of content. The use of typical memes is always in an ironic way and is usually a comment on how safe memes are nowadays and is almost always in the form of a response or a transformative piece taking inspiration or aspects of previously existing memes.

2.iv – Correlating Ideas

“Shitposting” has pseudo-existed in other forms but it was the rise of the internet where that term was created. It has correlations with the Modernist movement “Dadaism”, a culture that prides itself on the seemingly meaningless and the nonsensical and completely dabbles in irony and sarcasm. The art piece *Fountain* by Marcel Duchamp [12] is a way of explaining the phenomenon of shitposting from Dadaism. *Fountain* was submitted by Duchamp to the Exhibition of the Society of Independent artists to test their policy on anything being allowed to be submitted as long as it’s alongside an entrance fee. The piece was a urinal, that wasn’t made by Duchamp, with his name scrawled across it. The whole point of it was to be as objectively terrible as possible to test the policy put in place. Despite this, it was rejected and caused an outrage, especially amongst fellow Dadaists. People got attached to *Fountain* because of how provocative it was and how it challenged what people would consider art at the time. This is the main point of shitposting; a medium used to comment on how safe humour is on the internet by rejecting conventions and putting it on a pedestal to show how unchallenging and potentially lazy it is. Much like *Fountain* also, it tries to be as objectively terrible as possible but turns around and ends up being the opposite, creating a subculture from those that resonate with either the humour itself or the message it conveys.

Another considerably direct comparison that can be made is Bakhtin’s Carnival Theory [13]. He says it’s “liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order” and “it was hostile to all that was immortalised and completed”. In Paul Mcdonald’s analysis in *The Philosophy of Humour* [14], he adds “carnivalised texts can challenge culture that represents that authority by juxtaposing the high culture that represents that authority” and “texts have the potential to become sites of opposition to the dominant ideology” (pg 72). While not a literal sense, shitposting embodies the need to defy the “authority” or “established order”, which is meme culture in this instance. It’s aggressive or “hostile” due to it rarely running itself through any filters and will go as far as it needs to be in order to make itself clear.

Methodology (3)

3i – General Outline

In the analysis, there will be a huge focus on the conative and the motivational aspects of the data. Using the literature section will also help prompt some ideas and will help explain the aims of some of these posts. My data will be from a wide range of different sources, most I invest in myself, using mostly the websites Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. There will also be a different range of shitposts that have different criteria that will be categorised as such but are treated with the same umbrella term. There will be a focus only on shitposts in the form of images as videos and music are different entities entirely.

3ii – Schema Theory

In the broadest terms, schema theory is a psychological theory that tries to find a link between the key factors that influence a comprehension process and schema itself is a general term or a conceptual system for how knowledge is represented and used. In regards to humour, this helps us understand that something is a joke, especially when it comes to irony and sarcasm, and helps us understand the context and meaning. In Julia Snell's paper applying schema to Little Britain, she says in regards to the comedy aspect; "When interpreting a text under the comedy schema we don't take what we see to be literally true.... Eventually, when enough people share the same schematic knowledge, it would be possible to evoke laughter among one's friends and colleagues by the mere repetition of 'I am a lady' or 'yeah but no but' because these phrases are able to activate the relevant script with all its related links and associations" [15] (pg. 64). She describes a unanimous sense of understanding and community that occurs with the audience as a whole. They acknowledge what they're consuming isn't real or serious and can share that humour with each other. A similar approach will be made for my data to explain how we can tell it's a joke and why people are so attached to that sort of humour and why there are huge communities around it.

3iii – Irony, Satire and S. Attardo

As the humour of shitposting is seen to be in the form of irony and satire, many angles will focus on that aspect. Professor Salvatore Attardo of the Texas A&M University has spoken in great lengths about irony and satire. In the satire section of his paper *Encyclopedia of Humour Studies*, he defines it as "humour or comedy with social content" and has "the critical purpose of exposing of moral, social and intellectual failings" [16] (pg. 661). He also argues there are three aspects of satire; "expose in order to reform", "affirmation of the values implicit in the process of making someone a laughing stock" and "the need to punish or persecute" (pg. 662). In *Irony as relevant inappropriateness*, Attardo explores irony in many different ways and forms his own approach [17]. He acknowledges the aforementioned situational and verbal irony (section 2iii), briefly mentions sarcasm being "an overtly aggressive type of irony, with clearer markers/cues and a clear target" (pg. 794) and applies it to Grice's cooperative principle [18] with a focus on the maxim of quality, which states "try to make your contribution one that is true". Grice states that irony only flouts this maxim but Attardo argues "the violation of other maxims can be shown to trigger irony" and has also earlier argued jokes in general violate the maxims in a paper from 1990 [19]. This points out that humour is disruptive in nature but with irony and sarcasm, there is always an intent to using it, usually targeting an individual or idea in order to criticise. Using Attardo's definitions and approaches to

irony and satire will help analyse the intentions and outcome of the data. As they're also the most relevant when it comes to online content, there will also be passing references to the previously mentioned Poe's law and post irony when applicable, especially when attempting to work out between the aforementioned "shitposting" and "shit posting" (section 2ii).

Findings and Analysis (4)

4i – Fandoms, Hell and Hedgehogs

Shitposting has taken a large form of parody recently in regards to pop culture with the rise of “Hell” and “___posting” groups on Facebook, which are usually about a specific topic. The most infamous and arguably pioneer of these groups being the controversial “Melee Hell”, a group about the video game Super Smash Bros: Melee which is sitting on almost 50k members (as of writing) and is widely known in the Smash Brothers community. Other notable examples include Star Wars Sithposting: A New Hope (104k members as of writing), CBBC Edposting (50k members as of writing) and JoJo Hell (28k members as of writing). Typing “Hell” or words in the same semantic field (IE heaven and purgatory) in the Facebook search bar under groups produces a myriad of different groups inspired by the aforementioned Melee Hell. These groups are very reminiscent of tribalism; a pseudo-pact that will carry on and survive if they stick close and pass the group’s legacy on to more people, therefore spreading to a wider scale. There are also correlations of hostility and defensiveness if the pact is threatened but instead of physical conflict, more offensive content or content specifically made to mock another group is posted to “ward away the other pacts” such as the rivalry between CBBC Edposting and CITV Grizzly Tale Posting and the spat between Melee Hell and other groups that are to do with more traditional fighting games. A more relevant term would be neotribalism, coined by French sociologist Michel Maffesoli. He suggested that society has a reliance on nostalgia once modernism declined and it looks for guidance from the past, forming a new sense of tribalism [20]. In the context of the internet, it creates social networks between individuals and the glue that keeps them together in the context of shitposting is the shared humour and the shared fandom.

These forms of shitposting that focus on pop culture all tie in to schema theory as there is background knowledge that helps piece together the joke, even if it’s seemingly cryptic. For example, in appendix 1, the joke doesn’t work unless you have knowledge of who the child is in the fourth panel but those who have seen the second series of the show *The Story of Tracy Beaker* can recognise that the character is Michael who was known to be conniving and spiteful and the extreme comparison is where the joke lies. This also showcases that shitposting doesn’t tend to have a limit on what is and isn’t acceptable, tapping into incongruity. Paul McDonald goes into this sort of humour, saying “When we laugh at that quip, we laugh at hyperbole; in other words we laugh partly because it distorts reality. It’s the perfect example of a comic incongruity in that it’s both false and a little bit true” [14] (pg. 79). While the character of Michael is nowhere near the same level of the other figures in the meme, it exaggerates that he’s not a redeemable character.

A problem with groups is that the meaning of shitposting can be skewed, such as the previously referenced shitpost in appendix 1. While it is offensive and won’t click with many, it still has a similar formula to most “safe” memes out there, the types that shitposting rejects in the first place. There are clearer definitions if you look into single content creators, such as Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, but they can also fall under being about something specific that will only click with a certain group of people. One example is *Shadow the super edgy ‘edgehog*, a shitposting page with almost 40k followers that focuses on the video game franchise *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Sonic is a franchise notorious for extreme fans on the internet which carry many tropes and stereotypes because of this (IE amateur-drawn fan characters, sexual deviants and a pseudo-civil war about favourite and worst games), making it a perfect example of post-irony. While *edgy ‘edgehog* utilises

Poe's law with the use of capital letters and verbose rambling in the captions, the content that is created is most of the time transformative from other sources that are deemed difficult to figure out if they are genuine or satire. For example, the artwork in appendix 2 is amateurish and is of a vulgar nature but because there is proof of fans that unironically delve into this sort of content, unless the original creator says otherwise, there is no real way of a definite answer on whether it is ironic or not. Whether that be the case or not, *edgy* 'edgehog indulges in it all to create content and some running gags have emerged, such as that in appendix 3. This is referring back to Julia Snell talking about catchphrases in *Little Britain* (section 3ii), saying people "share the same schematic knowledge", poking at that sense of community again [15]. Much like how a group would repeat catchphrases and references from pop culture, a similar approach is taken here and it being more cryptic to most gives it a bigger sense of community. In both situations, there's mutual knowledge that both sides indulge in it which strengthens those relationships.

The owner of the *edgy* 'edgehog page, known by his pseudonym Gammas Grim, was able to provide a statement on why he likes this kind of humour and why he believes people are drawn to the humour on his page, with some similar ideas to those presented earlier;

"The reason I find this type of humour so funny is probably because of how abstract and vague it is compared to normal humour within the sonic community which is typical jokes people have been making for years like "gotta go fast" and stuff I've already seen. This kind of humour I see as more just the minority standard of internet humour as its more vague and less covered in emojis which is a factor I love for comedy so I simply apply it to sonic. I think the reason why the community attached to my page likes this is because as I said, this type of humour isn't the norm on the internet so it's already rare enough so in conjunction to the sub factor of this humour WITHIN a specific franchise, there seems to only be me and one other page making these vague abstract borderline ridiculous memes. So overall I think the appeal comes from two things, the first is the freshness of the humour when compared to typical sonic humour fans of it have heard millions of times and secondly, the more absurdist approach of a meme like that one being so idiotic it's funny, it's my type of humour so when applied to a franchise I like, brings others like me to my page who also like this approach".

4ii – You know I had to satire on em

As mentioned before, shitposting is seen as a form of irony or satire. With a similar goal to satire, shitposts have been used to ridicule, criticise and refute an opposing point or culture.

In regards to ridicule, a notable example is in appendix 4. Because there is no context to the post, it comes off as cocky and paints Luciano in a negative light. As a way to strike at his self-image, Luciano became a meme in the shitposting community. His "signature" pose was replicated by different characters and figures in some posts (see appendix 5) and he was also photoshopped in different ways, placing him in various locations or making him look ridiculous (see appendix 6). The former sometimes always had schema connotations if it involved a fictional character or political figure and the latter was an attempt to make Luciano look absurd. The function here is to make the target smaller in a metaphorical sense, which taps into disparagement theory, the idea that some jokes have both a provider and a target and buried within is a "tendentious" motive [21]. In this specific case, the idea is to put Luciano on a pedestal to show how smug the original image is and to maybe

bruise his ego as a result. Satire of this nature has existed in many forms, especially that of political and religious figures. Paul Simpson references this in his book about satire, referencing the *Hustler v Falwell* case in which televangelist Jerry Falwell tried to sue the magazine *Hustler* for intentional infliction of emotional distress over a parody advertisement. The court was in favour of *Hustler*, saying “Political satire and parody aim to distress. This genre of comedy depends upon distortion and discomfiture for its effect. The best political humour may be in bad taste” [22]. Simpson adds “the humorous text should provide a sufficient degree of ‘distortion’”, that a text “should be constructed in such a way to remove any ‘facts’” and “the text in question must also be insincere, for then it cannot be seen as a malicious and intentional attempt to wound” [23] (pg. 209). Shitposting tends to do the opposite of this, some even doing so with malicious intent. The humbleness usually comes from the side being mocked when it comes to the internet as it’s an environment that is extremely difficult to regulate and control. It is also basically impossible to convict anyone for posting something offensive online. While there has been certain cases of this (IE Nazi pug gate, see appendix 7), it’s a miniscule dent on the rest of the content.

A good example of criticism is the rise of shitposts regarding the adult animated series *Family Guy*. The main character of the show, Peter Griffin, has become a sort of shitposting icon, being used in many nonsensical images thanks to the rise of “Hey Beter”. The idea of these shitposts is to make fun of the cutaway gags the show depends on, some arguing that it’s become a crutch, especially for the later seasons of the show. They’ve been criticised for detracting from the main plot of their respective episodes, being random for the sake of it and being so overused to the point of saturation. “Hey Beter” uses this as a template to create something so absurd, it captures what it’s parodying and ends up becoming funny (see appendix 8). “Hey Beter” ties in with anti-jokes, which is explored in further detail in section 4iii.

For refute, a notable example is flat-earthers, a group of people, despite all the evidence from centuries ago, believe the Earth being round is a conspiracy and that it’s actually flat. While it has ties with post-irony once again, some have made it clear that there is no irony to their statements, such as the rapper B.o.B who constantly tries to prove on his Twitter that the Earth is flat despite getting responses from renowned scientists such as Neil deGrasse Tyson and Bill Nye (see appendix 9). While this also ties in to ridicule and criticism, these kinds of shitposts fall into refute as they are presenting an argument through humour in order to either debunk it or put it on a pedestal to show how ridiculous it can be (see appendix 10). This resonates with the technique “modest proposal”, named after Jonathan Swift’s piece in which he jokingly suggest the Irish sell their children for food to rich gentleman in order to fix their economic troubles [24]. The “modest proposal” refers to a satirical piece disguised as a “straight-faced” piece but has some sort of message buried within. The shitpost referenced earlier does this by using the same logic that flat-earthers are using to justify to themselves that the Earth is flat and the image works as a rebuttal because of this.

4iii – Anti-Memes

Anti-memes are anti-jokes in meme form and are also a form of satire. The way they work is that they refuse to play by the “rules” the meme sets out in order to create new material. This is evocative of a comedy device called the “shaggy dog story”, which is an anecdote that is long winded in nature with no or a weak punchline. Philosophy professor Ted Cohen links this in with Dadaism and Neo-Dadaism, the indulgence of the nonsensical (refer to section 2iv). He goes on to elaborate

“They play upon a presumed background known to the audience, namely the background of normal joke-telling or art-exhibiting. Thus oriented, the audience approaches this item with expectations that are either simply disappointed or met in an utterly expected manner” [25] (pg. 8). One way this takes is pointing out the obvious, where an image usually represents a metaphor (see appendix 11) or a feeling (see appendix 12).

A page that thrives on this sort of content is *Memes Without Bottom Text* on Facebook. The content on this page creates anti-jokes from one of the oldest forms of memes; advice animals. The format of these were always a picture of a mildly amusing animal that was given a personality trait (IE Business Cat and Philosoraptor) and had a caption always in Impact Font in relation to it, usually referring to a relatable event. The text was also always set out in a way where the build-up was at the top of the image and the payoff was at the bottom. The advice animal format was applied to many other images and became one of, if not, THE most common and abundant of internet content, being criticised for being oversaturated and easy content. *Memes Without Bottom Text* takes these kinds of images and crops out the bottom AKA the punchline, creating an anti-joke (see appendix 13) or sometimes a new joke entirely by giving it new context (see appendix 14). Despite this being fairly low effort, it becomes transformative and a comment on that type of humour by putting in arguably the same amount of effort, being tendentious in nature.

4iv – Art, Surrealism and the Absurd

Some form of shitposts are directly inspired by their Dada ancestors, creating meaningless “art” that elicits reactions from its absurdity. Kleiner described Dadaism as “a phenomenon bursting forth in the midst of the post-war economic and moral crisis, a saviour, a monster, which would lay waste to everything in its path” and “an act of sacrilege” [26] (pg. 754). In the context of humour, “laying waste” would be the content itself and “an act of sacrilege” is the meat of the content.

From a more comedic aspect, this may fall under the black comedy label, a form of humour that is fairly straight faced and tackles taboo topics or has a sinister outside with humour buried inside, similar to the “modest proposal” model (see section 4ii). Freud explores this idea, saying “The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” [27] (pg. 162). This relates to Poe’s Law also (see section 2ii) where, because of how ridiculous the content is, we can use those as indicators to tell whether something is straight-faced or tongue-in-cheek.

An example of this type of humour is the Facebook page *Simpsons pictures that I gone and done*. What started as a page dedicated to amateur drawings of *The Simpsons* characters done in Microsoft Paint (see appendix 15) became a journey into the surreal. Pictures posted on this page always have a creepy tone, whether it be the content of the image or the art style, where characters are always drawn with small, wide-apart eyes and big noses (see appendix 16). In tandem with this, the owner of the page, who refers to himself as “Chris (Simpsons artist xox)”, plays a naïve and innocent character juxtaposed with the kinds of posts on the page and the scenarios he creates (see appendix 17). This dark humour with an unaware spin has resonated with a lot of people, with 1.4 million likes on Facebook, a book deal, merchandise and commissions from the BBC to create web cartoons for their YouTube channel.

Another page from the same book is *Jim'll Paint It*. This page also dabbles in surreal art but takes requests, no matter how verbose and random they may be (see appendix 18). Unlike Chris from *Simpsons pictures*, Jim doesn't play a character and the comedy comes from the pictures alone but because of their content, they are able to stand on their own. To relate to Dadaism once again, there are correlations between Jim's work and that of Modernist artist and novelist Leonora Carrington. Both artists' works share a similar theme; the nonsensical and the absurd (see appendix 19). In a video from the Guardian when she was still alive, she stated that she disliked that people "intellectualised everything" and wanted to turn everything into "an intellectual game" [28] and she'd play this idea up with her works by giving them cryptic names and themes, which challenged those trying to interpret her works. In a way, *Jim'll Paint It* has a similar effect. Nothing makes sense semantically in any of his pictures and they are captioned with rambling nonsense but that's where the comedy comes from, much like where the artistic merit comes from in Leonora's pieces. It challenges the mind and makes it think in ways that stray from the norm, the whole point of Modernism during its conception.

4v – ShitpostBot and the Rise of the Machines

Speaking of challenging the norm, *Shitpostbot5000* is a page that uses a user influenced AI algorithm to create content. The page started out on Facebook but branched out to Twitter and tumblr, having 100k+ total followers on Facebook alone (As of writing, this is the third iteration of the Facebook page. The previous two pages have been banned for "offensive content" and had significantly more followers on previous versions). The way it works is there is a site set up in order to accept both template images and source images from members. Then, every half an hour, using both the templates and the source images, it creates a "shitpost" by combining two images from both categories (or more sources depending on the template). Because of this method of creating and collecting content, absolute nonsense is created most of the time (see appendix 20) but the occasional post can actually make sense, being mistaken for a "safe" meme or made by an actual person (see appendix 21). This is also more remarkable as the website doesn't utilise tags and has hundreds of submissions daily (unless it's for the many spinoff pages that have select source images, such as *Spongepostbob 5000* which uses only source images from the show *Spongebob Squarepants*). This has sparked a running joke where people comment "SENTIENCE!" if a shitpost that makes actual sense is generated and also jokes about the bot taking over its master. ShitpostBot does pose an existential crisis for humour. Artificial intelligence has shaped and evolved to extraordinary lengths over time, being able to streamline daily tasks, personalise content based on user data and, the most relevant, help companies produce content. A notable example of this is the company *Narrative Science*. On their homepage, they state they are "humanizing data like never before, with technology that interprets your data, then transforms it into insightful, natural language narratives at unprecedented speed and scale" [29]. Barry Petchesky of *Deadspin* ran a test using this AI to decipher whether a story on *GWSports* about a perfect baseball game in Washington was either organically produced or a product of the Narrative Science AI. Barry ran this test as he thought it was peculiar that the story didn't mention the score of the game until the second to last line of the story so he compared two different perspectives of the same story by feeding the information into Narrative Science; a neutral perspective and a perspective that was in support of the winning team. The neutral version mentioned the score at the end while the biased version mentioned it almost immediately [30]. Barry even argued in the title of the article that the version of the story the AI produced was better than the one on *GWSports*. In relation to *ShitpostBot*, it could be a pioneer for

AI produced humorous content. The content it produces is more akin to surrealism, where the enjoyment comes from its random and nonsensical nature but could evolve in a way that could make consistent content that makes sense. If it ever achieved this, it would be the perfect analogy for the main driving force of shitposting; to expose how predictable and easy jokes on the internet have become. The fact that an AI could achieve it is the ultimate criticism of stifled creativity.

Conclusion (5)

In conclusion, shitposting may seem like an alien entity but we're able to understand the intentions by referring back to older movements and theories and even normalise it to an extent. It's akin to history repeating itself, especially with that of modernism and specifically Dadaism in some cases. It's the counter culture that people engage in to challenge expectations and the norm and bring in new ideas to achieve this. It can be seen as a deep movement designed to non-conform and keep out the "normies" but also just mindless indulgence in the ridiculous, asinine and absurd.

Appendix

[1] Holly Mcallister on Facebook via CBBC Edposting



The character on the bottom right is Michael from the kid's TV show *The Story of Tracy Beaker*. Michael was a character in the third series who was known to be spiteful, selfish and annoying. This image compares him to an evil dictator, a paedophile and a controversial president, over exaggerating how dislikeable the character is.

[2] Shadow the super edgy 'edgehog on Facebook



The message at the top is an established meme, usually juxtaposed with something that doesn't warrant such a reaction but is most always tame. The joke here is not only the juxtaposition but also the absurdity of the image and the fact that it can be difficult to decipher whether the original material is serious or not. The caption also enhances the joke by either over exaggerating the situation at hand or giving it a darker twist than it already has.

[3] Shadow the super edgy 'edgehog on Facebook



Shadow the super edgy 'edgehog

31 July 2017 · 🌐



I WANNA FUCK THIS MAN



The character in the image is the blue wisp AKA cube wisp from the video game *Sonic Colours*. In the game, wisps gave Sonic powers that helped him progress through the level. Cube specifically gave him an ability to turn blue rings into blocks. It's widely renowned that Cube is the most useless wisp in the game and it became a running joke on the page, which always involved saying how amazing it was despite otherwise, enhanced by the caption.

[4] @LuckyLuciano17k on Twitter



A post that helped spawn shitposts with Lucky Luciano as the subject. The caption has absolutely no context, falling into post-irony once again but was taken seriously for the most part and helped create a slew of parody posts.

[5] XFlame-the-FoxX on DeviantArt



Freddy from *The Five Nights at Freddy's* series of video games replicates the pose of Luciano in appendix 4. Some background knowledge of the games may help give context to a joke but the absurdity in itself is what makes it amusing. *FNAF* has also become a subject of irony on the internet due to the vocal fanbase at the time.

[6] aquanecklaces on tumblr



A literal take on belittling Luciano.

[7] Count Dankula on YouTube (mirror uploaded by Computing Et Cetera);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zERViyKzZM>



M8 Yer Dugs A Nazi [MIRROR]

52,810 views

635 53 SHARE

A video in which a pug is taught to Nazi salute and react to the phrase “gas the Jews”. At the beginning of the video, Marcus AKA Count Dankula explains he’s sick of his girlfriend talking about how cute the dog is so he does this to make the dog “the least cute thing I can think of; a Nazi”. The video resulted in Marcus being arrested, put on trial after retrial for over a year and concluded with a fine of £800. As of writing this, Marcus is appealing this charge.

[8] cancer_supreme on Instagram



With inspiration from Dadaism, this piece is meant to not make sense to correlate with the cutaway humour that is prevalent in *Family Guy*. The first panel has a random character in a juxtaposed situation which is akin to the random pop culture references in the show. “Hey Peter”, something the character Joe Swanson says in the show, is spelt incorrectly. The second is Peter Griffin reaffirming who that character is, reminiscent of *Family Guy* having a tendency to draw out jokes and hammer them in. The third panel has been run through a filter to give it a low quality look. “Whomst’ve” became a meme from the “Grammar Nazi” label which describes a group of people that are anal about grammar and spelling online. The fourth panel spouts a catchphrase that Peter says in the show and has poorly cropped and sized images of Peter with a joke on ‘influencers’ trying to get followings on social media. The whole point is to be offensive to all the senses.

[9] B.o.B and Neil deGrasse Tyson on Twitter



B.o.B
@bobatl

Follow



99) Viewed from a ball-Earth, Polaris, situated directly over the North Pole, should not be visible anywhere in the Southern hemisphere. For Polaris to be seen from the Southern hemisphere of a globular Earth, the observer would have to be somehow looking “through the globe,” and miles of land and sea would have to be transparent. Polaris can be seen, however, up to over 20 degrees South latitude.

RETWEETS
212

LIKES
199



6:16 AM - 25 Jan 2016



Neil deGrasse Tyson @neiltyson · 5h

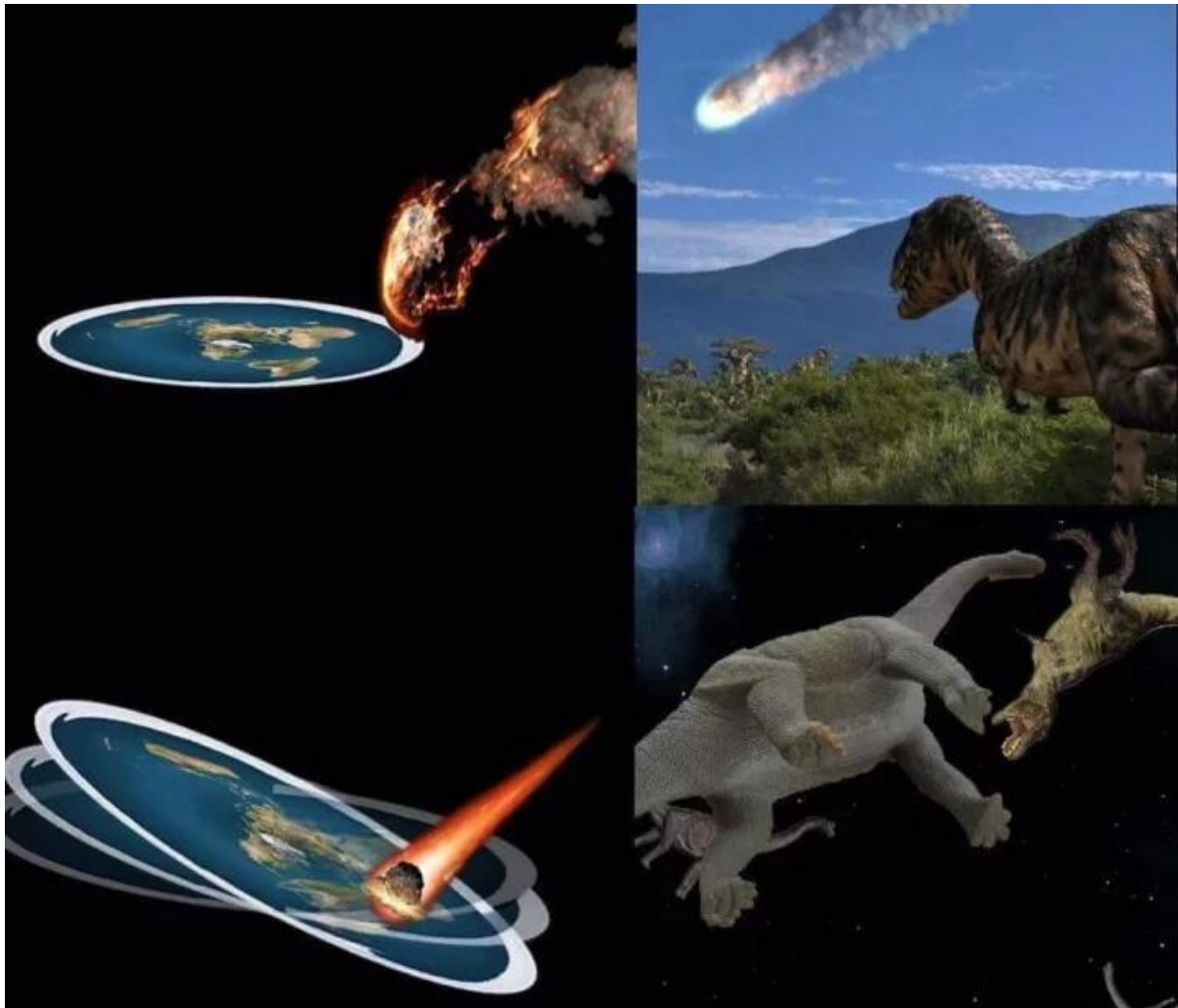
@bobatl Polaris is gone by 1.5 deg S. Latitude. You've never been south of Earth's Equator, or if so, you've never looked up.

@bobatl Twitter

1.3K 1.5K

With a similar effect to “schadenfreude”, the naivety of B.o.B and the rebuttal from Neil deGrasse Tyson is where a sick sense of humour lies. Humour also comes from B.o.B’s persistence despite evidence saying otherwise.

[10] @Lord_Mandalore on Twitter



A ridiculous argument about the Earth actually being flat had this response; something equally as ridiculous. The original poster sent this in a Flat-Earther's Discord server and got a hostile response as a result.

[11] *smellyratboy on tumblr*



The usual formula of this meme is the coffee represents a situation and the face Lisa Simpson portrays a person or group with negative motives, usually of a mild nature (for example, the coffee saying "a secret I've been told not to spread" and Lisa saying "me"). This image instead just literally points out what both parties are, creating an anti-joke so mundane, it becomes amusing.

[12] @derolo on Twitter



@derolo

Follow

when u go to a forest



12:43 AM - 7 May 2018

32,266 Retweets 126,509 Likes



167 32K 127K

The original image is from a sketch from *Tim and Eric Awesome Show* in which they advertise a free house and the original image from this sketch says “It’s free real estate”. It’s usually applied to relatable and mundane situations (such as “When a bee flies through your window”). This image makes the mundane even more mundane by pointing out something obvious in a different way to appendix 11. The text is manipulated to say “trees” and the caption mentions being in a forest, a place full of trees. Once again, this lacks any real punchline but is so silly, it becomes funny.

[13] Memes Without Bottom Text on Facebook

On social media, in order to get traffic, pages try and get people to interact by commenting, liking and sharing by posting something relatable in which people can do those things as some sort of joke validation. It follows the advice animal format of build up at the top and pay off at the bottom. Removing the bottom of the image means also removing the pay off and giving no context to what kind of “bloke” the original meme wanted you to tag, making it vague and trite as a result. The humour comes from a similar place to appendix 11 and 12.

[14] Memes Without Bottom Text on Facebook

The original meme is called "success kid", a picture of a baby that represents an achievement, usually insignificant in most cases. In this example, the removal of the bottom text creates new context. Instead of conflict with a resolution, it becomes a statement and creates a hopeless situation and is juxtaposed with the "success kid".

[15] *Simpsons pictures that I gone and done on Facebook*



Simpsons pictures that I gone and done



17 April 2011 · 🌐

Mr Burns is a really fun character to do detailed pictures of. As with the picture I did of Moe, I really think i've captured Mr Burns' attitude. I love his catchphrase, "release the wolves, smivvers".

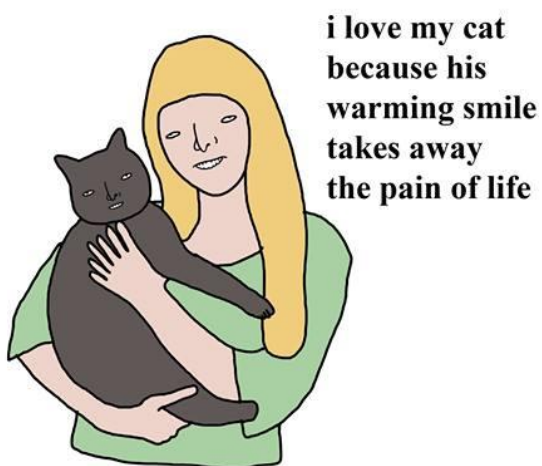


Schema theory comes into play here. Background knowledge of *The Simpsons* would inform us of the inaccuracy of the image and the caption. It may have been argued as post-ironic when it first came out but the page has been going on for 7 years now and future posts have made it clear it's not a serious page.

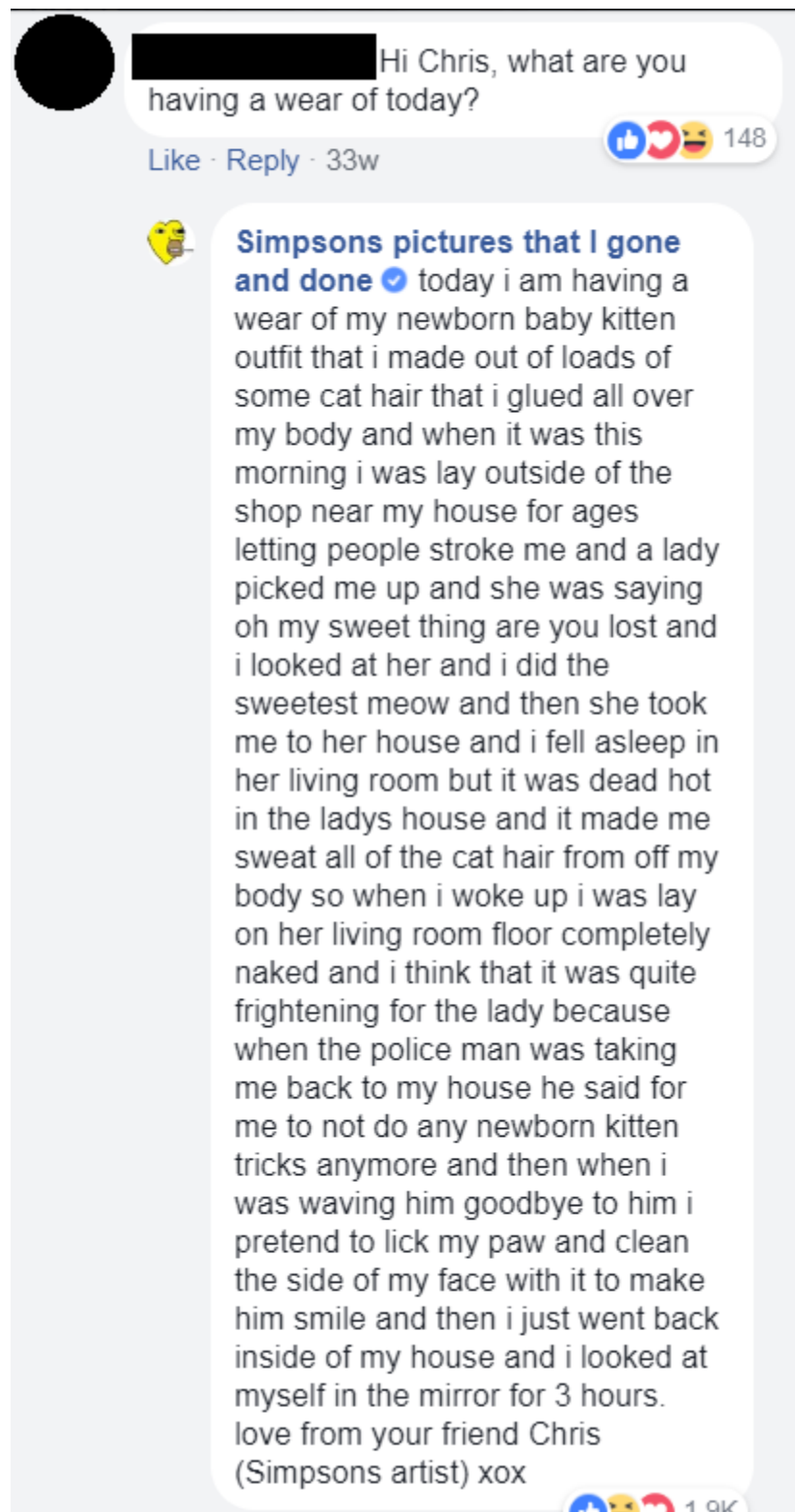
[16] *Simpsons pictures that I gone and done on Facebook*



why i love my cat

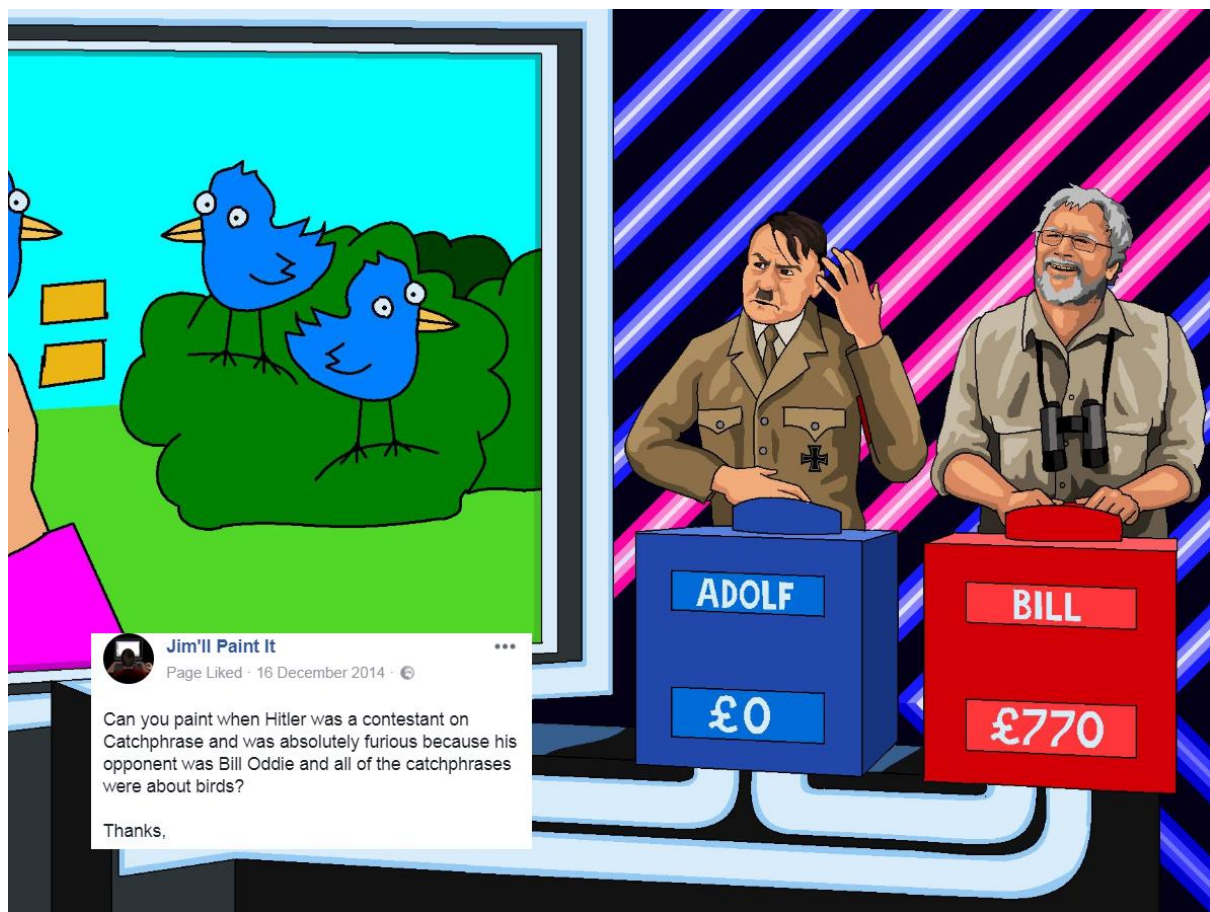


Both the faces of the humans and the cats have the distinct art style of *Simpsons pictures that I gone and done*. A cat having an anthropomorphised face creates an unsettling image when you attempt to apply it to real life. The reasons the characters give on why they love their cat also creates ridiculous images of a dark nature but the ludicrousness of it all makes it funny.

[17] *Simpsons pictures that I gone and done on Facebook*

The straight faced and naïve nature of Chris in contrast to a story of him gluing animals to himself and sleeping in a creepy lady's house creates a weird, yet amusing image, relating to the black comedy aspect. The story also becomes more absurd the further you delve into it, making it funnier in its nonsense.

[18] *Jim'll Paint It on Facebook*



The absurdity of the image works similarly to *Simpsons pictures that I gone and done* but the humour comes from the willingness to spend time and effort on ludicrous requests and creating something competent in the process. Hitler and Bill Oddie have nothing to do with each other, making it more ridiculous, and therefore funny, to look at.

[19] *And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur* by Leonora Carrington, 1953



Used to show similarities between this and appendix 18.

[20] ShitpostBot 5000 v3 on Facebook

When your crush touches you



This image was generated by an AI algorithm which takes templates and source images submitted by users of the website and then generates a new image from them. Here, the text above is the template taken from that category and the Pokemon on the motorcycle is the source. It makes even less sense than that in appendix 18, giving is a weirdly “pure” vibe in the sense that no-one is behind the content, only the AI that makes it.

[21] ShitpostBot 5000 v3 on Facebook



In this image, the AI was able to find a source image that matched perfectly with the template, the source being the Donald Trump frog and the template being Hillary Clinton telling Donald Trump to delete his Twitter account. This image was on the older page and had 11,827 reacts in 24 hours.

Bibliography

- [1] Data received from Internet World Stats and is right as of 2018;
<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>
- [2] Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison; *Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship*; 2008; International Communication Association
- [3] R. PERIS, Ph.D.; *Online Chat Rooms: Virtual Spaces of Interaction for Socially Oriented People (translated by Amparo Jimenez-Ivars)*; 2002; Mary Ann Liebart, Inc.
- [4] Michele Zappavigna; *Ambient affiliation: A linguistic perspective on Twitter*; 2006; SAGE Journals
- [5] Richard Dawkins; *The Selfish Gene*; 1976; Oxford Landmark Science
- [6] Nathan Poe; original comment that spawned Poe's Law in 2005 via
<https://web.archive.org/web/20170114124412/http://www.christianforums.com/threads/big-contradictions-in-the-evolution-theory.1962980/page-3#post-17606580> (archive)
- [7] David Foster Wallace; *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S Fiction*; 2006; ProQuest Information and Learning Company
- [8] Immanuel Kant; *The Critique of Judgment (translated by James Creed Meredith)*; 1790; Creative Commons
- [9] Arthur Schopenhauer; *The World as Will and Representation*; 1818 (translated by Judith Norman); Cambridge University Press
- [10] Josiane Boutonnet; *Irony: Stylistic Approaches*; 2006; Elsevier LTD.
- [11] Rachel Giora; *On Irony and Negation*; 1995; Tel Aviv University
- [12] Marcel Duchmap; *Fountain*; 1917 (purchased 1999); Friends of the Tate Gallery
- [13] Mikhail Bakhtin; *Rabelais and His World*; 1984; Cambridge MA:MIT Press
- [14] Paul McDonald; *The Philosophy of Humour*; 2013; Humanities-eBooks
- [15] Julia Snell; *Schema Theory and the Humour of Little Britain*; 2006; English Today
- [16] Salvatore Attardo; *Encyclopedia of Humour Studies*; 2014; SAGE Publications
- [17] Salvatore Attardo; *Irony as Relevant Inappropriateness*; 1998 (revised in 1999); N. H Elsevier
- [18] Paul Grice; *Logic and conversation: In Cole, P.; Morgan, J. Syntax and semantics*; 1975; New York: Academic Press
- [19] Salvatore Attardo; *The Violation of Grice's Maxims in Jokes*; 1990; Berkeley Linguistics Society
- [20] Michel Maffesoli; *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*; 1996; SAGE Publications
- [21] Sigmund Freud; *Jokes and their Relation to the unconscious*; 1905 (1960 reprint); Norton
- [22] Hustler v Falwell case; https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/485/46#ZC-485_US_46n1ref

[23] Paul Simpson; *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humor*; 2003; John Benjamins Publishing

[24] Jonathan Swift; *A Modest Proposal*; 1729 (retrieved in 2012); Project Gutenberg

[25] Ted Cohen; *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*; 2008; University of Chicago Press

[26] Fred S. Kleiner; *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*; 2006; Wadsworth Publishing

[27] Sigmund Freud; *Humour*; 1927; SCRIBD

[28] Joanna Moorhead, Lindsay Poulton and Michael Tait; *Leonora Carrington: Britain's lost surrealist*; 2010; theguardian.com

[29] Narrative Science, a program designed to create coherent language from fed data; <https://narrativescience.com/>

[30] Barry Petchesky; *We Heard From The Robot, And It Wrote A Better Story About That Perfect Game*; 30/3/11; Deadspin; <https://deadspin.com/5787397/we-heard-from-the-robot-and-it-wrote-a-better-story-about-that-perfect-game>