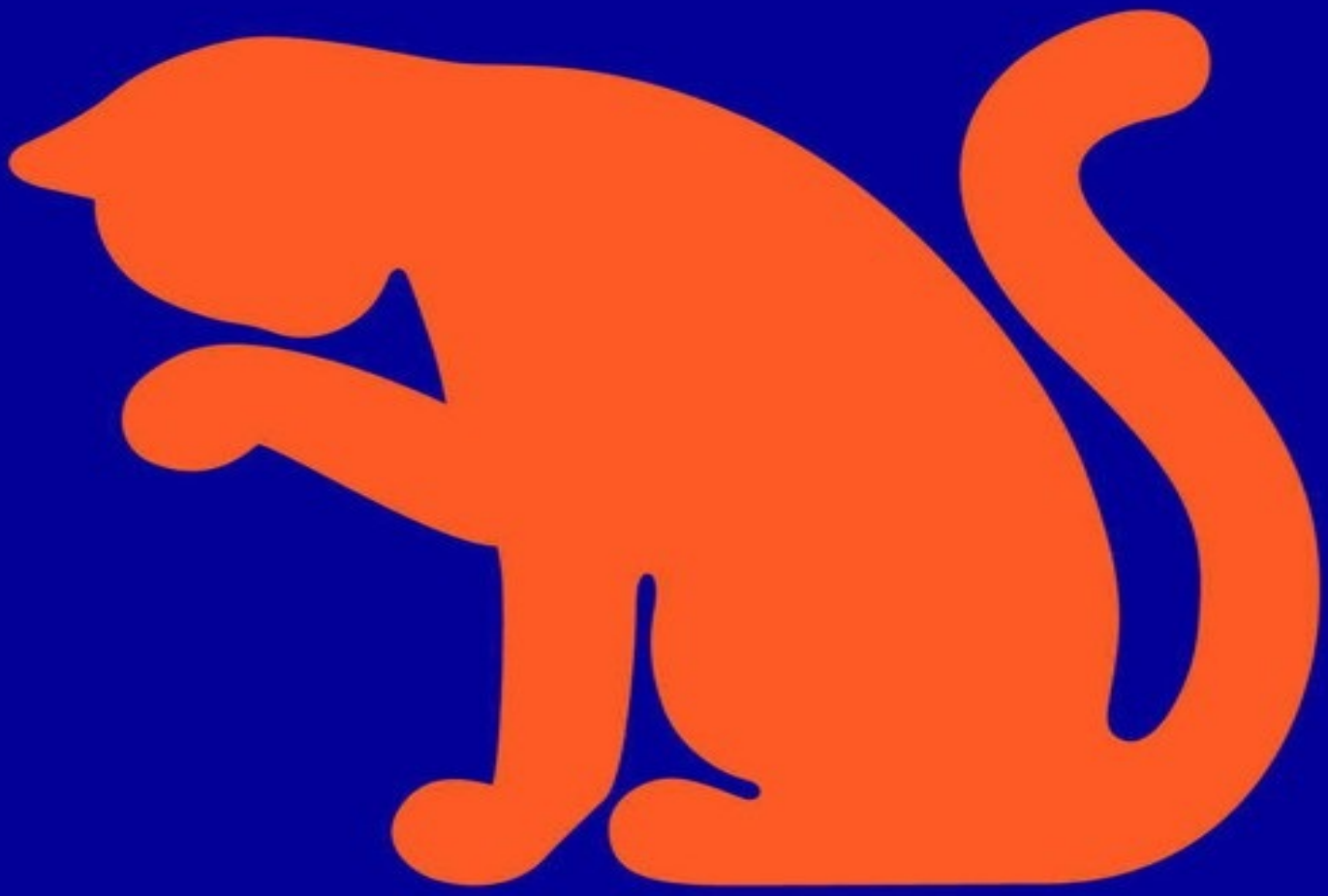
CAN JOKES BRING DOWN GOVERNMENTS?



METAHAVEN

3. THE MEME

The notion of the "meme" was introduced by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in the late 1970s as a way to describe what he called a "cultural gene." Memes are units of culture and behaviour, which survive and spread via imitation and adaptation. Examples of memes are dances, catchphrases, greetings, hairstyles. On the internet, they can be pictures of cute cats or unicorns; they can be Rick Astley videos or perverse sexual images. Memes play a distinct role in protest; they seem to be to the resistance of today what "political posters" were to yesterday – the embodiment of shared ideas in a community. They can be JPEGs, or rumours. Indeed, part of their appeal is that memes seem to spread spontaneously. Paul Mason, the BBC's travelling chronicler of all things crisis-related, found that "with the internet [...] and above all with the advent of social media, it's become possible to observe the development of memes at an accelerated pace [...]. What happens is that ideas arise, are immediately 'market tested', and then are seen to either take off, bubble under, insinuate themselves into the mainstream, or, if they are deemed no good, disappear."[16] Mason contends that "[for] activists, memes create a kind of rough alternative to representative democracy." But he seems unsure as to their potential for permanence; are they anything more than "small cultural portions of the zeitgeist"?[17]

Richard Dawkins was looking for a model that would explain how culture spreads and disseminates among people. In doing so, he applied Darwinian principles to phenomena of human creation and imitation. "Cultural transmission," Dawkins said, "is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution." Genes are replicators. What is their cultural equivalent? The unit of transmission or imitation proposed by Dawkins has itself proven memetic; it is a ruthlessly pervasive idea that applies to phenomena we see all around us. He explained the name:

> 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word même. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream.'[18]

There are three qualities that define the success of memes: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity. *Longevity* indicates how long a meme can last. *Fecundity* applies to the *appeal* of a meme, whether it is *catchy* and thus likely to spread. *Copying-fidelity* is about the strength of a meme to withstand mutation in the process of copying and imitation. It determines how much of the original core remains intact when the meme is in transmission. All three criteria also apply to jokes, but the joke was not mentioned by Dawkins as an example of a meme.

Some suggestions in this direction were made, however, by the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, a friend of Dawkins. Hofstadter was convinced that memes looked a lot like self-referential patterns, which would render them not only survival-minded and selfish – but also fundamentally absurd. An example of such self-referentiality is the Epimenides Paradox. The Cretan thinker Epimenides stated that "All Cretans are liars." The intricacies of this message, which says, "this statement is false," were explored by Hofstadter in his seminal book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.[19] Hofstadter brought memes to the attention of the readership of the *Scientific American* in the early 1980s, right before the idea caught on with the general public. Jeremy Trevelyan Burman reconstructs:

> In January of 1983, Hofstadter published an essay that directly discusses his interpretation of the memes proposal. This was

> inspired, he said, by letters from readers of his previous columns – in particular, by letters from Stephen Walton and Donald Going, who suggested that self-referential sentences of the sort discussed in *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (e.g., 'This sentence is false') could be described as being afflicted by a kind of meaning-virus: self-reference parasitizes language, makes it inconsistent with itself, and then encourages the reader (as carrier) to find or construct new instances of meaning-breaking self-reference.[20]

As Burman notes, "[both] Walton and Going were struck by the perniciousness of such sentences: the selfish way they invade a space of ideas and manage, merely by making copies of themselves all over the place, to take over a large portion of that space. Why do they not manage to overrun all of the space? It is a good question. The answer should be obvious to students of evolution: the sentences do not do so because of competition from other self-replicators."[21]

Memes are not phenomena *of* language; they are phenomena *with* language. From words that simply "annotate" a meme, conveying its minimally required meaning in a given context, to words that become an integral part of the meme's functioning. The standard internet meme is an image captioned with heavy type, superimposed on it "for humorous effect" (says Wikipedia). The sentences that are thus part of the image create some kind of strange loop or self-reference; but they also involve tacit knowledge on the part of the viewer. An example is the portrait of the Boromir character from the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, captioned with a sentence starting with "One does not simply…" In the original film, the actor Sean Bean says: "One does not simply walk into Mordor. Its black gates are guarded by more than just orks."[22] The "One does not simply…" meme has this sentence completed in different ways:

> One does not simply grow his dick six inches in three easy steps.
> One does not simply topple a Ugandan warlord by pressing "like" on Facebook.
> One does not simply log out of a friend's Facebook without making him gay.

A fictional, but widely known, point of reference is tinkered with to create new implications, to the point that one no longer thinks of Tolkien and Peter Jackson at all. But the remainder of that commonly held reference point, the tacit knowledge, which is that I know that you know that I know that particular part of *The Lord of the Rings* enables the joke, *any joke*, that follows. If, for instance, the same sentence would be based on a film that no one has ever seen, its mention would never achieve the same immediate impact. A meme can tap into a collective memory and transform the "outcome" of a commonly held starting point to different ends.

Further study into the nature of self-referentiality was done by Susan Stewart in her legendary book, *Nonsense*. For Stewart, the category of "nonsense" is opposed to the category of "common sense making" through which what we think of as reality is established. By categorising something as "nonsense", "the legitimacy and rationality of sense making was left uncontaminated, unthreatened."[23]

It is not difficult to see a fundamental political procedure at work here. Isn't it exactly the day job of most politicians to *manage* reality and sense-making, deciding what *others* get to see as nonsense and what as legit? One is tempted to think here of Labour leader Ed Miliband's June, 2011 condemnation of nationwide strikes in the UK. In a BBC interview, Miliband gave the same answer to each different question posed to him by the journalist. "These strikes are wrong … both sides should put aside the rhetoric and get around the negotiating table …"[24] Time and again, Miliband hammered out the same words. His drone-like repetition of a single, studied phrase laid bare a structural protocol of governance, an inability to deviate from a script – even more preposterous when you think that Miliband is supposed to lead the opposition rather than govern the country. "Milibot," as the curious speech exercise became known, is an example of what Mark Fisher subsequently labelled "reality management."[25] It showed the impossibility of conducting "opposition" within the governing

neoliberal frame, and the desperation of a politician trying to stay inside of it.

Indeed, argued Stewart, "all discourse bears reference to a commonly held world. The discourse of common sense refers to the 'real world.' The discourse of nonsense refers to 'nothing.' In other words, it refers to itself, even though it must manufacture this 'nothing' out of a system of differences from the everyday world – the common stuff of social life – in order to be recognised as 'nothing.'"[26]

Nonsense also involves an element of "play." Boromir's "One does not simply..." bounces off from a widely known, and also slightly ridiculous phrase, and then goes on to take completely different directions with it. Stewart notes that

> Playing at fighting may be "not fighting," but it is not fighting on a different level of abstraction from other kinds of not fighting such as kissing, skipping rope, buying groceries, or singing "Happy Birthday." Play involves the manipulation of the conditions and contexts of messages and not simply a manipulation of the message itself. It is not, therefore, a shift within the domain of the everyday lifeworld: it is a shift to another domain of reality.[27]

Memes take on a wide variety of forms and formats, but they do their work right in the human brain. Time, explained Dawkins, constitutes a major limit on the success of individual memes. No one person can do more than only a few things at once. Consequently, said Richard Dawkins, "if a meme is to dominate the attention of a human brain, it must do so at the expense of 'rival' memes."

Digital networks and social media do not dissolve the limits in attention that the human brain can give to any meme, but they do more or less solve two out of the three criteria that, according to Dawkins, determine a meme's success: longevity and copying-fidelity. Longevity of a meme in a digital network is in most cases guaranteed; a file may very well never be erased, and exist as long as the server exists that stores it. Then, copy-fidelity is guaranteed if a meme spreads by forwarding and reblogging a digital original. The meme's distribution into the gene pool is then completely without loss of quality. If a meme spreads by *imitation*, changes made in the process are still traceable when compared to an "original." Memes tend to be most successful if they get both copied *and* imitated.

When it comes to the meme's intrinsic fecundity digital networks don't give easy answers. Fecundity can't be presupposed just by something being on the internet. For every successful digital meme there are many thousands of failed attempts. Many internet memes share distinctive features shaped by the unwritten rules of their commonly held world – be it software used, the online forum inhabited, a language spoken, or a set of aesthetic preferences. This, in turn, has led to the predictable misconception that anything produced following those unwritten rules is bound to become a meme. This is not the case. Successful memes balance their reference to a commonly held world with an element giving them a strikingly new meaning. The more "advanced" a meme is, the more its meaning will be implied by manipulation of the context in which the meme appears.

On November 18, 2011, Fred Baclagan, a retired FBI agent, sent an e-mail to his contact list:

> Hello all, I was very disturbed to find this in my inbox this morning: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHg5SJYRHA0[28]

The link leads to the music video of Rick Astley's 1987 UK Charts, and Billboard Hot 100 No. 1 hit, *Never Gonna Give You Up*. The video is posted on YouTube under the title "RickRoll'd," and has been viewed 66,833,023 times, and counting. Baclagan's two Gmail accounts had been broken into by a hacktivist group called Antisec; his messages had been dumped online and Antisec made Baclagan aware of this fact by just sending him the Rick Astley link. Such is the power of a successful meme's manipulation of context. In common parlance, being "Rickrolled" now means having been hacked and knowing it; Astley's song is a kiss of death. Baclagan was, in turn, inadvertently rickrolling his

own contacts by just forwarding the Astley link. The origins of rickrolling lay in an amusing prankster meme on 4chan and other internet forums, where a seemingly promising, interesting and relevant link would lead an unsuspecting user to Rick Astley. It is a *gotcha* of sorts, which brings you "face-to-face with the ridiculous."[29]

Instead of merely entrapment in a false choice, the rickroll transports the user to what Susan Stewart called "another domain of reality." Instead of some parallel dream world, this is more of a conceptual overhaul in which all prior sense-making is erased, including the original meaning of Astley's own video.

Astley floats on an all-in, ready-to-roll commonly held world; like Boromir, there is tacit knowledge involved, of an audience's awareness of Rick Astley and his song. This is knowledge of the type "it's that guy/that song again" rather than "this is a young Rick Astley performing Stock Aitken and Waterman's 1987 monster hit."

But unlike the Boromir meme, the Astley video, as a meme, comes to imply a whole new set of things even *without* the superimposition of any new content.

The economist Thomas Schelling, in a 1958 experiment, famously found that when two people are to meet in New York City, but have not agreed on a place and time to do so (and have no way to coordinate their movements), they are likely to expect the other to show up at the clock in the middle of the Main Concourse of Grand Central Station at 12 noon. Schelling called such a space-time convergence a "focal point." Focal points arise not out of a prior agreement, but out of expectations. Memes can be focal points in man-made information space, in absence of a prior agreement. For example, the word "Tahrir Square" is a meme, shorthand, for the entire Arab Spring. Many (in fact, too many) people who have never been to Tahrir Square refer to it with intimate familiarity, and expect others to understand what they mean when they utter the word "Tahrir." In London in 2011, "Tahrir Square" street signs began to appear; streets seemed, indeed, to become psychologically primed for revolt; its possibility was being introduced to areas where people might not have otherwise expected it. Tahrir in "memespace" converged with Tahrir in "meatspace"[30] as a self-evident focal point.

While Schelling lay bare the "prominence or conspicuousness" of focal points, later analysis compared focal points to conventions, or "common expectations or regularities."[31] It is a meme's ultimate reward to achieve the platinum status of "regularity"; but it is also the moment that its evolution has come to a halt. *Never Gonna Give You Up* has achieved such status; even retired FBI agents now get the in-joke. In an ecosystem of expectations, memes cash in on the primeval instincts that both sustain and continuously undercut the order of common sense that determines their place. Richard Dawkins claimed that a meme's dominance could only be curbed by rival memes. Any rival of a dominant meme must cash in on the same type of lowly desire which makes you devour tabloids and horoscopes; if one meme is low, its challenger must be lower, until the cycle is broken and a new one begins. Some of these open secrets of fecundity have been probed by Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, founders of the subversive British acid house group, The KLF. Their *Manual* to create UK No. 1 chart hits is extremely relevant to meme creation. In it, the duo sets out to amusingly prepare the reader to write, produce and release a UK Number One hit single. Drummond and Cauty develop a fairly comprehensive view on what it takes to reach a top position in the charts in the late 1980s. A *Smash Hits* music journalist named Neil Tennant had already laid some groundwork for this with his Pet Shop Boys seminal hit *West End Girls* – a UK and US Number One in 1985, its mood and lyrics alluding to, but not spelling out, class war in Britain.

Drummond and Cauty, in their song writing and production, promote a ruthless exploitation of the

oasis of fecundity that is our gene pool. They reserve special praise for Stock, Aitken and Waterman – the latter-day golden boys of the mixing room – who wrote and produced one hit after the other and dominated all the charts around the last half of the 1980s. Drummond and Cauty appear overjoyed at the inherent fecundity of Stock, Aitken and Waterman's production of monster hits. In particular, they admire *Never Gonna Give You Up* by Rick Astley. Right when Astley "hit the first line of the chorus on his debut single it was all over – the Number One position was guaranteed," write Drummond and Cauty:

> *"I'm never gonna give you up"*
>
> It says it all. It's what every girl in the land whatever her age wants to hear her dream man tell her. Then to follow that line with:
>
> "*I'm never gonna let you down*
> *I'm never going to fool around*
> *or upset you."*
> GENIUS.[32]

Stock, Aitken and Waterman produced not just songs but also entire acts. They "invented" Bananarama, "created" Dead or Alive, "developed" Rick Astley, and "engineered" Kylie Minogue – each of them a platinum meme by itself. Stock, Aitken and Waterman's primary genius was, for the KLF, not so much in the overall stories their songs tell, but in the way catchy phrases are used. Stock, Aitken and Waterman are "able to spot a phrase [...] a line that the nation will know exactly what is being talked about, and then use it perfectly:

> "Fun Love and Money"
> "Showing Out"
> "Got To Be Certain"
> "Respectable"
> "Toy Boy"
> "Cross My Broken Heart"[33]

The three producers were themselves invisible, almost anonymous, behind the one-hit wonders they produced. They achieved their outcomes "masked" as Kylie Minogue or Rick Astley; looking like a baroque lollypop Marquis de Sade on one day (Dead or Alive), a proto-Rihanna R&B star (Princess – whose hit song is aptly called *Say I'm Your Number One*) on the next. Appearing as photo model secretaries (Mel & Kim), or pre-cybernetic, exploitative glam punks (Sigue Sigue Sputnik), each of Stock, Aitken and Waterman's avatars landed in the charts' top echelon out of nowhere, but always well below the bar of good taste. They changed the memetic landscape forever, and then disappeared.

Rival memes are rival dreams – the game is on not for a little bit of attention, or a little "like" here and there, but for a massive attack of the lowest common denominator, a rapture of the underbelly. Stock, Aitken and Waterman understood how such a project might be structured. While, indeed, internet memes use many elements floating in the common gene pool, these elements are almost always original acts by others; focal points and common references in a sea of information. Stock, Aitken and Waterman's "anonymity" behind the identities of their one-hit wonders was later eclipsed by the more overall facelessness of electronic dance music.

Enter the Lolcat

Stock, Aitken and Waterman are the original "coders" of Rick Astley and thus, by proxy, of the "Rickroll." The trio is not known for its political activities, but that doesn't matter; the internet meme version of any piece of original work is not likely to sustain any of its intended values. The inherent ridiculousness of Boromir and Rick Astley qualifies an *indifference* to their original meaning, which is why the Rickroll meme is disruptive as a form while its "content" can consist of pure Stock, Aitken and Waterman.

Many contemporary electronic images found on the internet are mere byproducts of the omnipresence of digital cameras. But they may lose that sense of innocence. A good example of an innocent image supercharged by the internet is the Lolcat. Lolcats are pictures of cats, superimposed with texts. Things are at their most hilarious when one tries to describe this type of image and its intended effect in a neutral manner; Wikipedia on February 21, 2013 found that a "lolcat (pronounced/ ˈlɒlkæt/ lol-kat) is an image combining a photograph of a cat with text intended to contribute humour. [...] LOLcat is a composite of two words, 'lol' and 'cat'. 'LOL' stands for 'Laugh out Loud' or 'Laughing out Loud'; hence, lolcats are intended to be funny and to include jokes."[34] There is also something funny about seriously discussing "I can has cheezburger", one of the best-known Lolcat memes. It is hard to discuss this trying to make sense. Cats are not eager to please; they are not likely to give in to any false choices presented to them. A Lolcat is the exact opposite of a Milibot; whereas Milibot desperately tries to force his puzzled listeners into "sense-making," Lolcat jumps out of the frame in which the false choice offered still seems to make any sense at all. Cats are today's political animals.

Every era, every generation, has to construct and reconstruct its political beliefs, and subsequent visuals, out of the stuff that surrounds it at any given moment. Protest signs will be made out of the cardboard, paper and textile available at that given time and place at a local hardware store; there is no hardware store selling "political" cardboard, so even at that material level, a transformation always has to be made. The same goes for the visual stuff of the internet; every generation will construct new, "political" beliefs out of it; out of all kinds of stuff, which seemed initially non-political. This is especially striking when, in Europe, a not merely "non-political" but "post-political" generation grapples with its own politicisation under the aegis of austerity, neoliberalism, and financial-managerial-political corruption. For example, the cutting-edge Leftist political journal *Kittens*, published in London by The Wine and Cheese Appreciation Society of Greater London / Kittens Editorial Collective, features radical leftist writing *only* alongside photographs of cute kittens.[35] The strangest thing is that this combination further radicalises the message; *Kittens* acknowledges head-on the self-politicisation of an information space in which we were supposed to merely *enjoy ourselves*. In the absence of a "properly political" visual expression at hand, the stuff that is readily available, the internet's equivalent of cardboard, gets politicised just like Astley became the "Rickroll." In other words, every bit of visual information on the internet can, through the spectre of self-politicisation, become revolutionary, because it exists in a shared gene pool. Cats are especially useful and relevant. In *Wired* magazine, Gideon Lewis-Kraus has tracked the origins of the Lolcat back to Japan, where it is tied to a culture of online anonymity.[36] In a sense the Lolcat is to the average person what Sinitta was to Stock Aitken and Waterman. Lewis-Kraus traces why cats are so successful as internet symbols; he cites research about the relation between depression in humans and domestic cats. Indeed,

> your cat will like you best if you pretend that you don't desperately want to play with it all the time. ... The more neurotic the cat owner – the more desperate for fuzzy comfort and nuzzly security and unconditional affection – the briefer the interactions that damn cat would allow.