EMILY APTER

Is there anything serious to be said about memes? Are earworms, pet videos, or those random weird things you can’t get out of your head anything more than just fodder for empty hours? Or self-medicating forms of humor that take you through the trauma of daily headlines? Memes correspond to what Charles Sanders Peirce called “general predicates of thought.” They build strength through repetition and recognition, and they call attention to themselves through techniques of likeness, indication, guideposting, exclamation, attention-forcing, thrown-togetherness, and the status conditions of badge or shibboleth.\(^1\) Memes also illustrate the thrust of the drives manifest in the obsessive-compulsive desire to engineer repeat “hits” to consciousness. Peter Szendy describes feeling

haunted, obsessed to the point of queasiness, possessed until you just can’t take it anymore by one of those tunes that come to you just like that, one of those songs you hear by chance . . . one of those hits that, from that moment on, refuses to let you go. . . . Nothing is to be done: A kind of virus has taken a hold of you. . . . And you have caught what some have called an earworm.\(^2\)

Richard Dawkins, who famously coined the neologism “meme” in his 1976 classic *The Selfish Gene*, treated its survival as analogous to natural selection in biological evolution.

I think that a new kind of replicator has recently emerged on this very planet. It is staring us in the face. It is still in its infancy, still drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup, but already it is achieving evolutionary change at a rate that leaves the old gene panting far behind. . . .

“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.”³

Though Dawkins would underscore that memes multiply through *non-genetic* reproduction and eventually refute the idea (proposed by Nicholas Humphrey) that they are actually existing living structures residing in the brain, he certainly encouraged the conceptual rhyme scheme of meme and gene; it appears throughout the book like a running joke.

Situated midway between Peirce’s “predicates of thought” and Dawkins’s “selfish gene” is René Thom’s distinction between *saillance* (a disruptive flash or jolt of sensory stimulus) and *prégnance* (animal cues ensuring propagation and species survival). Forged at a particular juncture of French phenomenology and life science in the early 1940s, Thom’s speculations on the biological origins of human symbolism yielded the proposition that predication rests on “l’investissement d’une forme saillante par une prégnance,” roughly, “the vesting of a salient form by an expectant substance.”⁴ The formula is useful for understanding, from the perspective of ethology and “semio-physics,” the conditions by which a meme “takes” or becomes a holding object of the brain. Umberto Eco, for his part, would associate this kind of predictive processing with the workings of the “recognition seme” based on “codes of recognition.”

There is a principle of economy both in the recollection of perceived things and in the recognition of familiar objects, and it is based on what I shall call codes of recognition. These codes list certain features of the object as the most meaningful for purposes of recollection or future communication: for example, I recognize a zebra from a distance without noting the exact shape of the head or the relation between legs and body. It is enough that I recognize two pertinent characteristics—four-leggedness and stripes.⁵

As objects of gestalt learning and *iconotropy* (the appropriation and reworking of like images), memes are construed by navigating diverse fields and subdisciplines: evolutionary biology, phenomenology, cognitive psychology, semiotics, technologies of neuroimaging, epi- and ontogenetics.⁶ With respect to epigenetics, I refer to the way in which the meme, like the interpretive molecule of RNA, reproduces a memory-self through mnemonic traces that pass along inherited trauma. With respect to ontogenetics, I refer to how memes function as operators that

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hybridize modes of existence, genres, and medial forms: jokes, puns, religious icons, transitional objects that soothe and heal. Underscoring this therapeutic capacity, Urban Dictionary notes: “Memes are a lifestyle and art used by teens and adults who are willing to actually live a life that doesn’t include depression. Technically the main reason half the world has not committed to die.”

In their antidepressant function, memes are salves for solitary souls. They are community-builders, connecting solo agents to social networks and political causes. They engender an implicit trust among the “users” who co-produce and distribute them, and, by doing so, model a kind of sharing economy dubbed “platform cooperativism” by Trebor Scholz. And yet, because of their predication on impersonal intimacy, memes shift the ground of the political from an ethics of direct responsibility to an ethics of limited liability and indirect consequence in moral action. The emotionally reactive, remotely responsible meme user yields the political actor as triumphalist raptor or rogue agent. Not surprisingly, memes enjoy a particularly robust life on the political right, their ever-evolving morphologies in step with the latest strategic political innovations in gerrymandering, voter suppression, and “computational propaganda,” whose objectives include damage to the opponent’s reputational brand (see “Pizzagate”) and industrial-strength production of triggering tags (“fetal heartbeat,” MAGA, the NRA Charlton Heston meme “I’ll give you my gun when you pry it from my cold, dead hands”). Fully weaponized as technologies of harassment and hate-mongering within a general “cryptoeconomy of affect,” memes are omnipresent warriors in the culture/flame wars (to wit, the flash point of “Pepe the Frog” after the Internet meme’s appropriation by the alt-right as the ideological mascot for white supremacy and white nationalism).


Wikipedia gives this overview of Pepe the Frog’s life as a far-right Internet meme:

During the 2016 United States presidential election the meme was connected to Donald Trump’s campaign. In October 2015, Trump retweeted a Pepe representation of himself, associated with a video called “You Can’t Stump the Trump (Volume 4).” Later in the election, Roger Stone and Donald Trump Jr. posted a parody movie post on Twitter and Instagram titled “The Deplorables,” a play on Hillary Clinton’s controversial phrase “basket of deplorables,” which included Pepe’s face among those of members of the Trump family and other figures popular among the alt-right.

Also during the election, various news organizations reported associations of the character with white nationalism and the alt-right. In May 2016, Olivia Nuzzi of The Daily Beast wrote that there was “an actual campaign to reclaim Pepe from normies” and that “turning Pepe into a white nationalist icon” was an explicit goal of some on the alt-right. In September 2016, an article published on Hillary Clinton’s campaign website described Pepe as “a symbol associated with white supremacy” and denounced Trump’s campaign for its supposed promotion of the meme (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepe_the_Frog).
Of course, the Right does not own the meme-tool. Across the political spectrum (including left-on-left attacks), the aggressive character of the meme has been mobilized, channeling the epidemiological analogy to an aggressive virus and all that comes with it: imaginaries of disease, contamination, toxicity, and demographic incursion. One could venture that the episteme of the meme (the *epistememe*, if you will) is essentially pandemic and bellicose. The association of memes with viral consciousness and mass violence underscores their volatility as a political medium and their susceptibility to appropriation and self-sabotage, as in cases—like those found in the comics of R. Crumb—in which “the satire of racist bigotry is indistinguishable from bigotry itself.” This negative capability of memes notwithstanding, it is important to acknowledge their historic contribution as rallying points of activism and protest politics (think ACT UP’s “Silence=Death” logo; or #Black Lives Matter, which itself built a series of new movement memes out of Eric Garner’s phrase “I can’t breathe” and Trayvon Martin’s hoodie; or the pro-choice movement’s pink X-emblazoned sign and slogan #SexStrike (If Our Choices Are Denied So Are Yours).

Memes assume strange, hybrid forms both in and beyond platform politics. In aesthetics and creative practice they figure prominently in the New Weird, a genre between fantasy and horror in speculative fiction associated with writers like H. P. Lovecraft, China Miéville, and Tom McCarthy. Weird objects, according to McCarthy, are protean and formless. In his 2015 novel *Satin Island*, an oil spill becomes an example of Weird: A dark substance, a primeval ooze, a terrestrial ink, it presents a script written by a nonhuman (the Earth) that remains mystifyingly illegible. Mikhail Gorbachev’s birthmark, sometimes referred to as a “port-wine stain,” exerts much the same fascination. It appears as a meme that emblematizes end-of-Cold War paranoia in Don DeLillo’s 1997 novel *Underworld*:

“You should train an eye on the mark on this Gorbachev’s head, to see if it changes shape.”

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12. See Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump* (Washington: Zero Books, 2017). To make the point about the escalation of meme warfare, Nagle asks us to compare the age of innocence when the Obama campaign circulated the HOPE meme by artist Shepard Fairey with the “irreverent mainstream-baffling meme culture during the last race, in which the Bernie’s Dank Meme Stash Facebook page and The Donald subreddit defined the tone of the race for a young and newly politicized generation, with the mainstream media desperately trying to catch up with a subcultural in-joke style to suit two emergent anti-establishment waves of the right and left. Writers like Manuel Castells and numerous commentators in *Wired* told us of the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be replaced by the wisdom of crowds, the swarm, the hive mind, citizen journalism and user-generated content. They got their wish, but it’s not quite the utopian vision they were hoping for” (pp. 8–9).


“Changes shape? It’s always been there.”

“You know this?”

“What, you think it recently appeared?”

“You know this? It’s always been there?”

“It’s a birthmark,” Brian said.

“Excuse me but that’s the official biography. I’ll tell you what I think. I think if I had a sensitive government job I would be photographing Gorbachev from outer space every minute of the day that he’s not wearing a hat to check the shape of the birthmark if it’s changing. Because it’s Latvia right now. But it could be Siberia in the morning, where they’re emptying out their jails.”

Flash-forward to the present and one realizes how this obsession has metastasized. A 2019 headline reads “Tourists head to ‘Gorbachev birthmark’ archipelago,” referencing the resemblance of the mark to the shape of the islands. The article explains: “An obscure Russian destination is the latest in a new holiday phenomenon known as the ‘shapecation.’” The reference is to Darak Aprel in northeast Russia off the Siberian coast. Tourists requesting to see “the birthmark islands” eventually prompted Russian tour operators to make it a destination spot. Here we have a triple-punch meme: the birthmark itself, “birthmark tourism,” and a news item that is stranger than fiction.

Gorbachev’s birthmark, like the oil spill, is a pictogram or “crypto-concept” belonging to a larger crypto-currency of the mind. Jean Laplanche coined “crypto-concept” to designate that which “goes astray” between material and subjective reality, fact and fantasy. It is what concepts lean on, are propped up by (like a subliminal subfloor), and remain oblivious of even as they quote and repeat it. One of Slavoj Žižek’s “old joke[s] from Socialist times about a Yugoslav politician on a visit to Germany” says it best: “When his train passes a city, he asks his guide: ‘What city is this?’ The guide replies: ‘Baden-Baden.’ The politician snaps back: ‘I’m not an idiot—you don’t have to tell me twice!’” What is mimetic here is not only the repetition-effect of “Baden-Baden” or the fact that it is already a Žižek joke meme, but also the “I’m not an idiot” idiocy, with its affirmation of insistent obtuseness. Roland Barthes identified obtuseness (l’obtus) with “third meaning,” using the example of the shower of gold raining down on the tsar’s head in Eisenstein’s film Ivan the Terrible (1944). Here, the historical symbolism of the gold is easy enough to decode, but there is something extra that remains harder to unravel; an “erratic, obstinate” factor, something “trivial, futile, false, pastiche.”

Unpacking this obtuseness further, we note how the meme’s redundancy bespeaks a mordant absurdity. As Martin Crowley would have it, the meme possesses a seemingly built-in “response to the reverberation of the redundancies that form its own structure,” bringing to mind “the monotone snickering of Beavis and Butthead—i.e., response as pure repetition.” Crowley speculates further that the contagiousness of the meme (of individual memes as well as of the meme as genre) may be taken as the apotheosis of the death drive: not as a psychic dynamic, however apersonal, but as the inorganic, mineral immobility of repetition asymptotically without difference. . . . An ambivalent form, the meme thus exists in celebration of its own repeatability, and has already buried this pulse of humor in the sheets of its repetitions (and the profitability they index, precisely through the derisory profitability of any single repetition).20

Obtuseness, deadly redundancy, and crypto-conceptuality are identifying traits of memes no matter their packaging: acronyms, logos, GIFS, CAPTCHAS, emojis, random phrases, aphorisms, tunes, bad fashion, “crazy shit,” and tags: “Killroy Was Here,” “Frodo Lives,” “Know da wae,” “White Claw,” “Hamster Dance,” “Scumbag Steve,” “Ermagerd,” “Alex from Target,” “Red Slime,” “Grumpy Cat.” It is this obtuseness—this ignorance of why they become memes—that comes into focus when trying to fathom what gives them lift-off and potential traction in the larger field of social micropolitics. Why do certain examples of weak messaging or random categories (“celebrities and things”) start to trend? Even witty artist memes give off an aura of bafflement about the fact of their becoming-meme. Testifying to this effect, the artist Nina Katchadourian claimed she could

20. Martin Crowley in an email response to a draft of this essay, June 20, 2019.
21. For a fairly complete seminar on the genesis of the Ugandan Knuckle meme, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVFTD-QZwMo. Urban Dictionary summarizes its history as follows:

Possibly the January 2018 Meme of the Month, “Do you know da wae” has taken the world by storm. Many brave, Ugandan Warriors formed by a group of Knuckles, which is a Sonic character, follow around people on VRChat, asking if they know the way. They find queens to follow, and if they find a false queen, they make spit sounds. If they find a real queen, they click their tongues to show that they are the queen’s followers. This random craze is funny because of how random it is, and many people do not seem to laugh at this, usually people who are not true meme artists.

Example 1
Warrior 1: Do you know da wae?
Anime girl: what?
Warrior 2: SHE DOES NOT KNOW DA WAE SPIT ON HER SPIT MY BROTHERS
Warrior 3: Give no mercy, for this false queen is a poser
never have anticipated how her series *Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style* (from the ongoing “Seat Assignment” project that she began in 2010) would go viral. Memes are born, then, already in scare quotes, citing their own obtuseness, their indifference to the sufficient cause of their reproducibility, their status as cognitive perplex. It is this queer aspect of memes that may account, at least in part, for their prominence in feminist, queer, and artistic practice. Pre-Internet, Mary Kelly created a leather-jacket meme of female masochism and self-defense (titled *Menacé*) as part of her project *Interim*, a 1984–89 series of panels that anchored narratives of midlife passage in iconic images of sartorial fetish objects. Lutz Bacher memed Jane Fonda’s “weirdness” in *Jokes* (1987) by adding the caption “I’m really weird. I’m really all fucked up” to a photograph of Fonda facing a microphone, her right hand raised in a gesture of explanatory self-justification. The work would seem to reference Fonda’s controversial 1972 trip to North Vietnam and FTA (“Fuck the Army”) troupe tour with actor Donald...
Sutherland. Her iconic shag haircut (familiar from the 1971 movie *Klute*, in which she played a high-priced sex worker) produces the meme “Klute Meets Hanoi Jane,” at once humorous and politically legible as a culture capsule of the ’70s seen through the retrospect of Reagan’s America at the dawn of the Iran-Contra affair. Jenny Holzer’s series *Truisms* (1977–79), *Inflammatory Essays* (1979–82), and *Survival* (1983–85) established the feminist aphorism (“Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise,” “Men Don’t Protect You Anymore”) as a medium *sans pareil* of political messaging. Post-Internet, this feminist legacy acquires renewed urgency and relevance. Queer, trans, and feminist artists (as the recent exhibit *By Any Memes Necessary* attests) fully claim the meme as an activist medium, as do artists like Tony Cokes, whose work has taken on misogyny. There is a clear homage to and reprise of the statement memes of Holzer and Barbara Kruger in Cokes’s *Evil.66.1* (2016) (also titled “War of Women”), a single-channel video featuring misogynist Trump citations in bold white lettering against a red backdrop, set to music by the Pet Shop Boys. Whether they be fatuous pronouncements (“Some women try to portray themselves as being the weaker sex, but don’t believe it for a minute”) or indulgent ramblings (“I was always of the opinion that aggression, sex drive, and everything that goes along with it / was on the man’s part of the table, not the woman’s. As I grew older and witnessed


life firsthand from a front-row seat at the great clubs, social events, and parties of the world—I have seen just about everything—I began to realize that women are far stronger than men./Their sex drive makes us look like babies”), what comes to the fore is the extent to which Trump’s speech is prepped through and through for viral dissemination. The trademark inflections of his speech drill down into the psyche, delivering ideological gut punches even as they measure the radius of his obtuseness (and cunning) in matters of sexual inequality.

In their one-linerism (a Mafex RoboCop figure captioned “I used to be a structural linguist, but now I’m not Saussure” billed by the duo Slavs and Tatars as “a theory of inner declension”), in their association with their back-office production process (hidden from view and in that respect the antithesis of assembly politics), in their reliance on the short attention span and the ephemeral, virtual environments of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (themselves meme trademarks), and in their complicity with the art of the stupid joke (think Žižek’s Jokes, a book whose philosophy-nerd subtitle, Did You Hear the One about Hegel and Negation?, alerts readers to the lameness of philosophy and prepares them for a joke at their own expense), memes lend themselves to being dismissed as frivolous

23. Slavs and Tatars, “More Phemes,” in Wripped Scripped (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2018), pp. 20 and 7, respectively. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated WS.
or excoriated as units of capitalist branding and rebranding. It seems incontestable that Internet memes flow out of a commercially driven economy of social media and that they increasingly populate what used to be quaintly known as “the public sphere” with a profit-harvesting avalanche of prompts, screengrabs, tweets, conspiracy theories, deepfake videos, and hoaxes. Memes are willing agents of the troll farm, helped along by the political brands of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Matteo Salvini, Jair Bolsonaro, Geert Wilders, Benjamin Netanyahu, Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, Jörg Haider, Nigel Farage, Narendra Modi . . .

Divya Dwivedi and Shaj Mohan have analyzed some publicity-stunt photos of Modi that became memes from this perspective in their article “The Hoax in the Cave”:

An oversized man (56 inches to be precise) in a cave swaddled in saffron robes posing for the cameras in a stance of catatonic freeze. Frozen men in mountain caves are consecrated with divinity in the myths of the subcontinent. This image, as with all images, captures the mode of capturing as well; that is the mode in which an image is generated is registered in the very image.

“Capturing the mode of capturing” is close to what I previously ascribed to the meme. Dwivedi and Mohan seize on this feature, along with the “camera after

24. As Liam Gillick notes, the end of the last millennium ushered in a host of memes as euphemistic fixers, “new Ancient Greek-sounding names” appearing “in ambient ambivalent spaces of exchange as a replacement for more difficult and directly contestable activities or scandals: Altria, Aga, Areva, Avaya, Aviva, Capitalia, Centrica, Consignia, and Dexia were joined by Acambis, Acordis, Altadis, Aventis, Elementis, Enodis, and Invenysys. By 2001, Arthur Anderson Accounting had become Accenture and Philip Morris had rebranded itself as Altria—all in an attempt to reflect the potential of new global markets and unforeseen opportunities, carried by new names that could be associated with visual affects spinning free from concrete associations.” Liam Gillick, “We Lived and Thought Like Pigs: Gilles Chatelet’s Devastating Prescience,” https://www.e-flux.com/journal/100/268837/we-lived-and-thought-like-pigs-gilles-chatelet-s-devastating-prescience/.

camera” cumulative effect that compounds the “hypophysical cultic power of the object in the hands of the magician-gangster” (HC).

This particular image of the large man in the cave comes in a series of images. In one of them, a cameraman crouching obsequiously at the feet of the overbearing saffron subject and pointing at the face making the pose was caught by another camera which was focused on the same subject from behind. The latter image which reveals the making of the image is important. It shows that a hoax in politics takes many men to invent and sustain, for politics is the responsibility of the many (HC).

Dissecting the logic of parts and wholes that upholds the “hoaxiness” of the hoax and the distributed responsibility of its production values, Dwivedi and Mohan leave us with lingering questions about how power is localized and disseminated in the vast field of micropolitics, and how, despite (or because of) their hoaxiness, memes become ascendant and sovereign, even if only for a brief time: “Is this man the whole of the hoax? Is it the robe? Is it the stone idols who are legal persons in the juridical system? Is it the media? Is it in our myths which are continuous with our present? Is it our histories?” (HC) The Modi “Man in the Cave” meme, ginned up by viral circuits of “millions of followers,” illustrates the way in which memes have emerged as the political technology du jour.

There is, though, something in the obtuseness of memes along with the unstable conditions of political literacy that often makes them backfire on dictators. Dwivedi and Mohan’s exposé of the Modi hoax itself went viral. One could say that, politically speaking, meme-ology derails the authoritarian political brand as it moves, in aleatory fashion, into remote byways of audience, into greater powers of “we.” It comes to resemble a certain form of comedy that, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai suggest, induces the kind of epistemological turbulence that structures of governmentality are at pains to contain or curtail:

Comedy isn’t just an anxiogenic tableau of objects disrupted by status shifting, collapse and persistence, the disruption by difference, or a veering between the tiny and the large. Nor is it just a field of narrative expectation punctuated by the surprise of laughter or vertiginous enjoyment. It is also epistemologically troubling, drawing insecure boundaries as though it were possible to secure confidence about object ontology or the value of an “us” versus all its others. Political cartoons, religious iconoclasm, matters of the risible are sometimes ordinary and, in some places, matters of life and death. . . . Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say “us.” . . . What lines we desire or can bear.26

Mobilized as a comic medium, memes test the conceptual boundaries of existential belonging and political community and critically reboot the venerable tradition of political satire for an era of micropolitics. Though they can blur the outlines of political programs by fusing the narcissism of “individual users” with outward-directed expressions of targeted political rage, memes make political history legible and micropolitically reprogrammable in the sense of Mark Fisher’s oft-quoted affirmation in *Capitalist Realism*: “The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.” At their best, memes breathe new life into the art of political caricature, the history of which, as E. H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris elaborated in their 1938 landmark article “The Principles of Caricature,” traces back to the end of the sixteenth century, when the mock-portraits of the Caraccis and the writing about *ritratti caricchi* (meaning “caricature” or “charge”) spawned a genre of grotesque comic likeness. Satire, akin to caricature but arguably less tied down to physiognomic “tabs of identity,” attained its heyday in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the July Revolution (which occasioned Philippon’s wildly popular caricature of the constitutional monarch Louis-Philippe as “the Pear King”). 

Consider a typical James Gillray caricature from 1793 featuring Prime Minister William Pitt at a moment of Britain’s maximal fear of revolutionary contagion. Pitt steers a small boat named *The Constitution* with Britannia onboard. Britannia expresses alarm at the sight of a tricolor cockade on the summit. Three “sharks”—the prominent politicians Sheridan, Fox, and Priestly (all supporters of the French Revolution)—chase the boat. The picture bears the caption “The Vessel of the Constitution steered clear of the Rock of Democracy and the Whirlpool of Arbitrary Power.” This caricature is didactic and hardly resembles the modern meme, though there are fairly clear continuities. One example is the “Jacob Rees-


> Hashtags and memes created in a context of social change often serve as micronarratives. Stop Kony. Uganda is not Spain. Chen Guangcheng will defeat Pandaman. Trayvon Martin faced systemic racism. Hoodies are powerful. Through satire and repetition, social media users are able to shape and define a narrative, and through intentional overproduction, they start arriving at narratives that have the potential to resonate more broadly (p. 75).


29. E. H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris, “The Principles of Caricature,” *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 17 (1938), pp. 319–42. The authors situate the art of caricature in a Freudian field of mind play, sensory stimulus, dream construction, and affective play, noting their methodological debt to Freud in drawing on psychology as “the science of the integration of sensation, perception and desire.”

30. Ibid. The authors interpret the effect of the “Pear King” caricature through the Freudian lens of transformation and condensation. The psychic apparatus of “primary process” becomes ascendant, putting conscious logic out of action (as in a dream or the working of wit). The caricaturist capitalizes on this effect, turning it consciously into a “grammar of form” that eventually culminates in Mannerist style.
Mogg Takes Brexit Lying Down” meme that takes aim at the Brexiteer henchman arrogantly stretched out and snoozing during the angry protest in Parliament over Boris Johnson’s suspension of its meeting schedule on September 4, 2019. A red line tracing the precipitous erosion of the Conservative Majority is traced over the supine, long-limbed body of the House of Commons leader. Like the Gilroy caricature, it “phemes” (as it memes) the political.

Peirce gave the technical definition of pheme as a sign that stands in for a whole sentence, but one could say that in the grander scheme of Internet micropolitics, pheming the political points to an emergent meme-caricature-satire nexus, itself qualified by the art collective Slavs and Tatars as “the twisted nexus of politics, affect, and society at the heart of alphabet politics.” This alphabet politics relies on the memic (technology-enabled) potential of transliteration; its morphemes consist of historical scripts, cartographic shapes, folk art, religious icons, stamps, flags, banners, billboards, posters, portraits, publicity shots, book illustrations, adverts, cover art, political decrees, and much more. Part of what the meme transliterates is its dual operativity as visual graphic and script—a medial object that demands “the looking” as well as “the reading.”

As a knowledge alphabet in a historical catalogue leading back to Leibniz’s project for a universal language of knowledge and looking forward to what has been dubbed the “franken-algorithm” of future self-learning machines, the meme positions itself at the porous boundary between orthography and algorithm. This generically semic nature of memes helps account for their imbrication in and contextual lamination by cultures of machine learning, digital reproduction, parametric representation, and, last but not least, political art and caricature.

To appreciate the morpheme as lexical unit of political caricature and source of “more memes,” we might look to Slavs and Tatars’ homonymic play on themes and phonemes in the section “More Phemes” of their book Wripped Scripped. The book presents a compendium of translatable icons, many recording the impact of successive waves of imperial conquest, regime change, and superpositions of religion and language over the variegated territories of Eurasia (Islamic, Christian Orthodox, Persian, Ottoman, French, Russian, Chinese . . .). It opens with an Arcimboldo-style composition of Adam, the original man. His hair part, nose line, and symmetric mustache form a system of face letters merged with the Arabic alphabet, spelling out the phrase “generosity of God,”


fazl-i haqq. In a second iteration (minus spectacles and hair) the imago is captioned, as if parodying educational copy, “The eyes, nose and mustache spell ‘Ali.’” Adam’s visage mirrors bisected worlds, and this bi-motif is humorously exploited to plot serial likenesses among disparate political phenomena: bisexual icons (Saint Wilgefortis in drag), Eastern Europe’s attacks on Western affirmations of nonbinary sexuality, schizo-analytic objects (a pair of bisected Courrèges glasses), and cringeworthy images of female gymnasts doing the splits in front of a lascivious group of Polish officials (the caption reads: Andrzej Duda and his gender-geriatric colleagues at the 100th anniversary of Polish independence, 10 January 2018). Throughout, memes are fabricated out of historic icons and political logos with the implicit (if not express) intent to enhance political literacy. Culled from the detritus of empires and revolutions, these new memes—spelling out the micropolitics of “Eurasia” while decomposing its constitutive clichés—call up subterranean resources in the historical-memory archive. As we are visually marched through the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Bloc, the Russian steppes, the Balkans, the Iranian Revolution, and the Polish Solidarity movement, cracks appear in the post–Cold War conceptual armature upholding bipolar axes of power (the “axis of evil”), East versus West, secular/non-secular dichotomies, hard lines of distinction among capitalist and communist ideologies and economies, and binary political thinking tout court (WS, pp. 7 and 14).
Hamja Ahsan’s recent project *Shy Radicals: The Antisystemic Politics of the Militant Introvert* uses satire in an equally formal way to expose the hidden relations between state power structures and affective states. Imagining a new nation of “Aspergistan” (a republic of shyness), Ahsan makes full use of the meme-friendly constitutional apparatus: articles of foundation, acts of parliament, declarations of rights, and so on. Under the proclamation “We, the Peoples of Aspergistan,” a body of legislation is put forth outlawing “the global system of Extrovert-Suprematism” and decreeing a code of conduct based on Lao Tzu’s dictum “the quieter you become, the more you are able to hear.” If there is an explicitly memic content here, it is found in the prescriptive hand and body-language diagrams codified as “the new lexicon of democracy.” In the accompanying text the directives are further specified:

> All democratic decisions and motions are to be negotiated via a series of hand and body gestures to arrive at a consensus. Whilst previous non-hierarchical social movements had experimented with moving beyond the language of applause and booing with what we call “wiggly hands” (also known by them as “up twinkles” or “spirit fingers”), the Shy Radicals movement nevertheless identify “wiggly hands” as representing a serious democratic deficit.34

In the spirit of adding to the cornucopia of satirical memes amassed by Slavs and Tatars and invented by Ahsan, we would offer a handful of the Trumps’, beginning with Melania Trump’s military-style jacket emblazoned with the phrase *I REALLY DON’T CARE DO U?*, donned as she headed to a camp for migrant children. Inevitably it spawned a full bloom of photoshopped memes: SAYS WHO? [face of Michael Cohen], BLINK DAMMIT BLINK ME ABOUT MY CITIZENSHIP PRESS CONFERENCE, LET THEM EAT CAKE, etc. Equally viral were Melania’s stilettos, spotted on the tarmac while she boarded a plane to flood-damaged Houston in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. The heels inspired a host of “more appropriate footwear” memes, including a Magritte-style webbed-foot stiletto. Donald Jr.’s animal-trophy selfies would give rise to a line of carcass-covered outerwear memes. Ivanka Trump’s book *Women Who Work* sparked the Halt Action Group to establish an Instagram site @DearIvanka, featuring photoshopped cover art: one of red-bonneted ladies familiar from Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, another riffing off her father’s *Celebrity Apprentice* trademark, “You’re fired,” and still more with altered tags like “Women Who Work to Death.”35 Memic parodies under the hashtag


35. I myself could not resist creating a jejeune limerick for the @DearIvanka collection, falling in with the memetic production line:

There was a young woman who lived as a shoe (brand) / she had so many conflicts of interest she didn’t know what to do
Unwanted Ivanka proliferated after the president’s daughter was caught on video at a summit in Osaka trying to butt in on a discussion among Theresa May, Emmanuel Macron, Justin Trudeau, and IMF director Christine Lagarde. Suddenly a million photoshopped pictures of Ivanka took fire: There she was in Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* and Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*, with Harriet Tubman along the Underground Railroad, alongside Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, in a lineup with Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin at the Yalta Conference, on the battlefield in Vietnam, on the bed with John and Yoko during the “Bed-Ins” with Neil Armstrong on the moon, in a group portrait of the current Supreme Court justices. They illustrate particularly well Shaj Mohan’s observation that memes are “explosive in their circulation, creating no regularity other than their own circulation.” He argues further that “because there is no comprehending law for memes (an effect of their polynomia, their power to receive many laws), they disrupt, but without the insurrection of something new.”

This law (or lawlessness) of memes, this effect of self-referentialism reinforced by infinite mirroring and the profigate circulation of preexisting image repertories, is characteristic of the art of political satire in the age of Trump; himself the consummate symptom of the repeater “me” in meme. The menu of Trump memes is endless, but the original Trump-Pence 2016 campaign logo retains particular traction. Net chatter reported that the big *T*’s thrust into the hole of the *P* immediately hit the gaydar alert. (One meme-making comment quipped, “The reason Trump didn’t pick Christie is because the logo wouldn’t have full penetration.”) As it morphed into a toilet meme (“Make America Wipe Again”), and a sex meme (The Kama Sutra), it became such a “thing” that it had to be retired by the Trump campaign. Trump’s hair was of course a meme well before he ran for president, but as his candidacy gained steam it morphed into a monster amphibian crown with a squirming life of its own, eventually ascending to art-house status in the Trump headshots by Jim Shaw.

Media theorists continue to offer optimistic prognoses of the progressive political potential of meme politics. Sasha Constanza-Chock coined the expression

> Despite Kellyanne, that braceletgate scam with Japan, Will go down in the annals of Trumpist head-spam.

“transmedia organizing” with reference to the way in which “social movements are becoming transmedia hubs, where new visions of society are encoded into digital texts by movement participants, then shared, aggregated, remixed and circulated ever more widely across platforms.” For Constanza-Chock, “despite digital inequality, the praxis of critical digital media literacy can produce subjects able to fully participate in transmedia organizing.”37 Citing this passage, Xiao Mina waxes hopeful: “Social change memes take their place in the long line of activist art and culture—from street theater to graffiti—which aim to disrupt and challenge narratives in the public space. . . Memes help us envision another world, a practice known as prefigurative politics.”38 Even if one remains skeptical of the ability of “platform cooperation” to deliver radical change and renew graffiti and street art, the word “prefigurative” takes us back to René Thom’s suggestive construct of prégnance with its connotations of

expectancy, pregnancy, and predictive processing. It implies a political epigenetics in which memes, while not predeterminative, perform as transmitters of political memory and information. Decoding this cipher of political information requires a basic fluency in politics, a civic literacy attuned to the transliterative and transfigurative capacities of alphabetic signs.

Michel Butor’s study of “words in painting” is something of a manual in this regard. He acknowledges “the gift of the acronym” (“le don du sigle”)—antecedent to the meme as digital bumper sticker—as he homes in on the techniques by which artists from the Renaissance to the present embedded their signature insignia. One example is Albrecht Dürer’s *The Adoration of the Saint-Trinity*, in which Dürer depicted himself in the picture’s right-hand corner holding a framed tablet engraved with his name and date, the trademark D placed in the interior of the A. In his analysis of a pair of *memento mori* works from 1670–72 by Spanish Baroque artist Valdés Leal, one titled *In Ictu Oculi* (In the blink of an eye), the other *Finis Gloriae Mundi* (End of the world’s glory), Butor draws attention to the Latin mottoes as formal visual devices and symbolic inscriptions. The words *In Ictu Oculi* appear inside the painting, with the N and the I interrupted by the insertion of the bony index finger of the Grim Reaper, a diacritical death mark that demands to be entered into the system of Roman lettering as an extra or plus-one orthographic character. Death’s hand rests atop a taper, snuffing out the flame in allusion to the extinguishing and brevity of life. The finger-letter reads out as Death’s seal, counterpoised to Christ’s monogram HIS (Jésus Sauveur des Hommes) in *Finis Gloriae Mundi*. Butor remarks that in Ingres’s *La Vicomtesse de Senonnes* the painter has tucked his calling card into the mirror frame. One can just make out the letters Ing. Though apparently a discreetly displayed set of letters, he observes, it is a sly, even self-regarding way to sign a picture, both because it presumes the viewer will spell out the full name of the great artist and because it renders the signature an object of mirror reflection.39 In each of these examples, what comes to the fore are questions of readability and legibility, with bearing on the function of alphabetic signs as both mirror and lamp of eidetic content. Butor argues that the signature, over time, invades the entire medium of painting, and he construes action painting as a blown-up signature, a takeover by graphism. This idea is relevant to understanding the political character of memes inasmuch as they may be seen as watermarks that grow to fit the size of expanding platforms of social media. One glaring instance is a Trump meme that went viral in July 2019 and was built on a screen capture of Trump delivering a speech in front of a presidential seal. Ever the glutton for pomp and insignia, he (along with his handlers) had failed to notice that it was a fake seal, created by graphic designer Charles Leazott. In place of the allegorical eagle brandishing arrows and an olive branch below the motto *E pluribus unum*, there was now a Russian eagle clutching dollar bills in one claw and golf clubs in the other, capped by the motto 45 *es un titere* (45

is a puppet). As Trump falls for the mirror of his own meme-making, the social-media platform takes over, rendering the hoax seal, and Trump’s unwitting appropriation of it, a totalizing emblem of the meme medium as such, in all its obtuseness and expansive viral spread.

Part iconotropic sigle (acronym, rhebus, emblem, insignia), part morpheme transliterating visual and verbal messages, part signature monogram prefiguring the anonymous online handle, part “psychotechnology” (Bernard Stiegler’s expression for the indistinguishability between the brain as a technology of cognition and technologies of marketing that control motivational structures and feelings), memes constitute the alphabet of political literacy. They serve as both echo chamber and visual archive of political debates and culture wars. They are weapons of political warfare (to wit, Trump’s summoning of a “meme army” of conspiracy theorists and right-wing Internet personalities to fight in his next presidential campaign). They channel the phatic language of diplomacy and parliamentary maneuvering. They data-mine the foibles and indiscretions of political actors. They monitor ephemeral shifts in public opinion, some of which add up to a political groundswell. They follow the money and stand in as the people’s court. They track the infrapolitics of “what happens” in ordinary life. They capture the obtuseness of political reason. They abridge past and future traditions of political humor.40 They give form to psychopower.

On this last point, consider by way of example Silvia Kolbowski’s Trump–David Bowie meme (captioned GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR TRUMP), in which we obtain a screen capture of the psychic shape of power. The mind-meld of these iconic figures, one a reckless oligarch, the other a revered pop idol, produces a disturbing emblem of rage and desire. It morphs according to the welter of what is at hand, including the drives and affects floating up from the unconscious. Kolbowski intimates that we get the politicians we meme for. What, she queries, “if Trump were actually himself a phantasm projected by his ‘base,’ rather than his base being an inherently evil group to which he plays? What if he is an effect—

40. Willy Staley, taking a dim view of the political humor of memes even as he recognizes their democratic potential, argues that:

the things we call “meme” today are largely just joke formats—mechanisms for the efficient production of humor. They develop less like new ideas and more like algal blooms, spreading until they block out the sun and consume all the oxygen, before dying out naturally (people get sick of them) or getting hit with bleach (explainer journalists write about them). Individually, these memes leave little mark on our culture. Worse than being forgettable, they become, within a year or two, embarrassing to think back on for even one second.

But taken as a whole, this swarm of cultural mayflies represents a meaningful shift in our culture. Joke-making, a sometimes cruel enterprise, has been mechanized and democratized. Humor now emerges from the ether, authorless or, more accurate, authored and improved upon by everyone. Jokes are communal now, and constant. Online, everything that happens all day—in politics, in culture, in the news—is rapidly repurposed for laughs, by everyone, all at once.

hologram—of their rage?"  

41 Whether we approach memes as holograms of partisan affect or forms of satire that undercut authoritarian rule, one thing seems clear: As a cryptocurrency of micropolitics, satirical memes offer instruction in the becoming-historical of what Gombrich and Kris called a “grammar of form.”  

42 Memic caricature has the capacity to stigmatize its targeted subject, but it also traces the outlines of the abuse of power, etching its occurrence on historical memory, transmitting it epigenetically as historical form and idea. As Gombrich and Kris noted (and it is impossible at the present pass not to have Trump in mind): “If the caricature fits the victim really is transformed in our eyes. We learn through the artist to see him as a caricature. He is not only mocked at, or unmasked, but actually changed. He carries the caricature with him through his life and even through history.”  

43

42 E. H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris, “The Principles of Caricature.”
43 Ibid.