NICO BAUMBACH

# Sameness-Machines: On the Political Unconscious of Memes

To try to say something of interest about memes means to be confronted with a certain conceptual incoherence. Even if we stick to the vernacular definition of *meme* as a specific kind of internet object that combines image and text—and not, as Richard Dawkins initially defined it in 1976, as *any* "unit of cultural transmission"—the word still carries the baggage of its pseudo-scientific origins, which attempted to apply the logic of Darwinian evolution to culture.[1] In the early 2000s, we might say that the word meme became a meme to refer to a genre of digital image featuring superimposed text, also known as an image macro, that seemed to come from nowhere and be everywhere. These image macros were anonymous and collectively made and generally were associated with cleverness and stupidity simultaneously. They seemed somehow to be the first homegrown signifiers of internet culture as a new kind of semiotic field—one that explicitly undermined high-tech Silicon Valley solutionism in favor of low-res ludic absurdity.

LOLcats, to take one well-known example from the first decade of the twenty-first century, are a genre of image macro typically featuring

FIGURE 1. A classic LOLcat, uploaded by Eric Nakagawa to https://icanhas.cheezburger.com on 11 January 2007.

Representations 168. © 2024 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 153–69. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2024.168.10.153.



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

a photographic image of one or more cats superimposed with absurdist text, usually deliberately misspelled and ungrammatical.[2] An archetypal example of an internet meme, LOLcats may seem a long way from the kinds of memes that interested Dawkins, such as "the concept of God." Memes, in Dawkins's sense, had no necessary connection to mass media, let alone the internet. Memes had existed as long as there was what we might call culture. They were conceptual objects, not easily pointed to, that spread on neural rather than computer networks, "from brain to brain." Other examples Dawkins gave include "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches."[3] While today we still use the term *meme* to refer not only to image macros but also to catch-phrases or slogans that replicate, we might be tempted to attach a hashtag to them, so strongly has the idea of the meme, and of cultural replication more generally, become associated with our relationship to computer networks and the image objects that proliferate on them.

Dawkins himself claimed that "an internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea," because internet memes are designed for conscious mutation rather than mutating by chance.[4] Nonetheless, the internet meme still leans on its association with Dawkins's concept. To call something a meme, whether LOLcats or #MeToo, tends to imply that what we call "virality" online is the result of a meritocracy, where the invisible hand of circulation is in force. To make a meme, that is to say, a successful meme, is to crack the code, to win the internet.[5] LOLcats were a meme because they became "a thing"—they circulated, and anyone "very online" became aware of them and to some degree internalized the rules of the genre. According to Dawkins, the successful meme is the *selected* meme in the fight for survival among memes. Whether or not the makers of internet memes would take seriously such a conception of memes, the word is still used to exploit its pseudo-Darwinian ideological trappings. As the common phrases "meme magic" and "meme warfare" suggest, perhaps no one quite believes that memes function deterministically like genes; they are treated more like a privileged form of weapon in the gamified online attention economy, which is, at the same time, suffused with occult fantasies.

Conceptual incoherence is only one reason that the analysis of memes seems to set a trap for the scholar. Designed to be ephemeral and drenched in irony, the typical internet meme ontologically resists serious analysis—its circulation value seemingly tied to a certain slipperiness or ambiguity, a "poorness," in Hito Steyerl's sense, that is under threat from institutional appropriation.[6] At the same time, the attraction for scholars is obvious, too. As anonymous, crowd-sourced forms of utterance that emerge from



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

below—and not top down from the culture industry, whose language they nevertheless appropriate and détourne—they seem to give privileged access to a kind of collective cultural unconscious.

In this essay, I am going to highlight a contradictory dimension to these things we call memes that has become dominant only more recently. The emergence of this new form of the meme is related to the ways in which memes are increasingly believed to have the potential for political or ideological efficacy. By analyzing these contradictions, I will show what memes reveal about our experience of online life today and provide a different way to think about their political potential.

On the one hand, internet memes, broadly construed, are associated with common forms of collective expression and shared affects, what Aria Dean calls "#relatability," made explicit "through the ongoing presence of such formats and language tropes such as 'it me' and 'that feeling when' (TFW)."[7] Dawkins liked the link between the word *meme* and the French word *même*: they indicate sameness; they are sameness-machines. Even when they signal in-group humor and invite variation, they give the same template to minor differences and, I am tempted to say, are "the signature of a perception whose 'sense for all that is the same in the world' has so increased that . . . it extracts sameness even from what is unique."[8] This makes them a natural fit for today's ideologies of networked communication. As Wendy Chun argues, homophily, defined as "similarity [that] breeds connection" or "love as love of the same," is the axiom that "grounds contemporary network science." What's more, it "closes the world it pretends to open; it makes cyberspace a series of echo chambers."[9] While memes are always already sameness-machines, the algorithms that shape the user experience of the dominant search engines and platforms are designed to make that sameness overdetermined. The internet meme, as sameness-machine, would then seem to be a natural unit of transmission on platforms designed to maximize user activity.

On the other hand, it is less often noted that homophily—or its cognate concept, "the filter bubble"—if carried to its logical conclusion is not sufficient to maximize participation. As already mentioned, memes are often associated with warfare and can be used as weapons, perhaps most famously with the Pepe the Frog memes that were credited on 4chan for the victory of "God Emperor Trump" and the vanquishing of his enemies in the 2016 election.[10] The in-group created by the so-called filter bubble is sustainable only to the extent that it absorbs enough of what is outside it to define itself against. Even when they are not explicitly used for combat, memes also function as difference-machines. They are presented as ways of cutting through the noise or interrupting the flow of information by asserting a critical mark, a distinction, an unpopular opinion, a difference that makes

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

a difference, which in turn might be affirmed by others in a consensus meant to undermine consensus. If they are successful, then they circulate—surfing along the flow they were meant to interrupt.

These two sides to memes, as both sameness-machines and difference-machines, are related to a structural dimension of online discourse in its current form—of which memes are a symptomatic example—that drives users toward binary operations of affirmation/rejection. In this drive, the feeling of sharing is always predicated on a perceived underlying polarization, and vice versa. Or, rather, what memes testify to is a feedback loop: a structural sameness of all online discourse that we are driven to resist through polarization, and a structural polarization of all online discourse that we are driven to resist through gestures of sameness.

This wasn't always the case. I have already indicated that internet memes, as they are typically understood, emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, associated with absurdity or ludic, anarchic idiocy, as if wrested from any means-ends rationale. It would probably be a mistake to celebrate this era too hastily as a utopian moment before Web 2.0, but I do think we can periodize internet memes and register a shift in their dominant tendencies that roughly corresponds to the emergence and growth of social media and accelerates after Trump's election to the presidency. Meme cultures that are willfully oblique and absurdist still persist in all kinds of mutating forms, especially among younger users, but mainstream meme culture has become more explicitly communicative and tactical.

One of the important indexes of this shift is the emergence of the "object labeling exploitable meme." Exploitable memes were first found around 2006 but took off as "object labeling exploitable memes" in 2017, rapidly becoming one of the first things we associate with the meme as form. According to KnowYourMeme.com, exploitable memes, also called "exploitables," "are a meme template in which a single image is manipulated through various means to achieve the intended, humorous effect. This can involve replacing words in the original image, adding words to the original image, or manipulating positions of objects in the image to change the original's meaning."[11] In other words, the exploitable meme is not an image object simply enjoyed as is but a template or format designed for user modification. To some degree, internet memes were always designed for modification—this was Dawkins's reason for saying they weren't true memes in his original sense—but with the exploitable meme, the way in which they are meant to be modified is baked in. The template itself is sometimes called a meme, but it also provides an opportunity for anyone to participate in making versions of the meme, which are, in effect, new



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

memes. Again, we come up against an ambiguity as to how the word *meme* is used. It could be said that not every iteration is a meme, only the specific modifications that go viral; still, the vernacular use of the word doesn't always make that distinction.

In the "object labeling exploitable meme," the more recent and now dominant form of exploitable meme, the words you can change are indexed to discrete elements in the picture. Meanwhile, the image (or, in some cases, series of images) maps a formal relationship between the discrete elements. Perhaps the most familiar is the Distracted Boyfriend meme, which first went viral in August 2017. Repurposing a stock photo taken by a Spanish photographer in 2015, it depicts a man in the center of the image who is leering at a woman, slightly out of focus, in the foreground to his left, while the woman he is walking with, to his right, expresses exaggerated irritation as she tries to get his attention. The template allows the user to label the man, the object of his desire, and the spurned romantic partner. The exploitable format usually ignores, if not disavows, the casually misogynistic cliché that makes the stock photo immediately legible and is used for any permutation in which a protagonist neglects the object he takes for granted for the sake of another, presumably less familiar, one. It also offers one example of how many of the popular exploitable meme templates, when they aren't signifying a shared affect, are templates for affirming a good object and expelling a bad one. The "Hotline Bling" meme, through Drake's image, explicitly rejects one object and affirms another. Another meme template shows a comic book panel with a finger choosing between one of two identical red buttons, which are usually labeled to show a sensible choice being rejected for a disastrous one. In each case, the template of the image macro is used to situate one's own subjectivity in relation to an approved object and a rejected one.

FIGURES 2, 3, 4. Object labeling exploitable meme templates that reject one object and affirm another.



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

We might call these "object relation" memes, to give a crude psychoanalytic spin to the name of the meme template. According to Melanie Klein, for example, the mother's breast—experienced by the infant as alternately frustrating and satiating—gets "split" into good and bad objects as part of the process of normal development and learning to manage anxiety.[12] It is notable that in the stock photo of the Distracted Boyfriend meme, the desired woman and the neglected woman are both brunette white women of similar height and build and are therefore marked as distinct primarily through their relation to the male figure. Formally, the two women are not unlike the identical red buttons. There's an implicit acknowledgment, in many uses of these meme templates, that what we so definitively affirm and reject may not be so different after all or may derive from the same source. As irony and self-deprecation are often involved in the use of these memes, the chosen object may be the bad one rather than the good one, or the subject interpellated by the meme may not be the user but someone from an out-group placed as an object of derision. There are numerous permutations with these memes, but they all function at some level as comments on the binary operations of online action in general and in relation to some more niche current online discourse in particular. As our social media feeds constantly require us to "like" (or not) what is put in front of us, the "object labeling exploitable meme" offers a reflexive commentary on online subjectivity. The templates themselves are also available to any political or cultural position. Their meanings when associated with clearly marked political positions are therefore always reversible by moving the signifiers around.[13]

It is this potential reversibility I want to look at more closely in relation to the psychoanalytic concept of projection. According to Jacques Lacan: "Projection doesn't always have the same sense, but for our part we restrict it to this imaginary transitivism by means of which when a child hits his counterpart he can say without lying—*He hit me*, because for him it's exactly the same thing."[14] Projection, in other words, means experiencing our own aggressive actions and sad affects directed toward others as if others have in fact directed them toward us. We have seen this infantile transitivism raised to the level of a powerful conscious strategy, most obviously by right-wing politicians. Notably, both Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1964), perhaps the two most referenced texts diagnosing the far right in postwar America, located the central psychological mechanism of the fascist or authoritarian personality in "projection." For Adorno, "pathic projection" was central to identifying authoritarian tendencies and antisemitism in particular.[15] In Hofstadter's words, "a fundamental paradox of the paranoid style is the imitation of the enemy."[16] Frantz Fanon



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

recognized similar mechanisms in the psychology of racism—the unacceptable and repressed desire of, or the desire to be like, the other projects itself outward as hatred of the other.[17] The French theorist of technology and propaganda Jacques Ellul understood projection as a strategy essential to propaganda. As he put it, "The propagandist will not accuse the enemy of just any misdeed; he will accuse him of the very intention that he himself has and of trying to commit the very crime that he himself is about to commit."[18]

Indeed, Roy Cohn is said to have taught Donald Trump to always accuse your accusers of the very thing you are accused of, if not worse. Call it the based Golden Rule. One of the most memorable moments of the 2016 campaign occurred in the final debate between Trump and Hillary Clinton. Clinton announced that Trump would be "Putin's puppet" if elected. Trump's reply: "No puppet. You're the puppet!" This exchange portended much of mainstream political discourse in the coming years. The online meme wars have continuously seen the memes of the left or mainstream liberal media appropriated and détourned by the right.[19] After the election, "fake news" emerged as a phrase from the liberal media establishment to explain Trump's shocking victory. The "fake news" referred to targeted disinformation on social media sites that, it was alleged, was often masterminded by Russia and may have effectively tipped the election in Trump's favor. But Trump almost immediately started using "fake news" to refer to the liberal media establishment itself, and it was Trump's use that stuck. Similarly, the term "groomer" circulated widely in the post-#MeToo moment to draw attention to the methods of the Harvey Weinsteins of the world, only to become a central QAnon accusation directed widely at representatives of liberal culture. While right-wing politicians or activists position themselves in strict opposition to the mainstream use of the same signifiers, the way they use them is a form of imitation and projection that reveals a shared terrain on which these meme battles are waged.

The technique reverses the meaning of the signifiers without debating the meaning of the terms and without even acknowledging that the reversal has taken place. This technique is not new, but it becomes more and more effective in the age of ubiquitous computation when the meme, broadly construed, becomes a central unit of political discourse. What the meme form does is reduce ideas to transmissible bite-sized units. Capitalism in the age of social media (called variously platform capitalism, surveillance capitalism, or communicative capitalism) is not post-fact—facts and opinions about facts circulate widely online, and the facts are available for correction and opinions for disagreement. What is much harder to meme-ify are reasons and explanations.



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

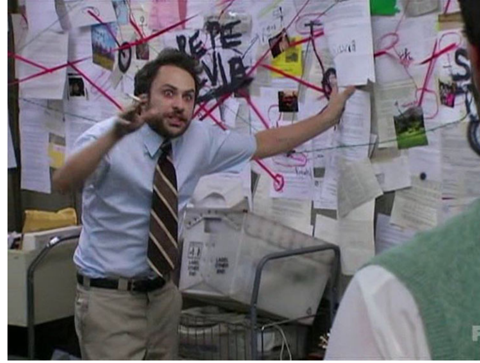

FIGURE 5. The Conspiracy Guy meme.

This is well illustrated by another popular meme format—the image of a frazzled man in front of an evidence board, often accompanied by a self-consciously half-baked idea or used to playfully undermine one's more serious work. In this image we see both the desire to understand and the failure to explain as central to the subject position within platform capitalism. The meme might be seen as a vernacular illustration of what Fredric Jameson in the 1980s called the desire for "cognitive mapping"—the attempt to situate ourselves within an ungraspable networked totality.[20] The evidence board, or conspiracy wall, or crazy wall, as it is variously called, is nowhere to be found in any of the great series of espionage and paranoid thrillers in the 1960s and 70s, but it has become a ubiquitous trope of serialized television of the twenty-first century, exhibiting an unmistakably internet-era nostalgia for pre-internet, analog pattern-spotting and data analysis.[21]

The image used in the meme is notably taken from a television sitcom, not a crime show.[22] Meme-ified to joke about one's own impulse toward the paranoid and conspiratorial, it suggests both the desire to connect all the dots and the feeling that doing so is impossible. The use of this image to situate one's own hypothesis about the state of culture or politics might serve to illustrate the basic position of all social actors on social media—we are all amateur semioticians trying to make sense of the totality of the network through spotting patterns and putting that operation in quotes at the same time. Tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation about the lure of the rabbit hole shows that central to online subjectivity is a form of play or game that provides a sense of being part of a collective or common project. This meme claims that our individual sense-making operation, our attempt to cut through the noise, is at once lonely and paranoid *and* relatable and sharable. As we interface with platforms, our attempt to mark our position within the sprawling map of the totality reverts to binary operations and takes the



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

form of affirming one object at the expense of another. We express our sameness to, and difference from, others through templates that encourage imitation and projection.

In this context, it is worth considering the allegory of taking "the red pill," adopted by the right to signal the opposite of so-called "woke" culture. The battle of the red-pilled against wokeness has framed right-wing activism since the Trump years. *Woke*, or staying woke, it should be said, was originally a term for political consciousness among black Americans that goes as far back as the 1930s.[23] But in the 2010s, it became common in mainstream liberal discourse to signify awareness of antiblackness, patriarchy, and other structural inequalities, and nearly simultaneously by the right to derisively undermine this consciousness by conflating it with its corporate and bureaucratic co-optation. As the anti-woke crusade led by the right has accelerated, it is increasingly difficult to find anyone who claims the term in an affirmative way. The right has started to refer to its enemies as infected with the "woke mind virus," suggesting in effect that wokeness is a bad meme, a replicator that must be avoided through taking the right medicine, the red pill. The red pill as metaphor derives from *The Matrix* (1999), a film with vaguely left-wing trappings, but was taken up by men's rights groups and later used to indicate the totalizing rejection of (woke) liberal culture in favor of right-wing "Truth." What interests me here is the point that if the red pill defines itself today primarily in opposition to woke (however caricatured), it is also notable that they are the same metaphor—a platonic ethics of choosing awareness of the harsh "Real" or Truth obscured by the comforting reality of everyday experience. This is the fundamental gesture of so many online speech acts, to signal awareness or, in a self-deprecating gesture, lack of awareness, which in the end is the same thing, a #relatable awareness of not being aware. This awareness tends to get structured around a binary friend/enemy distinction that frames all subsequent actions. Following the logic of projection, this friend/enemy meme warfare involves acting the same to declare your absolute difference.

For Sigmund Freud, projection is not merely seeing aspects of one's own self in others (another, broader definition of projection), but it always involves attributing to others unconscious traits that the subject represses. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis offer this useful illustration of the distinction between these two conceptions of projection:

> During a debate between philosophers of two different persuasions, one participant asks: "Surely we have the same position?" "I hope not," replies a member of the opposing group. In the ordinary psychological sense it is the first man who is "projecting" here; in the Freudian sense, we may take it that it is the second, in so far as his posture attests a radical rejection of his opponent's ideas—ideas which he is afraid to discover in himself.[24]



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

Projection in the Freudian sense takes the form of rejection rather than assimilation, but we might also notice a feedback loop between the two different forms of projection. The circulation of memes routinely operates through a back and forth of "we are the same"/"I hope not."

FIGURE 6. Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man meme.

With that in mind, I now turn to the analysis of another meme: Spider-Man Pointing at Spider-Man derives from a screencap from the 1968 episode "Double Identity" of the network TV show *Spider-Man*, which originally aired for four years on Saturday mornings in the United States. In the scene, Spider-Man confronts a villain who has been impersonating him, and he and the villain point at each other, both saying, "That man is an imposter."[25] In the exploitable version of the meme, text labels each of the identical-looking Spider-Men. The meme is frequently used to signify likeness between two entities that would presumably wish to distinguish themselves from each other—each pointing the finger at and accusing the other but ultimately indistinguishable. The meme speech act asserts sameness, where difference has previously been asserted. Note the distinction between the Spider-Man Pointing meme and the good/bad object memes. Rather than the narcissism of minor differences that comes from choosing one object over another, here two presumably distinct objects are depicted as identical or indistinguishable. The binary choice collapses into a black hole of tautology. The user, or memer, typically stands outside this picture—mocking, critiquing *x* for being no different than *y*. The meme is frequently used to call out hypocrisy and to level a charge of projection against



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

someone. But what the meme signifies at another level is the threat of a zone of indistinction in which the memer is not outside the picture but implicated by it: the user and its other are indistinguishable. This zone of indistinction is where "The Discourse," as it's often called, structured on the binary operation of separating us from them, good from bad, real from imposter, the liked from the not liked, collapses in on itself.

The notable third term here is, significantly, a police van in the background—an ambiguous floating signifier in the context of the meme. Are the police the final arbiter of who is the imposter and who is the real Spider-Man, or are they a threat to the user, signifying online policing, the attempt to shut down the circulation or play driving memetics? If the latter, are the police on the left or right side of the political spectrum? The left are ostensibly the ones against policing, but they are also in recent online discourse more often accused by the right of policing free speech, canceling, saying which memes are and are not acceptable, and so on. The meme, insofar as it is a common form designed for circulation, resists policing. At the same time, insofar as the meme is summoned for the meme wars in the competitive opinion markets of social media, policing is intrinsic to it, even if it must be disavowed.[26] This is true of memes across the political spectrum.

Identifying projection as the basic psychological mechanism behind hate speech, propaganda, fascist affect, and so on, risks oversimplifying the problem or even obscuring it by substituting a psychological reading for a political one. And we confront another more fundamental problem: to confine projection to the other is surely a form of projection itself. *He who points at Spider-Man has Spider-Man point back at him.* So let's assert that projection or transitivism is a quasi-universal mechanism, closely aligned with what Lacan calls the imaginary, and, secondly, let's suggest that projection is not very usefully conceived as merely a psychological coping mechanism of individuals but rather should be understood as intrinsic to individuation in relation to media messages. Projection is also radically exacerbated by the stock market logic of platforms that not only quantifies meme value but generates meme value through the value that has already been generated (the more people who have shared and liked a certain meme, the greater the possibility it will be shared and liked in the future).

Can the left meme? This question has been repeatedly posed in the post-Trump years, in light of the perceived triumph of the right in successfully usurping the position of irreverence and provocation somehow expected to be more native to the left and key to meme selection.[27] The right's success in the meme wars is predicated on creating the meme of the left not being able to meme. One way this is done is by depicting the left's memes as antithetical to the meme form. While memes, as they become more tactical and communicative, often retain their link to absurdism and even sometimes



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

rely on it to be effective, sincere political memes that successfully capture and name forms of oppression and inequality frequently challenge that tendency. Earnest and passionate demands for justice can function effectively as ways of cutting through the noise of layered internet irony and information overload, as long as they don't read as scolding or calculating. The right-wing meme strategy is to equate the left with a caricatured conception of wokeness, defined as an inherently unmemeable censoriousness for purposes of virtue signaling. They take the unquestionable success of memes like #MeToo and #BLM and, in effect, try to de-meme-ify them by articulating them with a chain of signifiers typically associated with the right and capitalism—censoriousness, policing, individual self-interest—which in turn undermines their spreadability except as bad objects.

Christopher Rufo, a professional right-wing cultural warrior, has been explicit about this strategy, arguing that "conservatives need to create a strong association between . . . the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans." For Rufo, these include such disparate groups and concepts as Black Lives Matter, critical race theory, trans and nonbinary individuals, decolonization, Hamas, and Democratic Socialism.[28] Rufo is often credited with exposing the cynical strategy of right-wing activism or "saying the quiet part out loud," but his presumed transparency is often slyly disingenuous. If all these concepts were necessarily unpopular with Americans, as Rufo claims, then there would be no need to create the association between them.[29] The goal is to undermine the left by manufacturing an association between what are generally considered bad or toxic objects with others that might, were they more familiar, have wide appeal for Americans. As Stuart Hall has argued, this is how ideology works: "ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts, but in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings." Correspondingly, ideology critique means rupturing that chain of association. In Hall's words, "One of the ways in which ideological struggle takes place and ideologies are transformed is by articulating the elements differently, . . . breaking the chain in which they are currently fixed."[30] Memes provide a format for bundling together liberating slogans with toxic assets. At the same time, as difference-machines, they can potentially be used for dissociating them. In addition to breaking the chain, we need to reveal the logic of projection that underlies the ideological operation. Rufo and the right more generally, as should be obvious, are projecting. The right defines cultural Marxism, critical race theory, and gender ideology as forms of bigotry to authorize its own bigotry. But it need not win the meme wars to be successful. If it gets the left to play the same game on the same depoliticized terrain of the binary logic of platforms, once left and right are two Spider-Men pointing at each other, then the left has already lost.



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

Should the left then abandon the meme wars? Yes. Or, at least, they should abandon the desire to win them. As long as they thrive or die in the current logic of platform capitalism, both the problem and promise of memes lie in confronting the zone of indistinction when we no longer know which Spider-Man is which.[31]

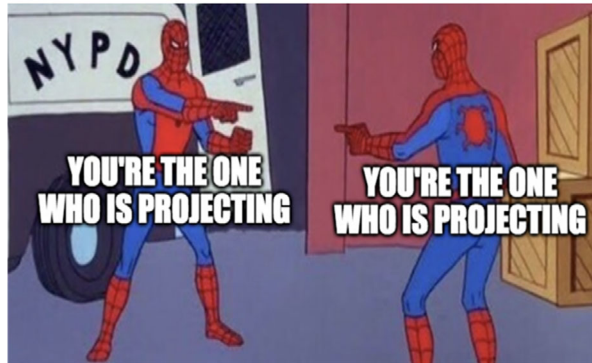


FIGURE 7. Spider-Man Thinks Spider-Man is Projecting.

The zone of indistinction is an inescapable telos of the feedback loops of social media in its current form, a zone where there is an inability to think dialectically, with our participation online confined to binary operations and reversible signifiers. This is what memes at their best can brilliantly comment on but never fully get beyond. This does not mean that the bigotry of the alt-right should be conflated with the left, however much they may end up sharing the same memes. The right-wing meme wars are driven by, as Jacques Rancière has put it, "the passion for inequality," which is not confined to the right but precisely mimics the same passion in the mainstream liberal media it attacks.[32] If the left can meme, it must not replicate this logic but find ways to expose the promise the meme form simultaneously denies. It must start from the awareness that what the meme as sameness-machine promises is an indifference to differences, an underlying passion for equality that structures the discourse but is thwarted at every turn.

The passion for equality is the utopian promise of memes and social media more generally. As Benjamin claimed in the 1930s, capitalism tends toward an unmooring of images from uniqueness and ownership, related to the masses' increasing "sense for all that is the same in the world." According to Benjamin, this is only half of the dialectic, and this tendency is, at the same time, undermined by the persistence of



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

capitalism, which tends increasingly toward fascism as it seeks to rein in the forces of production it has unleashed in an effort to maintain class and property relations. Nearly a century has passed since Benjamin's now routinely cited essay, and we may be eager to put it to bed. But the same dialectical movement at the level of culture persists, even as it has taken on new forms. What interests me here is how in the emerging culture industry, which, Adorno and Max Horkheimer would later lament, was "infecting everything with sameness,"[33] Benjamin saw the potential of this tendency toward sameness (or commoning) for resisting the mode of production that both made that collective sameness possible and sought to restrain it. Algorithmic programming for connection through sameness is often seen as the essential problem with social media. The critique of homophily or the filter bubble is premised on this reading. This critique is legitimate only to the extent that it recognizes that algorithms increase engagement not only by linking us to others through the expression of shared affects but also by finding sameness in the shared rejection of others or the repression of a more fundamental sameness. It is not homophily but the denial of sameness that is the motor behind social media as a projection-machine fueled by *ressentiment*, a denial that leans on the ideological fantasy of the meme as an agent in the social Darwinist battle for selection. The utopian promise of memes is thwarted, in other words, not by the filter bubble, nor by the other, our enemy, who infiltrates our bubble, but, rather, in Lacan's terms, the Big Other, the platform itself, the enemy we share with our enemy that is a crucial index of the current logic of global capitalism. Beyond that, when we participate in the game of seeking validation by signaling relatability through rejection of an other, we are all the same, even if we hope not.

.



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

## Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, 2006), 192.
2. LOLcats came to mainstream prominence as a quintessential example of the internet meme in 2005, the same year that YouTube was launched and one year before Facebook opened to the public.
3. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 192.
4. This oft-quoted line derives from a performance piece that Dawkins participated in from 2013 called *Just for Hits*, directed by Marshmallow Laser Feast. It can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5DOiZ8Y3bs.
5. Some scholars make a point of distinguishing between memetics (through its analogy to genetics) and both mimetics and virality. See, for example, Dominic Pettman, "Memetic Desire: Twenty Theses on Posthumanism, Political Affect, and Proliferation," in *Post-Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, ed. Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (Brooklyn, 2019), 25–30. But it is notable that Dawkins conflates them all in his original essay. He chooses the word *meme* for its link to mimesis and its echo of *gene*, and he also uses the metaphor of the virus to describe how memes spread.
6. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux* 10 (November 2009), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/. Building off Steyerl's notion of poorness, Jason LaRiviere has suggestively called memes "compression images" connecting their low-resolution or lossy compression with how they also "compress" ideas. See Jason LaRiviere, "The Just Kidding Jouissance of Dark Brandon," in this issue of *Representations*.
7. Aria Dean, "Rich Meme, Poor Meme," *Real Life*, 25 July 2016, https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 23–24.
9. Wendy Chun, "Queering Homophily," in *Pattern Discrimination*, by Clemens Apprich, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Florian Cramer, and Hito Steyerl (Minneapolis, 2019), 60.
10. See, for example, Abby Ohlheiser, "'We actually elected a meme as president': How 4chan Celebrated Trump's Victory," *Washington Post*, 9 November 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/11/09/we-actually-elected-a-meme-as-president-how-4chan-celebrated-trumps-victory/.
11. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/exploitables.
12. Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude, and Other Works, 1946–1963*, ed. Masud Khan (London, 1975), 242.
13. My thoughts on the reversibility of the meaning of language and how it is deployed in contemporary internet speak are influenced by Damon R. Young, "Ironies of Web 2.0," *Post45* 2 (May 2019).
14. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 3: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York, 1997), 271.
15. See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, 2005), 73.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

16. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 32.
17. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, 2008), 160n47.
18. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York, 1973), 54.
19. By calling this a form of détournement, I am not suggesting it is an avant-garde practice or in line with anything that would have been celebrated by the Situationists. In "A Users Guide to Détournement," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, 1981), Guy Debord and Gil Wolman write, "Détournement by simple reversal is always the most direct and the least effective" (17). They meant least effective for the class struggle, and they were aware that détournement could be used for reactionary propaganda.
20. Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, 1990), 347–60.
21. The diegetic use of the conspiracy wall on network-narrative crime series might be seen as an unconscious figuration of the streaming era and its narrative deadlocks. It's not hard to see in the crazy wall an onscreen analogue for the white board in the TV writer's room on which the writers scrambled in season 2 to sustain the appearance of a coherent logic.
22. The image is from a 2008 episode of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. The episode, titled "Sweet Dee Has a Heart Attack," was the tenth of the fourth season of the FX sitcom. The screenshot features the character Charlie Kelly played by the actor Charlie Day. It is sometimes called the "Pepe Silvia" meme, after the name that Day's character imagines is at the center of a conspiracy.
23. The recording of Lead Belly's 1938 "Scottsboro Boys" is typically cited as an early example. The song is about a case in 1931 in which nine young black men were falsely accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. In a spoken portion at the end, Lead Belly advises that if you go to Scottsboro, "best stay woke."
24. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London, 1973), 355.
25. The series aired on ABC for its first two years before going into syndication. The entire episode can be seen here: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8hxb37.
26. Joseph Vogl makes this point about how *ressentiment* is the basis of critique in contemporary media, which relies on opinions and facts but not reasons: "The critique festering in ressentiment always takes policing as its method: it searches and suspects and seeks out surrogate objects that are concretely tangible and supposedly liable for the efficacy of abstract system processes." See Joseph Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment: A Brief Theory of the Present* (Cambridge, MA, 2022), 133.
27. Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester, 2017) makes this argument explicitly. According to Nagle, transgression has typically been associated with the counterculture and the left. Therefore, the alt-right troll in the Trump era marks a break from that history. Certainly, there are many ways to complicate this narrative, but there is some truth to the idea that, in the American context, the political right has tended to be associated with traditional values in contrast to liberal or progressive culture, which is more likely to challenge those values. That said, the notion of "woke" is hardly the first instance of the right trying to turn left culture into a censorious dominant culture that needs to be subverted.



Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025

28. See Christopher Rufo's tweets: https://twitter.com/realchrisrufo/status/1712938775834185891? and https://twitter.com/realchrisrufo/status/1371541044592996352?.
29. Of course, the relative popularity or toxicity of these different terms with the American public fluctuates, but the strategy of association should be clear enough. To identify support for oppressed Palestinians with support for Hamas and support for Hamas with support for ISIS is one obvious example. Rufo has been especially active in trying to associate anti-racism with terrorism, censorship, and indoctrination. Similarly, the right is eager to link education about LGBTQ+ issues with pornographic books being given to children in schools and, by implication, with pedophilia. For Rufo and others, the goal is to mix all these things together in people's minds into a big stew called "woke."
30. Stuart Hall, "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media [1981]," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC, 2021), 100.
31. The "zone of indistinction" or "zone of indifference" is a phrase adopted by Giorgio Agamben through his reading of Walter Benjamin. For Agamben it refers to both dystopic "states of exception," such as the camps that, he argues, have become paradigmatic of modernity, and what Benjamin once called "the real state of exception"—moments of genuine political potential opened up when logics of hierarchy and distinct identity are suspended. Agamben writes, "Reaching this impersonal zone of indifference, in which every proper name, every copyright, and every claim to originality fade away, fills me with joy"; Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, 2019), 15. The zone of indistinction might also put us in mind of Hakim Bey's TAZ or "temporary autonomous zone"; Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, 2003). Another reference is "The Zone" in Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's novel *Roadside Picnic* (1972), depicted in Andrey Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979), a realm where the normal rules of reality have been suspended to the point where it is hard to recognize one's own autonomy. The Strugatsky/Tarkovsky concept of "The Zone" has been given a cinematic afterlife in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1982) and Adam Curtis's *Hypernormalisation* (2016), in both cases with reference to the ways that new electronic or computational technologies unmoor us from a stable sense of differentiation. I am interested in exploring the political potential of this concept for its ambivalence, without mystifying or romanticizing it.
32. Jacques Rancière, "Fools and Sages: Reflections on the End of the Trump Presidency," in *Uncertain Times*, trans. Andrew Brown (New York, 2024), 46.
33. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 2002), 94.

Downloaded from http://online.ucpress.edu/representations/article-pdf/168/1/153/841599/rep.2024.168.10.153.pdf by guest on 10 February 2025