

The Just Kidding Jouissance of Dark Brandon

THE HEAD OF JOSEPH BIDEN appears before the seal of the president of the United States of America (fig. 1). The resulting aureole is set off from a black background with a layer of eerie purple haze and further illuminated by brilliant light emanating from the eye sockets of the 46th commander in chief. The visual texture of the image bears all of the hallmarks of contemporary memes: it is decidedly low-res, lossily compressed, and—in online parlance—“deep fried.” It is supposed to look like shit.¹ What is one to make of this image when it is encountered in its native habitat, almost certainly a social networking platform on the world wide web? What do memes mean?

These are difficult questions because semiotics in the age of internet memes has gotten more difficult. What seems clear enough is that the formal elements, most notably the laser-like light beaming from the eyes of President Joseph Biden, would be highly inscrutable to anyone not well



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versed in the lingua franca of a specific form of online communication that has proliferated under Web 2.0 (and into whatever stage of web development we're in now). It would also be quite challenging, surely for a "normie" Democrat, to grasp how and why such an image has been assembled through the media affordances of a political landscape in a very precarious moment.² One could think of this as a "decline in symbolic efficiency"; no Master Signifier is here to tell us what this means, but I will attempt to take up that task presently.³ This is an example of the Dark Brandon meme template, and it will be the main object of this short case study into forms of compressed speech in the current digital media ecology.

In "They Say We Can't Meme: Politics of Idea Compression," an article published on the website of the Institute of Network Cultures in February 2018, media theorists Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters suggest that the current political emergency might have something to do with the power of *compressed ideas* in the form of memes such as Pepe the Frog, Kekistan, and other signifiers of the white nationalist revanchism that helped put Donald Trump in the White House in 2016. As Lovink and Tuters suggest, "In addressing the strategic question of 'what is to be done' in relation to the current political situation, with regards to political memes, it is in fact the reactionary right that's been most successful in recent years with their oft-repeated slogan that 'politics is downstream from culture.'"⁴ If the forces of political reaction have been the ones to understand this Gramscian insight of late, applying the politics of idea compression for their own ends, it would behoove the left to reckon with the implications of compression, both as an epistemological concept and as a technical process with a specific history.⁵

Dark Brandon has emerged as arguably the most successful left-liberal meme since the rise of Trump, even as what makes a meme a "success" (and "left-liberal," for that matter) is precisely what is at stake. So why *Brandon*? And why is it *Dark*? What does this darkness signify? To begin outlining a politics of compression, let us take a single meme representative of a densely compressed network of ideas and unpack it through a process of semiotic decompression qua demystification. The meme originates in a moment of miscommunication. On 2 October 2021, following the Sparks 300 NASCAR race at Talladega Superspeedway, in the deep-red state of Alabama, the winner, Brandon Brown, was being interviewed on the track by NBC Sports reporter Kelli Stavast. In the background of the live shot can be seen a good portion of the crowd still lingering in the stands. As Stavast is asking Brandon about his win, the crowd noise is clearly picked up by NBC's camera: "Fuck Joe Biden, fuck Joe Biden." Our reporter, either due to a genuine mishearing or the proprieties of live television, says to Brown, "As you can hear the chants from the crowd . . . Let's go, Brandon." What happens next should be familiar to those who have been paying attention to the message discipline among Trump

loyalists on Fox News, message boards like 4chan, and right-wing Twitter accounts—in other words, the Make America Great Again mediasphere. Almost instantly, “Let’s Go Brandon” becomes the slogan of choice to be deployed as a substitute for “Fuck Joe Biden.” Any time you can’t say “Fuck Joe Biden,” say “Let’s Go Brandon” instead, and *Brandon* becomes the cheeky codename for *Biden*, to be used freely, even apart from the original formulation of the phrase. This leads to the phrase being taken up by another phenomenon that became supercharged under Trump: the entrepreneurial grift of MAGA-branded merchandise to be sold online and, quaintly, at pop-up stands outside of the rallies for Trump himself and other Trump-endorsed Republican candidates running for office. The acronym FJB (Fuck Joe Biden) was similarly used in these contexts, yet another example of linguistic compression for those in the know.

A few months later, in May 2022, a new memetic slogan emerges in the MAGAsphere. The exact origin is hard to pin down—and largely irrelevant, of course—but one notable occasion of its use will serve for our purposes. The US representative from North Carolina’s 11th congressional district, Republican Madison Cawthorn, enmeshed in numerous scandals during his first and what may turn out to be his only term in the House, and reeling from his defeat in the primary that very day, posted on various social media platforms a list of “America First Patriots,” invoking one of Trump’s signature slogans, along with text that read: “The time for genteel politics as usual has come to an end. It’s time for the rise of the new right. It’s time for Dark MAGA to truly take command.” Dark MAGA then, naturally, becomes a rallying cry for the ultra right, believing that their God-Emperor will return to his rightful throne in the Oval Office to lead America once again and enact the Dark MAGA agenda. Indeed, Representative Marjorie Taylor Green ups the ante with her call for hashtag “Ultra MAGA” in a tweet posted on 6 May. Even darker than dark, *ultra* MAGA is the next step in the cultural logic of meme production (what exactly that means for Washington, DC, policy is unclear and, again, largely beside the point).

The particular visual tropes that mark the Dark MAGA memes are notable. Laser light radiates from the eyes of the politicians being depicted—usually Trump himself, but it’s an aesthetic format that’s easily adaptable to others. The light tends to pop against a dark minimalist background or, alternatively, amid a variety of gothic and occultist accoutrements. It’s in that sense that Dark MAGA could be seen as giving visual expression to a rather inchoate spirit of the cyber-gothic, certainly among the connotations of this “darkness,” and one associated with “meme magick” and the accelerationist thinking of neoreactionary writers like Nick Land and Mencius Moldbug, *nom de plume* for the software engineer and internet entrepreneur Curtis Yarvin.⁶ I can’t fully address here the connections between the rise of Trumpism and the

philosophical thought purported to be on the reading lists of Steve Bannon, Peter Thiel, and others on the “intellectual” side of Trump’s orbit, which has similarly found its way into the motley subsets of the New Far Right, including “white supremacists, masculinists, anti-feminists, seasteaders, transhumanists, Bitcoin freaks, Islamophobes, neomonarchists, and anti-Semites.”⁷ But we should at least gesture to the political horseshoe of “dark theory” that is in the background of whatever is going on with Dark MAGA or Dark Brandon memes. Jairus Victor Grove at the University of Hawaii, for instance, has conducted a graduate seminar on the “dark theory” that has emerged in connection to Trumpism, with Bannon being the straw that stirs this fascist brew.⁸ Grove assembles the works of current figures from the so-called “Dark Enlightenment” movement like Land and Moldbug and the Eurasian mystical-nationalism of Alexander Dugin (sometimes called “Putin’s brain”), along with more familiar expressions of reactionary modernism, like those of Ernst Junger and Julius Evola—the Bannon canon, if you will.⁹ On the other side of the political spectrum, we find Andrew Culp’s *Dark Deleuze*, Culp’s attempt to rescue a critical, left-wing, negative Deleuze from the affirmationist uses to which his thought has been put at least since the new millennium, whereby the vitalism of Deleuze has been used to bolster post-critical projects making comparatively sunny, new-materialist, reparative claims about the agential power of mushrooms and the like.¹⁰

For at least a decade now, this loose collection of the-only-way-out-is-through accelerationist thought has found its most common visual representation within the science-fiction aesthetics of *The Terminator* franchise, especially the first two entries, written and directed by James Cameron. The ubiquitous red-laser pupils of the Dark MAGA universe would seem to be a metonymic reference (conscious or not) to the design of the original Terminator, the T-800, played in human form by future governor of California Arnold Schwarzenegger and puppeteered in full-skeleton form by Stan Winston. The late Mark Fisher made the connection between the Terminator and an accelerated heightening-of-the-contradictions politics explicit in his presentation at the Accelerationism Symposium at Goldsmiths London in September 2010, presenting the audience with a stark choice for which Cameron text best allegorizes the path forward: *Terminator* or *Avatar*, with the latter standing in for any and all New Age back-to-nature imaginaries that desire a return to precapitalist territorialities, families, and villages. But as should be clear by now, history chose the path of the Terminator, as embodied in the person of Donald J. Trump.

Trump-as-candidate emerges in 2015 like the T-800 from the flame at the end of the first film, stripped of the outer coating of humanity, leaving only cold metallic infrastructure. The masks were truly off now. The masks of political civility, political correctness, basic human decency—all have

been burned away. What we are left with is the endoskeleton of capital stripped bare. As Fisher puts it, interpolating the time-traveling hero Kyle Reese's words of warning from the film: "Capital as megadeath-drive as Terminator: that which 'can't be bargained with, can't be reasoned with, doesn't show pity or remorse or fear and absolutely will not stop, ever.'"¹¹ And in some forms of memetic representation for those in the digital sticks, this identification is made painfully obvious: the Trumpinator.¹²

On this, both sides seem to agree. Trump signals the dropping of the mask of civility, a new age of nihilistic transparency. This act of exposure is why, in 2015, Jodi Dean, definitely no fan of Trump, called him, with a kind of cynical realism, "the most honest candidate in American politics today," writing: "Donald Trump cuts through the ideological haze of American politics and exposes its underlying truth, the truth of enjoyment."¹³

Here we reach the (de)based dialectical synthesis: Dark Brandon.¹⁴ Starting sometime during the summer of 2022, a new meme appears online, according to the typical mode of memetic production: a *variation on* or *slight revision of* an already-existing meme, and the less effort put into the new iteration the better. Now it is Brandon (that is, Biden) who appears with the T-800 treatment, cyborg eyes cutting through the morass and malarkey of DC deadlock to enact some of the commonsense liberal policies that were his bread-and-butter issues in the 2020 campaign. Democrats, with an eye toward the midterm elections in the fall, were widely touting Biden's leadership in their recent accomplishments: the Senate passed the Inflation Reduction Act, a revived and repackaged version of the Build Back Better bill that died the previous winter at the hands of Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia; Congress passed the CHIPS Act, a bipartisan bill that provides incentives for companies to manufacture semiconductors in the United States; the unemployment rate fell to a fifty-year low; the average price of gasoline dropped below \$4 a gallon; and a CIA-operated drone killed Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda.¹⁵ By the time Biden announced a pardon of thousands of people with federal offenses for simple marijuana possession and initiated a review of how the drug is classified, Dark Brandon had morphed into Dank Brandon.

According to reporting from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, Biden's people inside the White House were watching the spread of Dark Brandon memes with great enthusiasm, retweeting, quote-tweeting, and otherwise promoting the darkening of the Brandon agenda prior to the 2022 midterms. Liberals online appropriated the fun that the right was having with the "Let's Go Brandon" slogan and "dark" sci-fi signifiers and embraced the enjoyment that comes from meme play, with minor revisions and an ironic if-you-can't-beat-em-join-em spirit of fanfic creativity.¹⁶ This is détournement that even MSNBC viewers could appreciate. No less a DC

institution and ultimate Democratic-Party insider than Neera Tanden, then senior advisor to the president, commented, “This is an official position,” on a tweet by Matt Fuller, politics editor at *The Daily Beast*, which read, “Lasers shooting out of Joe Biden’s eyes is an Official Statement of Administration Policy”—Tanden quickly appended a second tweet: “just kidding.”

This last comment really gives away the game. It seems like everyone, from involuntarily celibate 4chan posters to senior advisors in the White House, are online for the same purpose, for the lulz (in internet speak), the “just kidding” jouissance that proliferates in the mischief, performative antagonism, and just plain weirdness of online speech that the extant scholarly work on memes highlights as a main feature of the “ambivalent internet.” As critics like Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner emphasize across a series of works, the sheer scope of the anonymity and indemnification that marks online speech is the pharmakon of the day, the poison and antidote, that distinguishes the internet from previous communication channels.¹⁷ This is the problem and the potential that was identified as early as 1993 in the famous *New Yorker* cartoon that rightly noted: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” We are all familiar with how this perhaps initially liberatory potential of identity play has become much more toxic and #problematic in online political discourse in recent years, where accusations of “irony-poisoning” and acting in “bad faith” predominate.¹⁸ The problem of Poe’s Law, the idea that online it is nearly impossible to tell the difference between sincerity and sarcasm, is a hard one to overcome.

It was this ambiguity that was exploited by trolls on the right in the leadup to Trump’s victory in 2016. Phillips and Milner call the carnivalesque culture of Trump’s campaign a “Trumping of the play frame,” where the channel was flooded with noisy expression of appreciation for a new figure on the political landscape—one that could not be contained by the traditional political process or legacy media institutions—and the signal was lost.¹⁹ Trump became, in the words of Olivier Jutel, “the permissive paternal agent of *jouissance*,” inviting the MAGA legions to enjoy their own participation in this demonology and identify with and mirror Trump’s own performance of ludic resentment (all the while doing free labor for the campaign).²⁰

Enjoyment always belongs to the other, Lacan says somewhere.²¹ But Dark Brandon goes to show just how easily the logic of political meme production can be reversed without changing the fundamental terms of the game; we are still stuck in the feedback loop of “just kidding” jouissance. If Lovink and Tuters suggest that we ought “to consider memes in relation to the left’s enduring question of how to overcome the deadlock of the neoliberal post-political situation,” I’m not sure we are any closer to getting out of this bind.²²

Memes are compressed fetish objects. Like all compressed media, they are the “good enough” result of a “compromise between engineers and

salespeople,”²³ and, like fetish objects, they facilitate “an enjoyment that occurs without any conscious awareness of its source.”²⁴ (Tracing the circuitous routes back to the source of Dark Brandon has been the object of this essay.) The parasitic enjoyment of Dark Brandon lasted for a while because it was an efficient means of highlighting the president’s perceived strengths among his base in 2022, and there is some evidence that meme campaigns in general have benefited Democratic candidates, as in the case of John Fetterman’s successful senatorial bid in Pennsylvania that year, when he couldn’t be on the stump while recovering from a stroke.²⁵ Dark Brandon was the “good enough” response to the Lovink/Tuters question: “is it true that the left can’t meme?”—allowing for the conflation of “the left” and American liberalism for the moment. At the very least, it represented a return of the repressed of symbolic efficiency, if only at the level of election season shit-posting, with Biden as something like Primal Uncle. If the efficiency of signals vis-à-vis the channel is *the* principle of compressive communication, then Dark Brandon was an efficiently compressed reclamation of the presidency as symbolic institution, some sort of “safe and unproblematic moral anchor,” which was clearly Biden’s great appeal in 2020.²⁶

Well into the 2024 campaign, however, this image of Biden is no longer tenable. Meme warfare may prove that politics is downstream from culture, but memes are no match for live-streamed reality. The support for the phantasmatic construction of an avuncularly libidinal Biden withered among young people, presumably the target demographic for meme politics, in the wake of his unqualified support for Israel’s destruction of the Gaza Strip and his increasingly obvious senility.²⁷ The fun and games stop when faced with genocide and a non compos mentis chief executive.

Biden is out of the race now, and the Dark Brandon meme is all but extinct.²⁸ New memes from the left and right have taken its place, of course—coconut trees, cat ladies, couch copulation. The list will no doubt grow until that fateful November night and beyond. The electoral cycle of “just kidding” jouissance shows no sign of abating, and while the field of irony should not be entirely ceded to fascists, it’s also clear that the left needs to pass through this moment of meme magick, kicking it away like Wittgenstein’s ladder on the way to a new universal program. If non-duped Democrats want to follow, all the better.

Notes

1. Nick Douglas, “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 314–39.

2. For a theory of memes as assemblage, see Kyle Parry, *A Theory of Assembly: From Museums to Memes* (Minneapolis, 2022).
3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London, 1999).
4. Geert Lovink and Marc Tuters, "They Say We Can't Meme: Politics of Idea Compression," *Institute of Network Cultures*, 11 February 2018, <http://networkcultures.org/geert/2018/02/11/they-say-we-cant-meme-politics-of-idea-compression-geert-lovink-marc-tuters/>.
5. For compression as a philosophical concept, see Alexander R. Galloway and Jason R. LaRiviere, "Compression in Philosophy," *boundary 2* 44, no. 1 (2017): 125–47.
6. Meme magick is clearly descendent from what Land and his acolytes in the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at Warwick University in the 90s referred to as "hyperstition," wherein speculative rhetoric (memes) becomes manifest in the real world (IRL) in something akin to the scenario depicted in Ursula Le Guin's sci-fi novel *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971). Twenty-first-century resonances might be found in the notion of "inception" as well, named after the Christopher Nolan film (2010). For an introduction to Mencius Moldbug and other intellectual influences of the New Right, see Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Oxford, 2019); and Christine M. Battista and Melissa R. Sande, eds., *Critical Theory and the Humanities in the Age of the Alt-Right* (Cham, 2019).
7. Ana Teixeira Pinto, "Capitalism with a Transhuman Face: The Afterlife of Fascism and the Digital Frontier," *Third Text* 33, no. 3 (2019): 6.
8. The syllabus is available on Grove's academia.edu page: https://www.academia.edu/32478710/Dark_Theory_and_the_Future_of_Reactionary_Politics.
9. For the foundational account of reactionary modernism, see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984).
10. Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis, 2016).
11. Mark Fisher, "Terminator vs. Avatar," in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth, 2014), 343–44.
12. An alternative case could be made that Trump's closest cinematic analog in style and substance is Al Czervick, Rodney Dangerfield's character from the snobs vs. slobs classic *Caddyshack* (1980): the outer-borough new-money court jester who swoops into the country club and charms everyone with his blunt dressing down of their stuffy proprieties. The case for Trump-as-Czervick is made in James Poniewozik, *Audience of One: Donald Trump, Television, and the Fracturing of America* (New York, 2019), 35–36.
13. Jodi Dean, "Donald Trump Is the Most Honest Candidate in American Politics Today," *In These Times*, 12 August 2015, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/donald-trump-republican-president>.
14. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=based>.
15. Blake Hounshell, "'Dark Brandon' Rises and Buoy's Biden's Beleaguered Faithful," *New York Times*, 17 August 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/us/politics/dark-brandon-no-malarkey.html>; Matt Viser, "Brandon Returns, Darkly: Democrats Turn an Insult into a Pro-Biden Meme," *Washington Post*, 8 August 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/08/dark-brandon-meme-superhero/>.
16. For accounts of irony in the Trump era, see Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, *That's Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them* (Berkeley, 2024);

- Sophia A. McClennen, "Don't Look Up, Birds Aren't Real: Comedy and Conspiracy," in *Theory Conspiracy*, ed. Frida Beckman and Jeffrey R. Di Leo (London, 2023), 129–46; and Leif Weatherby, "Irony and Redundancy: The Alt Right, Media Manipulation, and German Idealism," *boundary 2 online* [b2o], 24 June 2019, https://www.boundary2.org/2019/06/leif-weatherby-irony-and-redundancy-the-alt-right-media-manipulation-and-german-idealism/#_edn1.
17. See Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge, 2017); Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); and Ryan Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).
 18. On the irony-poisoning of the contemporary cultural sphere, especially certain sectors of the art world, see Larne Abse Gogarty, "The Art Right," in *The White West: Fascism, Unreason, and the Paradox of Modernity*, ed. Kader Attia, Anselm Franke, and Ana Teixeira Pinto (London, 2023), 181–89; and Larne Abse Gogarty, *What We Do Is Secret: Contemporary Art and the Antinomies of Conspiracy* (London, 2023).
 19. Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*, 191. For further work on Trump's weaponization of memes and social media generally, see Richard A. Grusin, "Donald Trump's Evil Mediation," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 1 (2017): 86–99; Richard Grusin, "'Once More with Feeling': Trump, Premediation, and 21st-Century Terrorism," in *Threat Communication and the US Order After 9/11: Medial Reflections*, ed. Vanessa Ossa, David Scheu, and Lukas R. A. Wilde (London, 2020), 176–90; Josh Cows and Ralph Schroeder, "Tweeting All the Way to the White House," and Julia Sonnevend, "Facts (Almost) Never Win Over Myths," in *Trump and the Media*, ed. Pablo J. Boczkowski and Zizi Papacharissi (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 151–57, 87–92.
 20. Olivier Jutel, "Donald Trump's Libidinal Entanglement with Liberalism and Affective Media Power," *boundary 2 online* [b2o], 23 October 2017, <https://www.boundary2.org/2017/10/olivier-jutel-donald-trumps-libidinal-entanglement-with-liberalism-and-affective-media-power/>.
 21. For a thoroughgoing account of the extrinsic and parasitic nature of political enjoyment with particular attention to Trump/Biden, see Todd McGowan, *Enjoyment Right & Left* (Portland, 2022).
 22. Lovink and Tuters, "They Say We Can't Meme."
 23. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, 1999), 2.
 24. McGowan, *Enjoyment Right & Left*, 7n9.
 25. Blake Hounshell, "Fetterman 2022: The Steampunk Version of Biden in His Basement," *New York Times*, 28 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/28/us/politics/john-fetterman-memes-campaign.html>.
 26. Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 332.
 27. Alaina Demopoulos, "Dark Brandon Popping Off: Is Joe Biden's 'Cringe' TikTok Helping or Hurting Him?," *Guardian*, 2 May 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/03/joe-biden-tiktok>.
 28. The intellectual origins of the darkness explored here have unexpectedly been thrust into the spotlight since the selection of Ohio senator J. D. Vance as Trump's running mate. Indeed, several outlets have reported on the young Republican's

status as a disciple of Curtis Yarvin (aka Mencius Moldbug) and beneficiary of Peter Thiel. See James Pogue, “Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel Is Placing His Biggest Bets,” *Vanity Fair*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>; and Gil Duran, “Where J. D. Vance Gets His Weird, Terrifying Techno-Authoritarian Ideas,” *New Republic*, 22 July 2024, <https://newrepublic.com/article/183971/jd-vance-weird-terrifying-techno-authoritarian-ideas>.