

SpongeBob, Meme Laocoön

THE 1506 CE RECOVERY OF the *Laocoön and His Sons* statue group provoked a crisis of interpretation. In *The Aeneid*, Vergil had described Neptune punishing the Trojan priest—for drawing attention to the possible treachery of the Greeks’ Horse—by summoning “two huge coiled snakes” to bite and crush him and his sons: “His shrieks of agony rose to the sky, / As when a bull escapes the altar, shedding / The ax that was half-buried in his neck.”¹ But the statue group, which was determined to have been sculpted roughly contemporaneously with Vergil’s poem, renders the snake-draped Laocoön’s mouth half-opened with downturned sides, suggesting not “shrieks of agony” so much as a moan of discomfort.² For centuries following the statue’s recovery, according to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the question was: why? In *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), Lessing resists the received idea that the sculpture affirms a distinctively Greek stoicism that its viewers would recognize but that the ambitions of epic would seek to transcend. Instead, Lessing tests several local explanations—a screaming mouth is not beautiful, as a statue is obliged to be; a scream would imply a moment of climax, whereas a sculpture must seem energetic rather than on the precipice of exhausted collapse—before arriving at an overarching theory of the arts:

this essential difference between [poetry and the visual arts] is found in that the former is a visible progressive act, the various parts of which take place little by little [*nach und nach*] in the sequence of time; whereas the latter is a visible static act, the various parts of which develop next to one another [*neben einander*] in space. But if painting, by virtue of its signs or its means of imitation, which it can combine in space alone, must completely renounce time, then progressive acts, because progressive, do not belong among its subjects—painting must content itself with acts next to one another, or with mere bodies.³

As Lessing continues, we learn that these fundamental orientations to *extent* are what shape the audience’s experience, and that they imply a set of rules regarding the conditions for success of a given (medium’s) artwork. Actions and their consequences belong to those media that are experienced through time, whereas complex juxtapositional structures belong to the



FIGURE 1. *Laocoön and His Sons*. Copy after a Hellenistic original, c. 200 BCE. Found in the Baths of Trajan, 1506. WikiCommons.

spatial; poetry is best equipped to examine ugliness, because the words describing it can be, themselves, beautiful. Theater and dance—and, by extension, film and television—are hybrid forms in which spatial signification can complicate or provide relief from durational aesthetics. With this observation of the “essential *disunity* of the arts,” Lessing inaugurated the formal study of comparative intermedial aesthetics.⁴

Bringing memes into Lessing’s matrix, we might begin by assigning them to the spatial arts.⁵ After all, we consume them visually, and whatever text is present is obliged to be brief enough and large enough that it can be taken in without feeling the duration-sensation of reading—so far, so *neben einander*. But memes are also *necessarily* iterative, and their enduring virality depends not only upon their adaptability but upon a minor sense of surprise created by successive recontextualizations. What makes a meme distinct from a funny picture with a caption is the impression that any individual meme received as such exists within a durational structure of serial encounters, arriving on our phones *nach und nach*, with traces of prior instances and the possibility of successive ones. Thus, a hybrid form, but their blend is not that of theater and dance, in which the primacy of duration promises a developmental narrative. They are static, but the combination of trace and surprise troubles an expectation that has long structured the hierarchical relation between image, text, and fluency in static hybrid forms.⁶ Michael Camille began his pathbreaking essay “Seeing and Reading” by quoting the artist of the *St. Albans Psalter*—“it is one thing to venerate a picture and another to learn the story it depicts, which is to be venerated”—but with memes we venerate the *range* of possible stories and the image’s availability for participatory recombination.⁷ Base images often come from films and

FIGURE 2. Dish with Laocoön and His Sons. Tin-glazed earthenware, c. 1530. Gardiner Museum, Toronto. Gift of George and Helen Gardiner.



streamable shows and carry the narrative residue of these earlier hybridities, but their meme-use bears no necessary resemblance to the context in which that base image first appeared. In short, meme culture behaves iconologically rather than iconographically, but frequent use can confer a kind of iconographic status on even stock images.⁸

The intuition of a comparative intermedial aesthetician will only get us so far. One lesson from the interpretive crisis that inspired Lessing's model is that a fecund meme and its source may bring us closer to determining the set of rules by which distinct (although linked) hybrid forms operate in the contemporary. One such source—one of the predominant meme icons—is SpongeBob SquarePants, the eponymous star of an ongoing animated series that premiered in 1999.⁹ According to KnowYourMeme.com, there are over 225 distinct memes with SpongeBob base images, with the earliest recorded in circulation in 2006 and new meme templates still appearing.¹⁰ The fact that so many images/phrases/moments from this show have become meme templates suggests that the source material is particularly suited to mememaking and thus particularly useful for interrogating these intermedial rules. While Iranian cleric Shahab Moradi was being sarcastic when he asked, "Are we supposed to take out Spider-Man and SpongeBob?," he nevertheless helps us to see that the iconicity of the SpongeBob character has a cultural importance that may exceed that of any American who has actually lived.¹¹ He has become a powerful current in what Legacy Russell has called the "broader undertow of American visual culture," broadly significant and signifying broadly, and, as with the Laocoön statue group, the SpongeBob of memes differs significantly from its hybrid source.¹²

Customer: I'm a critic on Yelp

Me: I'M A cRiTIC oN yEIP



FIGURE 3. A Mocking SpongeBob targeting a specific kind of querulous restaurant customer. Uploaded to KnowYourMeme.com in 2018.

As a succinct point of contrast, let's compare the SpongeBob meme that I encounter most frequently with its source episode. Mocking SpongeBob, which began to circulate in May 2017, depicts SpongeBob working at a fast-food restaurant in his uniform and hat, but cross-eyed and pitched over at the waist. Often accompanied by a caption in sticky caps, it is used to lampoon insufficiently self-aware behaviors, with the connotation that whatever idea the caption expresses is beneath intellectual engagement and better dismissed through malicious imitation.¹³ In the source episode, however, SpongeBob does not strike this odd posture in an act of insolent dismissal but is forced—or, rather, ineluctably compelled—to perform it. “Little Yellow Book” is one of many episodes based around horizontal workplace competition between the exuberantly productive SpongeBob and his resentful coworker Squidward. In this case, Squidward steals and reads SpongeBob's diary, discovering that “when SpongeBob sees plaid, he has this uncontrollable urge to quack like a chicken.”¹⁴ SpongeBob is then summoned and shown a plaid kilt, and he immediately drops his cleaning and begins quacking and scratching. It's a version of workplace degradation that exists in some pathological proximity to Sianne Ngai's theory of zaniness—which is “as much about desperate laboring as playful fun”—but could not be further from the sentiment that the meme expresses.¹⁵ The SpongeBob of the meme is canny and condescending, mirthful but cruel, and seems to utterly lack the capacity for exploitation by which the television character is frequently defined. If the core of the television character is his

identity as worker-driven-to-zaniness, this sense of “desperate laboring” is wholly absent from the many screenshots from the show that have achieved durable meme status.

Lessing’s most visible modern inheritors indicate that crises of intermedial aesthetics are almost always symptoms of emergent anxieties about identity. In conservative literary scholar Irving Babbitt’s *New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (1910), it is the *gendering* of the arts as much as the rules proper to spatial and temporal practices that has become confused. Dating the beginning of the “confusion of the arts” to early nineteenth-century misinterpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Babbitt believes that “the function of criticism at the present hour [should be] to bring once more into honor the broad, masculine, and vigorous distinction.”¹⁶ In *Iconology* (1986), media theorist W. J. T. Mitchell helped us to see the gendering latent in Lessing’s analysis.¹⁷ But Mitchell sounds more like Babbitt than we might expect in his preface to *Rethinking Lessing’s “Laocoon”: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the ‘Limits’ of Painting and Poetry* (2017), reprising his previous work but with a gesture of contemporary consequence:

Lessing’s own father . . . wrote a Latin thesis at Wittenberg entitled *De non commutando sexus habitu* (that is, on the impropriety of women wearing men’s clothes and men women’s). In the year 2016, which looks to be remembered as a time when European national borders were overwhelmed by a flood of immigrants, and when American popular culture was flooded with images and narratives of transgender individuals whose identity confusion went beyond clothing to include genital alteration, Lessing still matters a great deal.¹⁸

Mitchell has not only borrowed Babbitt’s key term (“confusion”) but has added an edge that seems more consequentially targeted—away from a misogynistic generalization about a culture of art and criticism and toward certain individuals who may or may not participate within it, framing affirming care as an escalation. We can reject Mitchell’s transphobia while acknowledging that it is symptomatic of a widespread contemporary anxiety about gender and its signification from the hegemonically cisgendered mainstream, in which even notionally leftist intellectuals have become increasingly militant about policing biological sex and its *Grenzen*.¹⁹

At least one contemporary artist seems to believe that memes are particularly suited to intervene, and she draws on SpongeBob to do so. Playing with anxieties like Babbitt’s and Mitchell’s, performance artist Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo) rose to prominence with a series of meme-adjacent works that explore the plasticity of gender and sexuality—of identity broadly—online. Her very name, “Puppies Puppies,” began as a reference to a friend who had replaced all of their Facebook pictures with images of kittens before disappearing, although Kuriki-Olivo started adding



FIGURE 4. Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo) performs “Love, Bob Esponja” at the Queer Thoughts booth of Mexico City’s “Material Arts Fair” in February 2015. Copyright Kuriki-Olivo, appears here by courtesy of the artist.

her own name, in parentheses, “in tandem with her transition.”²⁰ Her early, controversial work engaged and extended the modernist practice of readymades by concealing herself as pop culture figures like Voldemort, Gollum, or Shrek and performing repetitive actions in public. “I actually think that’s how Puppies tries to differ from Duchamp, however crazy that sounds,” she said to *Artspace* in 2016. “In Puppies’s work, the objects must function or else they’re props.”²¹

“Love, Bob Esponja,” her widely discussed performance for the Queer Thoughts booth at the Mexico City “Material Arts Fair” in 2015, directly incorporates the distinction between SpongeBob-as-Character and SpongeBob-as-Meme. For the performance, she dressed as SpongeBob and held aloft a placard with one of the more notorious and widely travelled SpongeBob memes—a fan-created image of SpongeBob and Squidward locked in a passionate embrace. It’s difficult to determine the source of the meme, largely due to the number of different persons online who have appeared to take credit for it over the years. The intermedial quality of the performance seems clear, with the friendly imposture of the costume—recalling as it does the exuberant mimesis of theme parks and parades, decidedly family-friendly outings, and anticipating Nickelodeon’s recent “outing” of SpongeBob as queer—standing in explicit contrast with the erotic, affective, and identitarian suggestions of the image.²²

And yet the point seems less to identify the contrast than to *rejoice* in the dissonance between SpongeBob-as-Character and SpongeBob-as-Meme, and to playfully sustain that dissonance. It is as though the Laocoön statue group was revealed to contain a speaker, which could play a recording of the

Vergilian scream. It is a reminder that fun, joy, and play exist in much closer proximity to beauty than we aesthetic theorists often admit—where Albright’s aesthetic schema offers “abrasion” as a limit point that all inter-medial works approach, “in which the component artworks seem to clash incoherently, attack, erode, and possibly destroy one another’s effects,” Puppies Puppies’s performance uses clashing tonalities and sensibilities to recuperate the zaniness of the cartoon, with the differing artforms and their attendant conflictual rules offering a form of aesthetic argumentation for queer love over work, maybe even *at* work (given that the meme depicts coworkers).²³ For Mitchell, Lessing’s father’s work on gender, fashion, and decorum is a silent, defining influence, but Lessing himself offers a fairly explicit dismissal of this kind of thinking: “conventionality . . . was held of small account among the ancients. They felt that art, in the attainment of beauty, its true end, could dispense with conventionalities altogether. Necessity invented clothes, but what has art to do with necessity?”²⁴ It may be disappointingly commonsensical to answer Lessing’s question with *expression*, an impulse that may enter uneasy alliance with convention but rarely emerges from a reverence for it. I don’t think we need to take SpongeBob as our meme Laocoön to understand that the emergent, social media-enabled form is a vital site of play over conventionality, well-suited to a historical moment in which fewer people feel constrained by birth assignment. But if we do, we understand that the meme-form troubles the received rules of spatial and temporal arts in ways that are unique but nevertheless participate in a form of avant-gardism with roots deeper than modernism or Romanticism—a form of avant-gardism as old as the classics later taken as tradition.

Notes

Thank you to Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo for your work and for the permission to include it here, to Mia You and Diana Wise for your thoughtful edits, to the ULeth Works-in-Progress group for workshoping an earlier version, and to Brent Hayes Edwards for setting me on the path.

1. Vergil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Sarah Ruden (New Haven, 2021), 38–39.
2. Dating the statue group in relation to Vergil’s writing was central to other philosophers’ and critics’ interpretations of their relation. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing raises the possibility that each work was separately inspired by some lost third source but then settles on an inductive argument for dating the Vergil first—the common-sense approach of which belies Lessing’s extensive reading in ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics, history, and poetry. See Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire, “Introduction: Rethinking Lessing’s *Laocoon* from Across the Humanities,” in *Rethinking Lessing’s “Laocoon”: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the ‘Limits’ of Painting and Poetry*, ed. Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire (Oxford, 2017), 18–19.

3. Lessing, translation (including square brackets) by Daniel Albright in “Untwisting the Serpent: Recasting *Laokoon* for Modernist Comparative Arts,” in *Word and Music Studies Defining the Field: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Word and Music Studies at Graz, 1997*, ed. Walter Bernhart, Steven Paul Scher, and Werner Wolf (Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1999), 83n2. Based on the German text in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Lessing’s Laokoon*, ed. A. Hamann (Oxford, 1901).
4. Daniel Albright, *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts* (New Haven, 2014), 3.
5. Despite significant movement in rendering social media more accessible through screen readers, memes are notoriously difficult to translate into audio. This is not to say that there are not memes of other sensoria, but they tend to be distinct areas of experimentation. See Justin Caffier, “Blind People Can Struggle to Understand Memes, So They Made Their Own,” *VICE*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/yw8y45/blind-people-can-struggle-to-understand-memes-so-they-made-their-own>.
6. Something like sixteenth-century Laocoön memes came into being shortly after the statue group’s discovery, with representations of the scene appearing on ceramics from Urbino’s popular maiolica studios. Lessing doesn’t account for ceramics in his treatise, but we might observe that the affordances of glazed tableware suggest a polysemic version of “circulation” within their appreciation. See, for instance, “Dish with Laocoön and His Sons,” tin-glazed earthenware, c. 1530, Gardiner Museum, Toronto, <https://emuseum.gardinermuseum.com/objects/583/dish-with-laocoon-and-his-sons>.
7. Michael Camille, “Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,” *Art History* 8, no. 1 (March 1985): 26.
8. “Iconology” tends to denote something broader than iconography—per W. J. T. Mitchell, iconology is “the historical study of the logic, conventions, grammar, and poetics of imagery [and which] thus contains its tributary discipline, iconography” (introduction to *The Language of Images* [Chicago, 1980], 2)—but also work that self-consciously follows Edwin Panofsky’s aesthetico-anthropological approach. What I mean, though, is that a base image’s becoming-meme does not cleanly follow from the significance of the figure that it depicts; in fact, that significance may be completely incidental and run contrary to use. Here, I find Giulio Carlo Argan’s definition quite helpful: “Iconological research can also be done into the portrait, the landscape, or the still life, but it certainly would not consist in ascertaining who the characters are, or what place, fruit, or flower we see represented. The iconology of a portrait is the pose, the dress, the social or psychological meaning which can be attributed to the figure; the iconology of a landscape or of a still life is the mode of perspective, the configurations, the rendering of places and things as significant”; Giulio Carlo Argan, “Ideology and Iconology,” trans. Rebecca West, in *The Language of Images*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1980), 19.
9. For details on the history of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, see “SpongeBob SquarePants (TV Series, 1999–),” *IMDb*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0206512/>.
10. Precise dating of any meme is fuzzy, and the anthropological leanings of KnowYourMeme.com suggest that any given entry acknowledges an entry into widespread use that may have been preceded by unrecorded private or local use. It’s worth mentioning, too, that there are at least two SpongeBob base images used for the pre-social-media meme-page of the YTMND (You’re the Man Now Dog) subgenre. But my point is really that the show and the SpongeBob character

- have a strange, outsized influence on meme culture that extends beyond the persistent circulation of any one or few specific base images.
11. Following the American assassination of Major General Qassem Soleimani in the first days of 2020, Shahab Moradi commented: “Think about it. Are we supposed to take out Spider-Man and SpongeBob? They don’t have any heroes.” See Ryan Fahey, “‘Are we supposed to take out Spiderman and Spongebob?’ Iranian Cleric Mocks US and Says Tehran Can’t Strike Back at Targets of Soleimani’s Stature Because America Only Has Fictional Heroes,” *Daily Mail*, 6 January 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7857497/Iranian-cleric-says-fictional-heroes-like-spongebob-spiderman.html>.
 12. Legacy Russell, *Black Meme: A History of the Images that Make Us* (London, 2024), 6.
 13. Cory Dudak, “‘Mocking SpongeBob’ Meme Is the Trendiest Way to Insult Someone,” *Mandatory*, 15 May 2017, <https://www.mandatory.com/fun/1263567-mocking-spongebob-meme>.
 14. *SpongeBob SquarePants*, season 9, episode 5, “Little Yellow Book/Bumper to Bumper,” directed by Vincent Waller, written by Stephen Hillenburg, Luke Brookshier, and Marc Ceccarelli, featuring Lori Alan, Dee Bradley Baker, and Clancy Brown, aired 25 November 2012, in broadcast syndication.
 15. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, 2012), 23.
 16. Irving Babbitt, *The New Laocoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (Boston, 1910), 244.
 17. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986): “In his wandering, however, Lessing has disclosed what is probably the most fundamental ideological basis for his laws of genre, namely, the laws of gender. The decorum of the arts at bottom has to do with proper sex roles” (109).
 18. W. J. T. Mitchell, preface to *Rethinking Lessing’s Laocoon: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the ‘Limits’ of Painting and Poetry*, ed. Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire (Oxford, 2017), xxviii. This gesture to Lessing’s father’s work appears nearly verbatim in *Iconology*: “Lessing never mentions Burke, from whom he borrowed so many ideas and examples, in *Laocoon*. Nor does he mention his own father, who wrote a Latin thesis at Wittenberg entitled *de non commutando sexus habitu*—‘on the impropriety, that is, of women wearing men’s clothes and men women’s’” (111).
 19. In *Iconology*, Mitchell notes that “the word which is translated as ‘limits’ (*Grenzen*) would be rendered more accurately as ‘borders’” (105). This partly explains the odd parallelism whereby images of trans experience are the domestic correlative of the European migrant crisis, but one cannot help but wonder whether Mitchell considered extending his metaphor, which places Mitchell himself into the position of a domestic/gender border guard.
 20. “Puppies Puppies (Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo) by Jane Ursula Harris,” *BOMB* (Winter 2024), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2023/12/15/puppies-puppies-jane-ursula-harris/>.
 21. Dylan Kerr, “Who, or What, Is Puppies Puppies? Meet the Art World’s Most ‘Huh?’ Viral Sensation,” *Artspace*, 26 January 2016, https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/material-art-fair-2016/puppies-puppies-interview-53446. More recently, Kuriki-Olivo has come to see those early performances as an “alternative take on vulnerability” that began in her high school years, when she performed as her school’s mascot, but also a take that she needed to leave behind as part of her transition: “It meant something very different to hide as a trans woman . . . because society forces us to hide.” See Jameson Fitzpatrick, “The Reappearing Act of Puppies Puppies,” *New York Times: T Magazine*, 18 August 2021.

22. Lisa Respers France, "SpongeBob SquarePants Gay? Nickelodeon Just Reinforced That Theory," *CNN*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/15/entertainment/spongebob-gay-tweet-trnd/index.html>.
23. Albright, *Panaesthetics*, 211.
24. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York, 1969), 41; see also Mitchell, *Iconology*, 111.