

## “The Cure of Depression”

THIS IS THE FIRST DEFINITION of *meme* on Urban Dictionary, the crowd-sourced internet reference for slang, common usage, and popular culture. In seeking to define memes, scholars tend to emphasize several things: anonymous and/or collective authorship, circulation online, and constant mutation through endless variations of the same.<sup>1</sup> Depression isn't usually mentioned. Read down to the second definition on Urban Dictionary, however, and depression appears again: “Memes are a lifestyle and art used by teens and adults who are willing to actually live a life that doesn't include depression.” Scroll to the seventh definition, and depression still lurks in the background. This entry defines memes succinctly as “my life,” and provides the following example: “Memes are the reason why I am still currently living.” Scroll down and down into the internet abyss, and you will continue to find depression mentioned in many more of Urban Dictionary's thousands of user-generated entries. Overall, the striking prominence of depression in Urban Dictionary warrants consideration because it reveals a disjunction between the ways the internet understands memes and the ways scholarship does. So far scholarship has failed to recognize, let alone reckon with, the deep and even defining relation between memes and depression.

As a case in point, I would like to think here about vaporwave or, more precisely, a specific track entitled “リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー” (Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing). If you were even just a little bit extremely online in the 2010s, then you probably heard at least snippets of this iconic track of the weird internet era, usually just the main melody, with or without lyrics laid over video-based memes and frequently in Vines, as a sort of meme within memes.<sup>2</sup> The song itself first appeared as the second track on the 2011 album *Floral Shoppe*, also known as *フローラルの専門店*, by the Portland, Oregon-based outfit Macintosh Plus, an alias for the recording artist Ramona Andra Langley (who also goes by many other aliases, such as Vektroid). The track itself is a slowed-down and pitch-modified version of a 1984 R&B track by Diana Ross entitled “It's Your Move,” itself a cover of a 1983 song by Australian performer Doug Parkinson. The most common idea attached to vaporwave and to this song is that it conjures a feeling of



FIGURE 1. Album cover for Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*, Beer on the Rug, 2011.

nostalgia for a time one never actually experienced (see the comments section on any vaporwave track on YouTube).<sup>3</sup> I would myself describe the song's mood as gently unnerving, ambiently dissociative, suggestive of an alternate reality, ghostly, maybe parodic, maybe trolling, and generally hovering over and at the edges of meaning and meaningfulness. Or, put differently, and in an internet idiom the song and its many memes helped to popularize, the song is “a e s t h e t i c.” And also, as we will see, *depressive*.

But let's take a moment. The term *depression* can be difficult, even perhaps impossible, to define.<sup>4</sup> Without fussing over definitions and caveats, however, I want to emphasize two prominent aspects of the experience of depression that often come up in its medical, psychological, and popular cultural discourses. First, the experience of depression often features a slowing or stalling of motor activity. This is the “can't get out of bed” aspect of depression. Second, the experience of depression may be approached as a collapse of meaning and of the meaningful. What I have in mind here is not necessarily sadness but rather a near-total dissipation of symbolic meaning. This is the “nothing seems to matter anymore” aspect of depression.

Even a fairly cursory reading of the Macintosh Plus song reveals how the meme rehearses and recasts the double collapse of motor activity and meaning central to depressive experience. Slowed, warped, and pitched down from its source material, the track feels a bit like being psychically underwater—all meaning threatens to dissipate into, well, vapor. The chorus repeats, “It's your move, I've made up my mind / Time is running out, make a move / Oh, we can go on, do you understand? It's all in your hands, it's your move.” Represented as if sung through digital molasses in a manner gently

redolent of a cassette tape grinding to a slower and slower pace on its way to ruin, the repeated imperative to *make a move* feels slightly menacing or impossible. In the substantially more upbeat Diana Ross version, the lyrics come across as directed toward resolving a romantic impasse to a beat you can dance to. By contrast, the Macintosh Plus version brackets even the possibility of action. This is not music you can dance to, at least not in any conventional sense. Maybe you could drum your fingers slowly to its spaced-out beats, but only maybe. The whole vibe of the song is one of felt inertia rather than expected action. This rehearsal of depressive experience's collapse of motor activity also affects the semantic meaning of the song's lyrics. Without the possibility of moving along with or toward action embodied by the tempo of the Ross version, lyrics in the Macintosh Plus version lose their urgency and potency. That is, it feels this way if you can actually make out the lyrics themselves, which register more as just another garbled texture of sound than as a distinct human vocal track here. In other words, semantic meaning does not so much dissolve as circle endlessly around the drain of meaninglessness, expressing a diminishment of meaning but not collapsing completely into senselessness. In this newly slowed mix, the lyrics warp, stretch out, and linger in between spaces in the instrumentation—almost like a sonic equivalent of the spaces between the letters in “a e s t h e t i c.”

Here it may be helpful to note how vaporwave's expression of semantic meaninglessness resonates with the definition of memes as “the cure of depression.” Why is it the cure *of* depression rather than the cure *for* depression? It may be a mistake. After all, Urban Dictionary does not edit submitted entries. Still, the definition is the most popular on the website, which leads me to speculate that this odd use of a preposition is more of a feature than a bug. So, let's unpack this. The issue is that the use of ‘of’ instead of ‘for’ suggests that depression itself may be a cure for something. This is a perverse and perhaps even offensive idea, which implies that depression may be useful in some way and may not be merely a malady. Such provocative and ironic ambiguity seems absolutely par for the course when it comes to internet discourse in the era of Web 2.0, as Damon R. Young shows.<sup>5</sup> It also strikes me as paradigmatic of so much meme culture, which frequently takes aim at sincerity in meaning-making. If Urban Dictionary is something like the internet troll's version of the Oxford English Dictionary, then it makes sense that its first entry for meme should contain within itself some volatile ambiguity chipping away at the stability and coherence of definitions as we have come to expect from a traditional dictionary. My point here is simple. If vaporwave expresses the dissolution of meaning as a meme it only does so because memes themselves may be incommensurate with semantic meaningfulness, stability, and coherence.

To be clear, I want to claim that memes, vaporwave, and *Floral Shoppe* rehearse *and* recast aspects of depressive experience. They produce an aesthetic relation to the experience of depression; they do not express the experience of depression itself. The experience of depression itself cannot ultimately be recuperated in textual form. This is at least part of the reason William Styron titles his 1990 depression memoir *Darkness Visible*. For Styron, John Milton's famous phrase describing Hell in *Paradise Lost* succinctly expresses the seeming paradox of communicating anything at all about the experience of depression. Aesthetic works, however, do have the power to put into textual form that relation of nonrelation to meaning, by which means the experience of depression becomes communicable and shareable.

In considering how the song/meme produces an aesthetic relation to the experience of depression, it is important to note how "Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing" recasts depression through a rehearsal of meaninglessness that diffuses in several directions. The distinctive album cover art deserves an extended discussion in its own right, but that will have to take place elsewhere. Indeed, the website Know Your Meme discusses the cover art as itself a meme. Here I just want to note the brazen semiotic incoherence (or retro postmodernist aesthetic?) of its striking juxtaposition of classical statuary and early 1990s-era computer imagery. Or one might look more closely at the song's title. First, the album track is only listed in Japanese characters in the song's publication on Bandcamp, a barrier to semantic comprehension for the Anglophone internet. With the help of Wikipedia and Know Your Meme, however, we discover the English translation of the song title to be "Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing." This allusively dense title only underscores the theme of verging on meaninglessness even as it makes connections with other texts and people and events. I encourage curious readers to do an image search for "Lisa Frank." Best known for her commercial designs gracing the surface of 1980s- and 1990s-era Trapper Keepers and similar products, Frank's design work tends to feature a distinctive preteen psychedelic aesthetic of wide-eyed kittens, dolphins, unicorns, and bright sparkles galore. Needless to say, it's hard if not impossible to grasp how this striking aesthetic has anything to do with computers, Greek statuary, Diana Ross, or the song title's pairing of Frank's name with "420," namely the "time to get high." Like the slowed aesthetic of the musical track, the invocation of stoner culture suggests both a certain kind of spaced-out enjoyment and a further cognitive slowing and stalling of meaning. Adding "Modern Computing" to the title, then, almost feels like the thesis statement of a manifesto on meaninglessness in the way it locates this aesthetic in the context of the weird internet era of the early 2010s. Taken all together we can start to see the multiple ways in which this meme gestures toward an experience of meaninglessness consonant with depression but also how the various iterations or branches of that meme recast the experience of meaninglessness as

something aesthetically adjacent to depression yet always couched in some other idiom of enjoyable non-sense.

Now, there are probably a million other possible case studies for thinking about memes and depression. A quick search on YouTube alone for the words “memes” and “cure” and “depression” yields many instances of a subgenre of compilation video: *Tik Toks That Are So Funny My Depression Went Away*, *Memes that cure depression?*, *memes that ease my depression*, *memes that cure my depression in 10 min*, *Memes that cure depression*, and so on. However, I also believe that looking at the life cycle of any meme whatsoever would ratify to a significant extent my working thesis that memes rehearse and recast the double collapse of motor activity and meaning central to depressive experience. I argue this for two broad reasons. First, while it may be a commonplace to argue that memes produce cultural value in their circulation online, it is also true that memes “die.” As another first-page definition of memes on Urban Dictionary notes, memes, by definition, “expire after 2 days.” Their value usually declines rapidly, and they are quickly forgotten and consigned to the dustbin of history (or maybe just the second and third pages of search results). Memes circulate, but they also cease to circulate, which is just as important to note. Here I want to suggest that their defining noncirculation (or “death”) rehearses something of the collapse of motor function central to depression. Secondly, memes thrive on context collapse, or the ways the internet flattens the world by presenting disparate sorts of content and sources in exactly the same way, one open web browser tab after another. They iterate and iterate and iterate, often until it becomes difficult to source any “original” meme in the first place. Here I have in mind not just the subgenre of memes known as “deep-fried memes,” or memes that have been photoshopped or glitched into visual oblivion, but also memes generally in their tendency to function as ephemeral placeholders for symbolic coherence.

Yet aren't memes the *cure of depression*? The complete version of the just-cited definition of memes on Urban Dictionary complicates things: “Memes are jokes that need to 1. Be a way of life for anyone who owns technology. It gives laughter and joy to the viewers. 2. Expire after 2 days.” This definitional awareness of the extreme limits on the life cycle of memes raises more questions. What does it mean to say that instances of a generic “way of life” expire after only two days? If memes are really a “way of life,” something like a worldview, a practice, a structuring habit of ordinary life, a *Weltanschauung*, then what does it mean to recognize that the thing providing much-needed symbolic coherence in an increasingly a- or anti-symbolic world cannot be counted on to mean anything for any appreciable length of time? Perhaps more than just providing momentary symbolic coherence, then, the consumption of memes and meme content should be recognized as a technology of the contemporary self, a vernacular strategy of self-management.<sup>6</sup>

That is, memes allow for the management of a feeling of encroaching incoherence predicated not just on the mountains of content and inhuman speeds of internet life but also, and more troublingly, on the definitional instability of memes themselves as one of the only forms providing digitally native stability for the experience of internet-saturated existence. Memes keep collecting and dissipating, like so much gross sea foam blowing on the sandy shores of the churning seas of content. Their endless mutations seem to both recognize and participate in an endless circulation of meaning's creation and destruction. In doing so, memes often provide a welcome lifeline to those struggling to find footing or just dog-paddle in the oceans of data composing the twenty-first-century world.<sup>7</sup> So if memes are the cure of depression, then perhaps they are so in the way that candy might be the cure of hunger. And to be clear, I am not hating on memes or the people who love them. My suggestion is that our engagement with memes is more like the way Lauren Berlant talks about eating potato chips or "food that is not for thought."<sup>8</sup> Like eating chips and snacks and sweets, enjoying memes is perhaps mainly a form of "lateral agency," that is, a "form of ballast against wearing out" more than part of a plan to move forward.<sup>9</sup> Forms of lateral agency have value in themselves. But they may also remain difficult to theorize because they do not happily buoy widespread fantasies of aesthetic experience as liberating or even as ideologically reliable.

By this point I hope that this short consideration of "Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing" as a meme has begun to not only articulate something substantial about the importance of aesthetic form to grasping the relation between memes and depression. I hope it also says something about the broader field of "meme aesthetics," the subject of this special issue. To close, I would like to leave you with a brief sketch of a spectrum of meme aesthetics: at one pole are individual vernacular memes, e.g., the Distracted Boyfriend and the like; at the other are recognized artistic works engaging memes in some fashion. These would include Patricia Lockwood's 2021 novel *No One Is Talking About This* and the 2023 feature-length movie *Dream Scenario* starring Nicolas Cage. But there would be a broader spectrum of internet native vernacular forms along the same spectrum, too. Close to the Distracted Boyfriend meme but reaching out toward *Dream Scenario* might be the meme compilation videos mentioned above, which do some sort of extra interpretive work by putting a collection of memes together. Much farther along the spectrum would be internet-native or internet-adjacent aesthetic works, things like the early 2000s digital videos of the artist collective Paper Rad, or several movies and shows appearing on Cartoon Network, such as *Too Many Cooks*. Between compilation videos and Paper Rad, or between YouTube and something that might appear at MoMA, would be other compilation works with an interpretive edge, such as those by internet gadfly Vic

Berger or the internet-born but print-published comics of Allie Brosh. I suspect vaporwave and Macintosh Plus would exist somewhere in this murky middle phase of the meme aesthetic spectrum. The promise of these not-quite-art but also not-quite-vernacular works is that they express something about the nature of memes while also thinking through form in ways that individual memes simply cannot. Most importantly, these art-vernacular hybrids don't die, at least not as quickly as a typical meme. Instead, they allow us to hold onto an important experience of meaninglessness, one that sometimes might funnel into depressive experience but mostly just scaffolds a tenuous relationship to it. Perhaps here we might learn more about the "cure of depression."

## Notes

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1. See Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); and Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).
2. See entry for "Vaporwave," and the subentry on *Floral Shoppe*, on KnowYourMeme.com. Last accessed June 2024.
3. On vaporwave, I recommend watching any of several short video essays on its history and subgenres readily available on YouTube (one example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SP4b3sZxjc8>). In scholarship, see Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (Washington, 2016); and Ross Cole, "Vaporwave aesthetics: Internet Nostalgia and the Utopian Impulse," *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 2 (May 2020): 297–326.
4. On the difficulty of defining depression, see Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC, 2012); Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age* (Montreal and Kingston, 2010); and Junko Kitanaka, *Depression in Japan: Psychiatric Cures for a Society in Distress* (Princeton, 2012).
5. See Damon R. Young, "Ironies of Web 2.0," *Post45* 2 (2019).
6. I am thinking here of Michel Foucault's late-career writings on technologies of the self, as well as scholarship in media studies adapting Foucault to think about contemporary technologies. See Damon R. Young, *Century of the Selfie* (manuscript in progress); and Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis, 2016). On new networked genres as provisional strategies of self-management, see James J. Hodge, "Vernaculars," in *A Concise Companion to Visual Culture*, ed. A. Joan Saab, Aubrey Anable, and Catherine Zuromskis (Hoboken, 2021); and James J. Hodge et al., "Touch," *TriQuarterly* (December 2018), <https://www.triquarterly.org/the-latest-word/node/303191>.
7. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC, 2011); and Scott C. Richmond, "Vulgar Boredom, or What Andy Warhol Can Teach Us About *Candy Crush*," *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, no. 1 (2016): 21–39.
8. Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 780.
9. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 116.