The Abstraction of Meaning in the Digital Landscape and the Communities that Form There

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Abstract

Computer-mediated technologies are changing how we communicate; the boundaries between oral, visual, and verbal communication, already difficult to distinguish, has blurred, becoming a construction with its own grammar and diction. One such visual/verbal-mixed unit of communication is the internet meme, an image, text, video, or performance meant to be circulated within digital communities. This open-ended medium begs for rhetorical study in this evolving digital landscape. Preceding scholarship that has blended the field of rhetoric with internet memes has tended to focus on a study of circulation (Mills; Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong; Guadagno, et al.) or the use of specific forms and modes within memes (Huntington; Segev, et al.; Davis, et al.). It seems only recently that an eye has turned towards meme-sharing communities and the larger effects these meme communities have on the internet and non-internet culture altogether (Shifman; Milner; Massanari). This thesis attempts to add to the literature an analysis of specific internet communities' incorporation of ironic, absurd, and surreal elements in their visual rhetoric. Through an analysis of subreddits /r/DankMemes, /r/DeepFriedMemes, and /r/SurrealMemes, I will attempt to answer how these communities make meaning out of digital objects, as well as how they form create and reinforce the boundaries of their communities through interactions with such objects.

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Introduction

When Richard Dawkins first released his pop-science book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, it's not likely he thought its farthest reaching takeaway would be a single word: meme. In its original usage, a "meme" was meant to be understood as a concept of cultural transmission—Dawkins listed songs, ideas, and catch-phrases as examples. More concerned with evolution than with social psychology, he compared memes to genes: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (192). Thirty years later, "meme" has taken on a simultaneously more concrete yet infinitely abstract definition. Nowadays, "meme" is used most frequently in reference to a humorous image that is shared across vast online communities, yet it can be a reference to either a lone image (as in an image that takes on a standard "meme" format) or an iteration of any number of media/performances in our society (those phrases, videos, or acts which spread "virally" and become as culturally recognizable as a celebrity's name and likeness); but the modern meme retains an element of its original definition, for a meme is circulated through the same process of imitation highlighted by Dawkins. Essentially, these internet creations have become units of culture that leap from brain to brain (that is to say, the contemporary concept of a meme is a meme.)

This cultural propagation is not unique to the internet's domain, but in it propagation has thrived. As it does so, it changes and morphs at speeds unknown IRL (internet slang for "in real life.") As internet users share and imitate memes, they change: they are given new characteristics, are incorporated into new contexts, and are appropriated to convey new messages. Often, a meme, and the message associated with it, morphs to become something

nearly unrecognizable or even completely disassociated from the image of its original context. One recent and popular example is that of Pepe the Frog. Pepe was an anthropomorphic frog character that first appeared in a 2005 comic by Matt Furie; the character in the comic was a jovial if innocuous stoner. In 2008, a single comic panel in which Pepe, smiling, says, "Feels good, man," appeared on imageboard community 4chan and was used as a reaction image (Fig. 1).[1] From then, through its height in 2014, and into 2016, iterations of this character made their rounds across numerous internet communities, but remained especially close to 4chan's "random" board, /b/. Popular iterations include "Feels Bad Man" and, particularly, "Smug Frog" (Fig. 1). As Pepe's likeness was imitated, appropriated, and changed, he was no longer associated with Furie's comic at all, but rather became a symbol of the 4chan community, a community that has often maintained a controversial, anonymous membership.[2] It was these anonymous community members who began to feature Pepe as the face of racist, anti-Semitic memes. Why this nonsensical cartoon frog was linked to anti-Semitism one can only guess at, but the consequences of this were felt by the public in 2016 when Pepe the Frog was officially added to the list of hate symbols by the Anti-Defamation League ("Pepe the Frog"). By the time Pepe's name graced the headlines of such news sources as *Vanity Fair* and CNN, the message contained in his image was wildly far removed from the "peaceful cartoon amphibian who represents love, acceptance, and fun" that he began as a decade earlier ("The Truth About Pepe the Frog").

This process of removal, or more rightly pulling away, where a cartoon character who

[1] The "reaction image" refers to a category of memes that, when shared, illustrate the user's supposed reaction to another user's post/comment, frequently in the form of a still image or animated .gif.

[2] For more information concerning 4chan, see Phillips, who gives a detailed account of 4chan's relationship to "trolling," and Stryker, who follows the imageboard's rise to internet infamy.

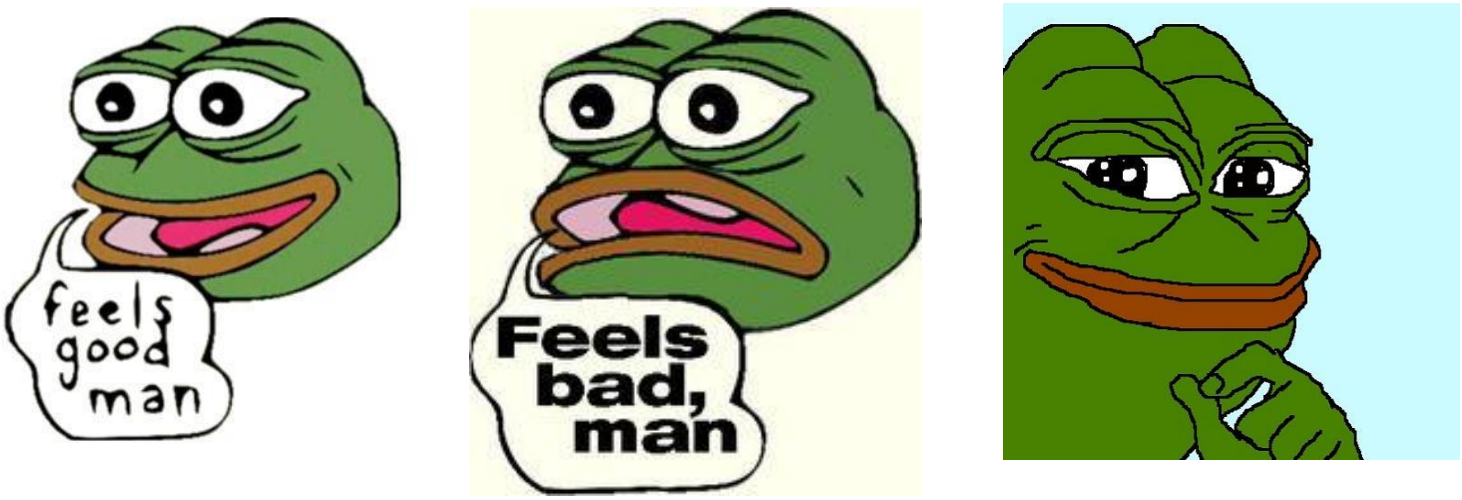


Figure 1: Various Pepe the Frog meme iterations. From left to right: “Feels Good Man,” “Feels Bad Man,” and the ever-popular “Smug Frog.” Taken from Know Your Meme.

was nothing more than a cartoon character became a symbol of hate, is a process I call meme abstraction. This term is a union of multiple definitions made new. Abstract art is a genre in which color, light, and form are used to create a piece that does not necessarily represent the real world (as opposed to the art of realism, where an artist that draws a chair is trying to represent a chair); additionally, abstract language is the language we use to discuss the intangible, like thoughts, ideas, concepts, which are themselves formed from the process of abstract thinking. "Abstraction," then, defines these online images whose representational or referential qualities have been eroded. Pepe the Frog, as it exists now, is an abstraction of its former self, both in its visual representation and in the referential message it carries; the frog's image is no longer a call back to Furie's affable Pepe, but rather 4chan's infamous Pepe, and the two carry drastically different connotations. This is a prime example of the abstraction of meaning, and it is the focus of my study within these pages.

Methods and Terms

I've set out to explore abstracted meaning in the digital landscape of the internet, especially the abstraction seen in image-based memes. "Digital" can be quite a nebulous term. Within this introduction, and further on into the following chapters, "digital" will be used to refer to that which is computer-mediated, a definition I borrow from Denis McQuail's *Mass Communication Theory*. Thus, the digital landscape is a place accessed through the laptops, tablets, and smartphones which have becomes so deeply integrated into our everyday lives. I could've said I was interested in studying "the internet," but that word doesn't quite describe what the internet has become. "The internet" describes a *formless thing*, equal parts arbiter of communication and supplier of entertainment; it's like a well we can give to and take from; to say I'm studying memes on the internet doesn't convey the intent of my research, which I

consider to be a people-, communication- and culture-oriented study. The digital landscape, however, describes a *place*. I'm not the first to use this term, but it's no surprise to me that the term seems to be most popular in the realms of media and marketing, both people-centered fields. In 2015, Lee Rainie used the same wording to discuss Pew Research Center findings about the state of technology and media in a presentation called "The Changing Digital Landscape: Where Things Are Heading." He discovered that an emergence of a new "digital landscape," ordered by social media and prioritizing participation, was changing the media environment and consumer habits of the users who populate this digital space. The internet, once simply a place whose sole purpose was to aid the speed and ease of communication between people separated by distance, is now a physical meeting space, where people form entire relationships and even personhoods that may never be realized IRL. Of course, it's important here, as other scholars have noted, not to make the digital landscape out to be a place utterly and completely separated from our real lives, as if it's a new reality that people transport into (Phillips; Phillips and Milner). Our world, the "real" world, and our personalities are infused in the digital world; behind every screen is a human face, a fact often forgotten when internet inhabitants engage in cyberbullying (which is really just bullying) and acts of trolling—intentionally antagonistic behavior done usually "4 the lulz," or simply for the amusement of the perpetrators.

In this study, I set out to explore the abstraction of meaning in this digital landscape by identifying the abstracted elements of memes found within web communities. Anyone who has operated in a social media community (and indeed many people who haven't) are at least topically familiar with what a meme is: a "virally" reproduced and circulated internet creation. In its most popular form, it is a humorous-in-nature graphic composed of text superimposed on an

image, but Ryan M. Milner notes they also include videos, .gifs, phrases, and even performances (27-28). In the last decade, the meme as we know it became a subject of intense study. Limor Shifman identifies memes (and I follow suit) as "(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by many users" (6). This definition, combined with Milner's above, makes sense when one sees a meme, which have become a strong part of the visual nature of online social activity. It is because of the meme's curious and inescapable visibility in our online culture that scholarship is surrounding it in the fields of communications, new media studies, and visual/digital rhetoric (Limor Shifman's *Memes in Digital Culture* has contributed largely to these fields.) This study concerns itself with memes as representational creations, borrowing much from semiotics (but especially Roland Barthes's concepts of denotation and connotation, to be discussed). I'm not the first to connect the meaning-making with memes; Heidi E. Huntington's examination of metaphor in her featured memes reveals they have the potential to be more than just humorous images—they can indeed be message carriers, for better or worse, with potent purpose hidden under their layers of humor ("Pepper Spray Cop and the American Dream" 91).

In taking on the task of analyzing these visual message carriers, two scholars come immediately to mind. The first is Carole Blair, who in 1999 challenged us to rethink rhetoric as material. Acts of communication, she explains, are enacted simultaneously through their materiality and symbolicity; that is, all communication must take place through a material means (whether the paper we write on, the photograph we display, or the voice through which we speak), and the material carries a symbol, a unit of meaning that exists outside the material vehicle. But, in a close analysis of US memorial sites, Blair argues against thinking of rhetoric,

and the materials they are associated with, as merely symbolic. To account for all the symbols hidden within any communicative act gets us no closer to discovering what truly matters: a rhetorical act's *consequence* (Blair 19; 23). The importance of effect is highlighted again ten years later by Laurie E. Gries, the second of my two scholars. When in 2008 the famous poster for Barack Obama's campaign (*Obama Hope*) began spurring a multitude of creative copies, Gries postulated and perfected a New Materialist approach to rhetoric which "[takes] meaning consequentialism seriously" (334). By tracking the materializations, circulations, and transformations of *Obama Hope*, she was able to see firsthand the consequences the image had upon people, art, and communication acts as a whole, putting into practice with images what Blair had with memorial sites. These scholars' influence, in this study, means an understanding of an image not just as an image in existence now or in the past, but as a future, always-in-existence image that shares its "eventfulness" with people and places in contextualized moments of time (Gries 337-338). Goals which naturally flow from a New Materialist perspective include: to "(a) follow the multiple transformations that an image undergoes during circulation, and (b) identify the complex consequentiality that emerges from its divergent encounters" (Gries 337). In a more pragmatic sense, I follow Gries' advice on tracking past and present versions of images using in-community, crowd-sourced databases and forums while also getting creative with screenshots and digital notetaking. In the following chapters, I will study not only what a meme is and what it means, but what it *does*.

Tracking the distribution of one type of creation, the *Obama Hope* image, allowed Gries to realize the diverse, far-reaching possibilities of eventfulness, and my tracking a handful of digital communities' meme activity seeks to create similar insight. Therefore, the bulk of my

analysis will draw on memes taken from the social forum site Reddit.[3] On this website, any individual who has created an account can go on to create a "subreddit," or smaller niche community. Subreddit topics can be broad, like /r/Videos, where users upload noteworthy, humorous, or informative videos of all sorts, or they can be ridiculously specific, like /r/PixarMovieDetails, where users share surprising hidden details they've discovered in *Pixar* films. The ones I've selected (/r/DankMemes, /r/DeepFriedMemes, and /r/SurrealMemes, to be discussed) exist primarily to create, view, and circulate memes. Reddit communities have the advantage of being confined units, individual from one another, almost always constrained in the form of content rules which are (generally) enforced; these facts make them easier to explore and study, as I can track creation dates, activity logs, and user interactions. I have catalogued memes from a specific moment in time, mainly across the years of 2014 to the beginning of 2018. So although I am restrained in my attention to a specific digital location, in a specific moment of time, within specific digital communities, it is my hope that this study accurately reflects the phenomenon of abstraction which occurs therein.

"This is the Future that Liberals Want"

The "Future that Liberals Want" meme was started on March 1st, 2017, when the Twitter user @polNewsNetwork1 (a reference to the 4chan politics page "/pol/") tweeted a copy of a photograph that depicted a woman in Islamic modesty garb sitting next to a drag queen riding the New York City public subway, attached to the caption, "This is the future that liberals want" (Fig. 2) (Reinstein). In its first iteration, the image was, to its creator, an illustration of a poisonous progressive culture. The two people symbolized everything the "alt-right" news

[3] For a more in-depth and, frankly, better description of Reddit, its unique inner workings, and the communities that exist there, see Adrienne L. Massanari's *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit*.

network was against in US politics (the niqab-wearing woman representing what they saw as Islamic extremism and the made-up drag queen representing nonconforming gender-bending). Within hours, the tweet became a circulated meme, especially by those on the political left, who were quick to point out what they saw as the triviality of the original tweet's fear. To poke fun at the ridiculousness of the original caption, the words were repeated but paired with humorous images.

This was the beginning of the Future that Liberals Want image spinning outside its intended meaning. One of the earliest and most popular extrapolations came in the form of an image of a team of costumed people on a subway (Fig. 2). Twitter blogger @SFtheWolf shared this image of costumed roleplayers (or "cosplayers") riding a subway train paired with the same caption as the original /pol/ message, with, of course, the ironic intention of pointing out the ridiculousness of /pol/'s fears (Satans Little Helper). The first iteration of the meme shows cosplayers dressed as Power Rangers, popular children's TV show characters in both Japan and America. The irony of this image is, of course, that these figures are colorful, oddly dressed individuals riding the subway, implying that this harmlessness is "what liberals want." It takes place within the same context as the original Future that Liberals Want, twisting the participants just outside of the norm enough to point out the ridiculousness of the original meme's supposed insinuation.

An intensified pulling-away began with the Future that Liberals Want meme after its circulation caught on and became mainstream. The meme was circulating mainly on Twitter, as the message was blogged and re-blogged, the same caption always paired with a new, more ridiculous image. A few early iterations of the meme seemed to stay within a more realistic situation—two or more dissimilar subjects interacting in a friendly manner, always on a subway.



Figure 2: Renditions of the Future that Liberals Want meme. From top left to bottom right: the original image, an ironic version, an absurdist version, and a surreal version. Taken from Buzzfeed.

More ironic iterations began to place increasingly dissimilar characters together. And then the irony spun further away from its origins: the caption began to be paired with images that simply showed odd, unlikely realities. One such iteration paired the caption with an image of Chihuahuas riding in a kid's supermarket cart (Fig. 2). If irony is the first step away from a message's intended meaning (intentionally flopping the message on its head to point out a flaw or inconsistency) then absurdity begins when the inverted message is intensified beyond its understandable range. The Chihuahuas in the cart iteration of the meme shows a situation that is absurd—one step further in the abstraction process.

The last step of abstraction I'll explore is that which enters the realms of surrealism. At its core, surrealism is intentionally irrational, nonsensical juxtaposition with special attention to the possible symbolic elements of those juxtapositions. As an art form, it began and had its chief popularity during the 1920s, having grown out of the disenchanted Dadaism of a post-WWI world. As the Future that Liberals Want meme journeyed down its path of abstraction through circulation, eventually it reached a point where the images paired with the caption ceased to make sense at all, and were only calling back to their predecessors by repeating the original caption. One such iteration paired the caption with an image that was completely nonsensical, showing an army of tabby cats in sunglasses riding mustard-glazed hotdogs through space (Fig. 2). Yes, even typing that out is ridiculous. In distinguishing surreality from absurdity, my argument rests on the layers of referential material that the meme sits upon (or, in the case of the Future that Liberals Want meme, how close in meaning its conveyed message is to the conveyed message of its referent). Although there are reasons to argue that surrealism isn't the most removed from literal meaning one can get, I choose to leave my analysis here because I think surrealism is a broad enough term to encompass the farthest regions of abstraction that I, as a

researcher, can uncover within the limits of this study. (After all, I have my own sanity to consider.)

The Abstraction of Meaning in the Digital Landscape

The Future that Liberals Want meme is just a small demonstration of the abstraction that will be further explored in this work, which will be organized in a similar pattern of exploration and analysis (that is, from the world of irony, into absurdity, and finally into surrealism.) Chapter One, The Internet's *Eiron*, will handle the category of ironic memes, the first stage of meme abstraction. The community of /r/DankMemes will be analyzed as a gathering site for such ironic creations. Chapter Two, The Absurdists' Play will tackle what I will reveal as absurdist memes, particularly those found in the community of /r/DeepFriedMemes. And, lastly, Chapter Three, In the Wake of (Sur)Reality, explores the community of /r/SurrealMemes and the surrealist memes found therein. My focus on community and communication reflects my scholarly background as a student of rhetoric and writing; regardless, I think a focus on the situation and context of these memes is paramount to the understanding of how and why these memes come to be. The digital landscape is a strange place, indeed, but it is my hope that this study brings some sense to the senselessness.

The Future that Liberals Want in particular was a fleeting, short-lived fad, having been popular for just under a month; no more iterations are being produced, and I strongly suspect a Twitter user would be unaware of the reference if a new meme cropped up now, just a year later. Memes frequently have a way of coming and going, of being quintessentially temporal, which is one of the reasons I think they need to be studied and catalogued. There's no telling which memes will be remembered by future generations—will even Pepe the Frog fade into obscurity?—or if memes altogether, which seem so impossible to extract from our participatory

internet, will be considered something of a product of their time, like bell bottoms or poodle skirts—or if memes will become so linked to our way of living that they become staples which are handed down from generation to generation, as parents teach their children nursery rhymes that were told to them when young. Either way, this rise and proliferation of the abstract meme seems necessary to document. And, with that, I invite you to read forward and travel with me from the mainstream, the shallower, maneuverable digital shoreline, into the darker, stranger depths of the digital landscape, where meaning distances from recognition.

Chapter One: The Internet's *Eiron*

Like humor, the human capacity for irony seems to be one of the few characteristics that truly separates us from animals. To know even a fraction of how far back humanity's experience with this strange type of insincerity stretches, one simply has to look at the etymology of the word "irony," which stems from the ancient Greek *Eiron*, the name for an archetypal figure in many Greek comedies. *Eiron* characters (generalized as *eironeia*) were clever underdogs, the sort of characters that would win over their opponents using a unique form of wit ("Irony"). *Eiron*'s opponent typically came in the form of the *Alazon* character (generalized to *alazoneia*), prideful imposters who were constantly pretending to be something they were not by exaggerating their faculties or abilities beyond the limits of truth; thus, the patterned response for the *eirons* was to knowingly *understate* their own abilities in order to outwit their *alazons.* This particular type of understatement would come to be so associated with *Eiron*'s name that 20th century literary theorist Northrop Frye, in his essays on the *Anatomy of Criticism*, would use the same name to categorize dramatic and comedic archetypes throughout history. For Frye, *eironeia* makes itself known by making itself go unnoticed. The *eironeia* he depicts is in the form of dramatic protagonists that take on neutral, unformed, or withdrawn positions in their respective plays, moving the action of the plot forward by choosing inaction, or else indirect involvement (172-175). This is *eironeia* in its essence, and the basis for our word, irony: the indirect directness, a subtle masking of one's intentions. Another way to put it: *eironeia* is insincerity with intent, purposeful display of one message when another, unstated message is the truth. Everyday communication is rife with *eiron*-ic performance, and because memes are an outlet for digital communication, they too become an extension of humanity's ironic capacity—and meme creators their performers.

The Doge's Bite

If I were to take a survey across the nation asking young adult internet users (let's say, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five) what image came to mind at the mention of the word "doge" (commonly pronounced "DOHZH"), I'd put money on the fact that the majority would point to a particular image of a Shiba Inu (Fig. 3). Although the word "doge" as a reference to dogs has been in use as early as 2005, this Shiba Inu is beyond a doubt the titular Doge character ("Doge"). How this came to be can most accurately be described as a meeting of coincidences: the original image was uploaded by a Japanese photographer to her personal site in 2010, while concurrently the word "doge," as slang for "dog," began to catch on in popularity on various subreddits and 4chan boards; the two collided in 2013 when a captioned image of the Shiba hit a chord that resounded with likes, shares, imitations, and modifications across the internet (Fig. 3). This particular iteration plays off an "interior monologuing" category of memes, where an image will be paired with captions that supposedly reveal how the photographed figure(s) think or feel about their current situation. This meme went viral—that is, it spread through the digital landscape's population like an infectious virus. MTV named the Doge as #12 on its "50 Things Pop Culture Had Us Giving Thanks for This Year," and *Wired* named it #1 on their own end-of-the-year top 10 countdown ("50 Things"; Watercutter). These intensely popular Doge memes became icons of internet culture, spawning cellphone cases, t-shirts, and even becoming the namesake for a type of digital currency (*Dogecoin*).

Its memetic spread meant it quickly became part of the public internet domain from which many memers select content for their own repurposed creations. Although this one image of the Doge became the iconic image that would be represented in all corners of the internet, Shiba Inus themselves were adopted for use in memes; sometimes the meme rested on just the

reference to the Doge for its comedic effect, and other times the Doge was incorporated in a way to mock other pop culture figures (Fig. 3). In one imitation of the Doge meme, "hipsters" are the butt of the joke (Fig. 3). The "hipster" figure is a trope that is often made fun of for the supposed insistence on being original, unique, or independent. The classic stereotype is a twenty-something man or woman, in glasses and a fashionable but tousled clothing. In this meme, a Shiba is pictured in a stylish scarf and is surrounded by captions such as "no filtr" and "so hip." Captions such as "no filtr" mock the selfie-taking style experts of such photography-based mobile apps as Instagram (where digital filters are commonly used to correct a photograph's color and saturation) while captions "so vintage" and "indie lvl=100" mock the popular hipster stereotype of being overly concerned with authenticity. As you can see, the displayed, overt message in the Hipster Doge meme is that the doge is trendy and savvy; but the implied message is one of biting mockery. This is just one sample of the quintessential *ironic meme*, a category of meme that, as it turns out, is one of the most popular across the digital landscape's social media outlets (and Nueangjamnong).

The ironic meme can most be recognized by its double-entendre, its housing of two messages which are opposed in meaning to one another. The Hipster Doge, for example, says one thing while it means another. I distinguish these two as, firstly, the *denotative message*, or the literal face-value message, and, secondly, as the *connotative message*, or the unstated, almost-imperceptible message that is being implied beneath the surface or between the lines, so to speak. Denotative and connotative dualities are established in the field of semiotics, from which I borrow the terms, mentioned in Peirce as well as Barthes, among others. For many memes, the denotative message is the same as the connotative message. Figure 3's meme is simply the Doge becoming the mascot for the ShamWow! cloth, because the Doge character









Figure 3: Top, the original image of the Shiba Inu and, on the left, the original meme. Right, the Doge meme satirizing the infomercial for a ShamWow towel; bottom, an ironic iteration of the Doge meme, mocking the hipster stereotypes. Taken from Know Your Meme.

often accompanies the interjection, "wow"; there is no subtle, hidden message to such a meme, only humorous oddness. This is not the case for the ironic meme, where *eironeia* enters the picture, shaping denotation and connotation so they take on contradictory messages. Such is the nature of the ironic meme because such is the nature of irony, a concept most speakers are familiar with.

Salvatore Attardo notes in his comprehensive study of irony markers that, in person, irony can be marked and understood by any combination of phonological means (such as nasalization, changes in intonation, or exaggerated stresses), morphological means (marked by phrases such as "if you know what I mean"), kinesic markers (like a wink or a nudge), or by incongruous cotext signals (as when one exclaims, "What a beautiful day!" when it is raining outside) (7-9). Most often it is these paralinguistic irony markers that we recognize. So then what happens when such markers are removed, as with digitally-mediated communication and image-based memes, such as the Hipster Doge above? In speaking ironically, the speaker may imply her subversive ironical stance by using a deadpan tone, or a skeptical physical expression of the face or body, or her irony may be obvious given her surroundings. Yet remove a phrase from all of those indicators and it becomes simply its literal meaning. Ironic memes, lacking these paralinguistic markers, depend on various methods to portray their insincere stance. In the ironic Doge meme, the misspelled, mismatched fonts serve to signal the irony of the meme's creator through being intentionally "wrong"—they, essentially, provide the same incongruous cotext clues that can be available through in-person communication; the audience sees the denotative, intentionally ugly message (i.e., this hipster character is "so hip") but is aware that it is being subverted by the opposite, connotative, mocking message (i.e., this hipster character is ignorant of how un-hip he actually appears.)

The misspelling, the intentionally mismatched fonts—these are hallmarks of the Internet Ugly Aesthetic, an aesthetic that Nick Douglas describes as "the core aesthetic of memetic internet content," and which correspond to memes whose sole purpose is to carry an ironic message (315). Rarely does one come across an ironic meme that isn't carrying at least something intentionally "ugly" about it, whether that ugliness comes in the form of the traits listed above or in other ugly makings, such as a poorly-cropped image cut-and-pasted over another image, a leftover watermark on a stock photo, or blocky, pixelated mouse-drawn manipulations. But to what purpose? When the spread of technology has made it so that a large portion of the meme culture's audience has access to tools that can allow them to create at least mildly-sophisticated digital work, why deliberately choose to make a creation ugly? The very nature of such an action is ironic, for its denotative ugliness reveals layers of connotations. Douglas observes that the use of the aesthetic "telegraphs the practitioner's casualness, capacity for irony, and internet savvy" (336). So it seems the ironic meme's creator is actually performing as the *eiron* of the digital landscape—cleverly understating her abilities while attempting to signal her strengths to her fellow memers. These *eirons* of the internet exist around every corner, from Facebook, where overtly ironic memes make up the majority of memes shared on the social media site, to smaller communities whose sole purpose is the creation and spread of ironic memes (Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong). Such communities can be exemplified by one small, but growing subreddit: the community of /r/DankMemes.

Enter the Dank Meme

In the same year the Doge meme rose in popularity, 2013, Youtube user "fennthulhu" posted a video to YouTube titled "how 2 make dank memes!" In this two-minute video, a man shows his audience how to create a meme using the online meme generator tool Quickmeme

(Fig. 4). Although this is not the first instance of the word "dank" being used to describe a meme, it is one of the earliest examples. The Success Kid meme that the narrator refers to as "dank" is a meme that entered the mainstream and grew to be widely popular in the years before the video was made, much like the Doge; Success Kid features an infant whose expression seems to be triumphant; by this point in time, however, the Success Kid meme was already on the decline as far as usage goes, making it passé, so to speak ("Success Kid / I Hate Sandcastles"). By using the meme here, the narrator is being ironic, trying to appear naïve of the meme's tiredness, thus appearing unaware or ignorant of current trends. Following the format of an instructional video, the narrator begins by telling his audience, "Every meme you're ever going to make, *ever*, is going to have to start with the word 'le'"; this is, again, an older meme whereby users would place the French article "le" in nonsensical places. By 2013, it had far lost its novelty and had acquired "pretentiousness" ("le"). The narrator's hyperbolic insistence signals his ironic stance. He then instructs his audience to follow "le" with their "favorite profane little vulgar word" in order to appear "edgy" (a word that typically means "innovative" but in this case, and many others, is used ironically.) Because they, the audience, are "going to want to be as edgy as [they] can," this phrase is then followed with "something… that usually people would be offended by." These instructions lead the narrator to create an absurd Success Kid meme that has the text "LE FUCK DEAD PEOPLE" imposed across the top half of the image (Fig. 4). The purpose of the video seems to be an attempt to mock those who are earnestly ignorant of both meme trends and meme culture. Vulgar, dark, absurdist humor became the primary theme of what would come to be the Dank Meme subreddit, created in 2014.

"Dank" is a word used originally by the stoner community to define above-average or fresh marijuana but was appropriated ironically to refer to a category of memes which are not

"fresh" but rather "stale," like the "le" and "Success Kid" memes incorporated in the video above. According to the meme encyclopedia "Know Your Memes," these memes "describe online viral media and in-jokes that are intentionally bizarre or have exhausted their comedic value to the point of being trite or cliché" ("Dank Memes"). Thus, the Dank Meme subreddit exists primarily to take the memes of the mainstream that have overstayed their welcome, memes which they consider to be uncool, and incorporate them into their own creations in a way that is meant to subvert their popularity. Frequently, this is done with scathing undertones, perhaps because /r/DankMemes is an online subculture comprised, for the most part, of what online communities call "trolls," or intentionally antagonistic internet users, whose point and purpose is to mock, satirize, and subvert the mainstream "normie" meme culture. "Normies" in this sense is a pejorative used by web subcultures, especially 4chan and certain corners of Reddit; as an adjective, it describes that which is mainstream, conventional, everyday, or ordinary; as a noun, it denotes anyone whom they deem to be outside of the community—in other words, outsiders. Much like the *eiron* wears a mask of humility, dank memes wear the mask of mainstream

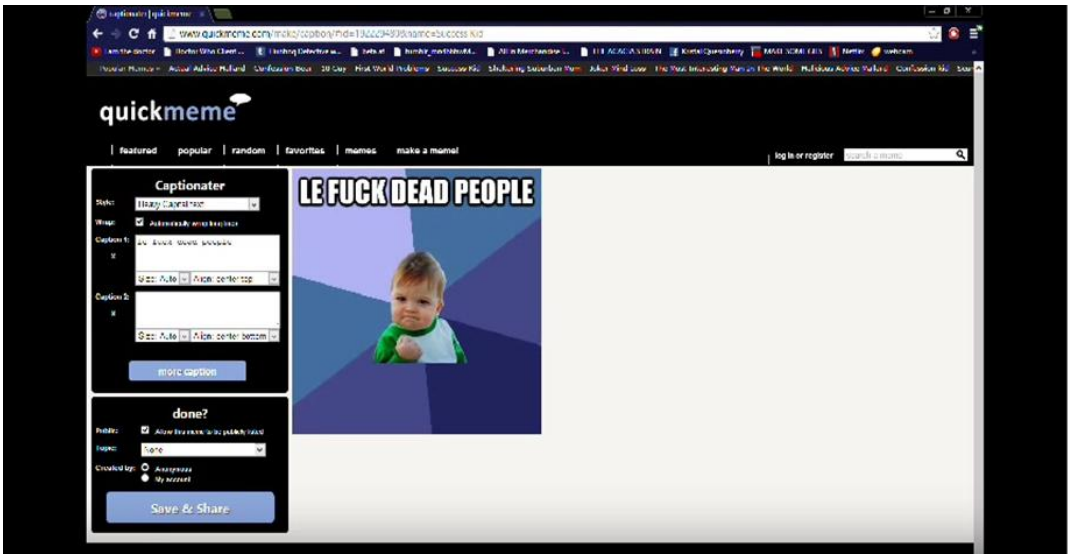


Figure 4: Screenshot of the "how 2 make dank memes!!!" video; taken from YouTube.

culture. They do this by taking on the persona of the memes of the mainstream (like the Doge meme discussed earlier, memes which are shared widely and popularly across social media platforms) and twisting the original message in order to ridicule those who would share such memes sincerely.

Take, for instance, the meme of Figure 5, which plays off of multiple overused or popular memes in order to put together a heavily ironic image. In fact, the overloading of memes is intentional, as it is another sign of mocking amateurish behavior. This pastiche of memes in particular rides on the popularity of the Doge meme, while also playing on a common meme of internet conspiracy theorists who believe an all-powerful, malicious "Illuminati" is secretly running government institutions for nefarious purposes ("The Illuminati"). This meme makes the Doge, a typically innocent character, into a hyper-violent symbol by adding in the assault weapon, which plays into the nefariousness of the "Illuminati," whom this meme assumes is working covertly with the Doge. The violence, the sarcastic undertone, the overtly photoshopped layout, and the obnoxiously stylized text are all common motifs of dank memes; another aspect of their distinctiveness from the mainstream meme is the dank meme's appropriation and use of



Figure 5: A "dank" Doge meme. Taken from /r/DankMemes.

other memes. Appropriation is not something unique to dank memes, but is rather a partial requirement of anyone hoping to engage in meme culture at large; copying, cutting, and pasting elements of other memes into one's own creations is necessary for memetic participation (Shifman 72). But memes tend to do this in order to play inside meme culture, imitating other memes with the intention of creating another iteration of the same meme—they become part of the meme, not separate from it. Figure 3's Doge memes use the Doge's likeness as a sort of springboard, interacting with the Doge in a playful, sincere manner. Dank memes, however, more frequently appropriate the popular not to engage with it but rather to satirize it. Like the Hipster Doge meme has done with the traditional Doge meme, dank memes wear the system they mimic in order to mock it, using heavy-irony as their weapon of choice. This is what distinguishes them from other meme communities.

According to their own webpage, "/r/DankMemes is the #1 source for new and popular memes on the web." "Users like you," they say, "provide all of the content and decide, through voting, what's dank and what's stank" ("Wiki Index"). Their self-labeling as the place for "new and popular memes" is as sarcastic as their use of "dank" and "stank." Their penchant for irony is immediately apparent the moment one steps onto their page; /r/DankMemes uses a busy, contrast-heavy theme, supposedly with the intention of appearing "edgy" or socially adept; text frequently glows with neon rainbow color-changing backgrounds and images of marijuana plants appear as backgrounds and icons (Fig. 6). This format, of course, is ironic bordering on the edge of absurd, intentionally and conspicuously "ugly," an obvious callback to the Internet Ugly Aesthetic. Memes made in this community are frequently rendered with outdated, unpleasing font (such as comic sans), stock photos that retain their watermark, and distorted or poorly-formatted images (Fig. 5; Fig. 7). The ugly aesthetic that dank meme creators often make use of

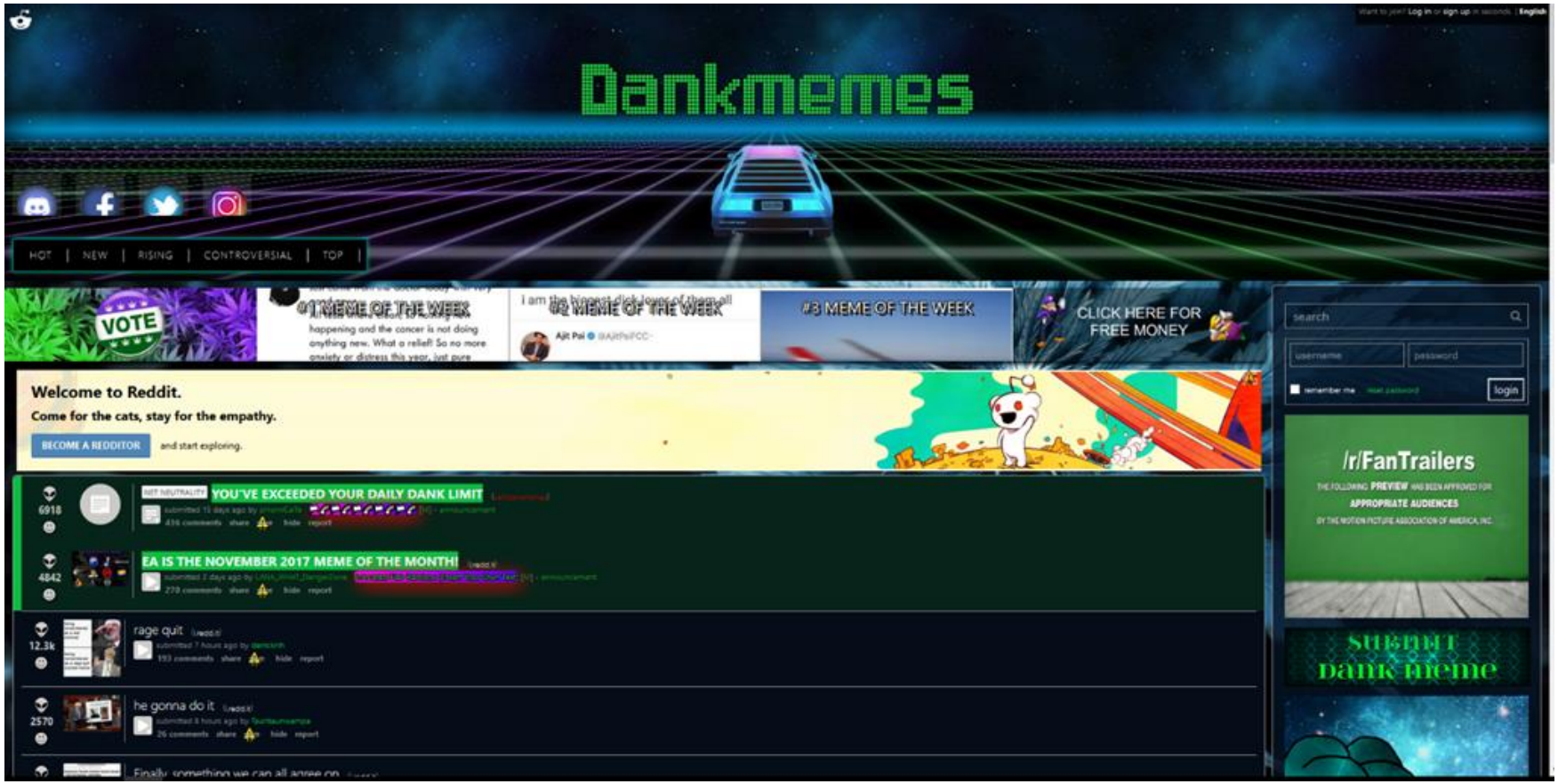


Figure 6: The /r/DankMemes homepage; taken from /r/DankMemes.

does the same work of "telegraphing" their savvy and knowledge, but especially their capacity for irony, a foremost concern of the average dank memer (Douglas 336); in other words, by showing that they know what is most distinctly *not* cool, and by demonstrating their ability to mock it, they are portraying themselves as in fact quite knowledgeable about meme culture. This has the secondary purpose of confirming their membership in the community, especially if the memes they create get "upvoted," or given prestige.

The ironic nature of the dank memes seen thus far lies mainly in the meme's ability to subvert common expectations, appropriate and turn over what is accepted, in order to produce satirical creations whose purposes seem to be nothing more than to deride and trivialize that which the normies find repulsive or unacceptable. It is this secondary motive that leads the dank meme into dark arenas, where common themes include references to rape, pedophilia, suicide (as seen in Figure 7), offensive racial stereotypes, homophobia, and other types of humor that go beyond what could simply be called "off-color." Not all dank memes take on these themes, but it is the dank meme genre in particular which seems to allow and even encourage the creation of such images. Regrettably popular is the mockery of African Americans. Since 2014, African American professional boxer Floyd Mayweather has been the subject of ridicule due to accounts of poor reading ability, which was accompanied by a flood of unabashedly racist memes mocking him. These memes were not exclusive to /r/DankMemes, and altogether they did not achieve any amount of mainstream success; however, when the boxer defeated the Irish MMA fighter Conor McGregor in 2017, the meme seen in Figure 8 showed up on /r/DankMemes. As of December, 2017, this is the second most popular meme (yes, of all time) on the Dank Meme subreddit, with 61.2 thousand upvotes. Not only does this meme stand on unfounded allegations about the fairness of Mayweather and McGregor's match, but, because literacy "still is and has

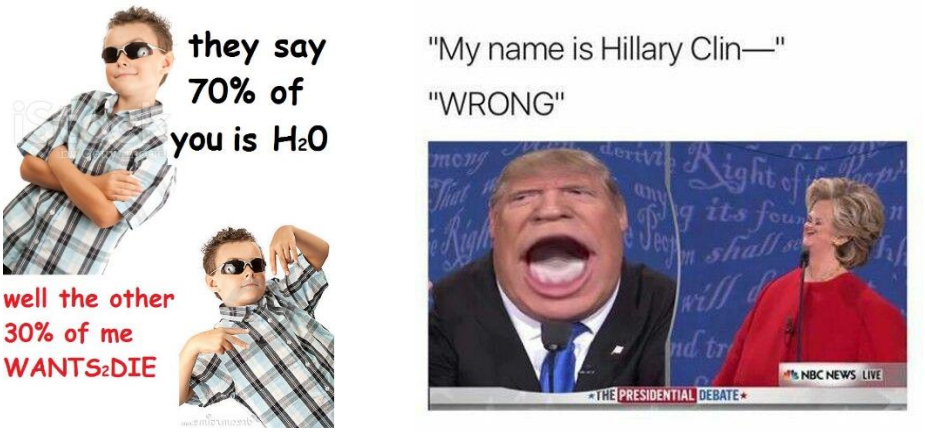


Figure 7: Left, a darkly ironic dank meme, taken from Know Your Meme; right, a dank meme featuring an intentionally distorted image, taken from quotesnhumor.com.

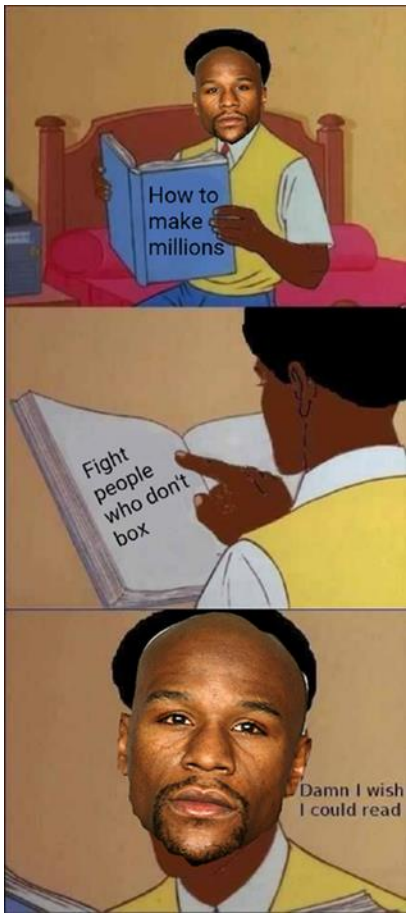


Figure 8: An example of racism in Dank Memes, taken from /r/DankMemes.

historically been a weapon of the elite," the meme and its message are drenched in racism (Madu). Yet it succeeded in finding an audience on this subreddit.

To take these memes at face value reveals troubling belief systems, systems which have not gone unnoticed by other Reddit communities. Posts on other subreddits such as the popular /r/TheoryofReddit page ask, "Since when has /r/dankmemes become a racist sort of alt-right meme page?" and "Is it me or is /r/dankmemes have become [sic] really racist?" ("Wiki Index") Clearly, /r/DankMemes is not known for being pleasant much less politically correct, and with the Mayweather meme shown above it's no wonder. These memes are dark and offensive in nature, as are many of its stripes. But, as the analysis of the /r/DankMeme page reveals, they are supposed to be intrinsically *ironic*. That complicates things. It is impossible to truly tell what the creators of these memes meant when they shared their creations. Some dank memers might be simply following in fennthulhu's footsteps to be "as edgy as you can" by being offensive, with no intention for their memes to be seen by people outside their communities; some others still might reveal truly problematic belief systems. Yet, if the Dank Meme subreddit is a place for members to revel in waves of irony, then we must at least consider the interpretation of these memes as ironic in purpose and message—which, of course, means the face value, denotative message of racism and sexism *is not* the meme's sincere connotative message, but rather another part of the community's ironic interaction.

***Eironeia*'s Purpose**

The unfortunate reality of /r/DankMemes is that the line between subversive and sincere can be hazy at best—this is often what comes with comedy that obscures itself with darker shades of irony. It is purported that Johnathan Swift's satire *A Modest Proposal* was met with disgust by his contemporaries, who thought he was literally calling the public to begin eating

their children; clearly, it is possible for an audience to miss an ironic message—but that's not supposed to be the goal of irony. Haverkate's analysis of verbal irony implies that an ironic speech act relies on its overt and *recognizable* insincerity in order to succeed (106). Yet (to most of the users in Reddit's corner of the digital landscape, anyway), their ironic message has failed to transmit. If this is the case, then what does this community hope to accomplish by their subverting of the mainstream through their use of irony? Is it simply a desire to be subversive, as Huntington suggests, that memes might function as subversive communication simply by "[responding] to dominant communication structures in unexpected ways" ("Subversive Memes")? Or could it be simpler than even the desire to troll? In some cases, yes, but a deeper look at the hidden agendas of ironic performance provides other insights.

Attardo, whom I have quoted before, has done much in-depth study concerning the usage and practice of irony, and has found irony to have multiple purposes when it is used by speakers. One of the more common uses of irony is simply that an ironic utterance allows a speaker to save face by understating something that would otherwise be an overly harsh criticism; when the speaker expresses an opinion in a passive fashion, he has a better chance of thwarting criticism (13). Imagine a couple readying for a night out, and the man asks his partner, "Do I look ok?" to which the partner replies, "You look terrible." The ironic reply's connotative message is that his partner does not look terrible, but it doesn't clarify whether the first speaker looks attractive; this gives the replying partner the ability to avoid stating his truer, but potentially more hurtful opinion. In the dank meme community, this function of irony is absent, precisely because the opposite is happening. Refer again to Figure 8: the denotative message is already biting, harsh, and offensive, so this community clearly shows no want of avoiding the internet's ire. Conversely, the use of irony allows the meme creators to perform detachment and superiority, a

sort of aloof indifference which then permits the creation of the over-the-top, dark satire of the memes they present. Irony's component of performance and its use can also mean being perceived as humorous and therefore more intelligent or sophisticated (12-13). All of these characteristics that irony underscores can be summed up into one attribute: cool.

"Cool" is a uniquely American concept, a word derived from jive, a pattern of speech that began with the black jazz musicians of the post-WWI era. It meant then what it means now: not only a detachment from but also an unspoken defiance of the mainstream culture—which is ironic in and of itself, considering that, like the music of this attitude and its accompanying style of dance, cool was soon appropriated by white subcultures, which helped it along to being appropriate by the white mainstream, especially youth culture. Cultural characters began to exhibit coolness, from Fitzgerald's secretive Gatsby to Bogart's shadowy film noir protagonists; it invaded art, with poets, writers, and artists such as Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Warhol all but mascots of American cool (Nancarrow 132-134). It's no surprise that this association mirrored the rise of postmodernism, as its popular tenants parallel the creed of cool: an inherent distrust of power structures, systems, and establishments that is juxtaposed by a withdrawn sort of ennui. The height of this feeling came in the 1990s and was documented in David Foster Wallace's seminal essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U. S. Fiction," which describes in detail a grim youth culture ruled by nihilistic, indifferent postmodernism:

> "Indifference is actually just the contemporary version of frugality, for U.S. young people…. In the same regard, see that in 1990, flatness, numbness, and cynicism in one's demeanor are clear ways to transmit the televisual attitude of stand-out transcendence - flatness is a transcendence of melodrama, numbness transcends sentimentality, and cynicism announces that one knows the score, was last naive about something at maybe

like age four." (181)

Although Wallace was discussing television's effect on youth culture, a culture which then turned to irony as "a sort of existential poker-face," many connections can be drawn to the modern-day ironic memer (183).

The dank memer, for example, may or may not believe African Americans are inferior to white Americans, but by posting a meme similar to the one seen in Figure 8, he is able to signal his cool, his complete indifference to the overtly offensive message. The underlying, hidden message is not, "Black people can't read," but rather, "It doesn't matter whether they can or cannot; I don't care either way." The *purpose*, then, of this meme's darkly ironic performance is a performance of amoral apathy, which (un-)coincidentally ties back to our study of *eironeia*. Another model of the *eiron* noted by Frye is the amoral pragmatist, which is exactly what we see exhibited here; this pragmatist sees a world lacking in any reason or morality (226). These eirons have a "distrust of the ability of anyone's reason, including their own, to transform society into a better structure," which again marks the sort of disinterested removal from society that Wallace warned would come of the postmodern ironic youth (Frye 232). Transmitting such a dark message might be closer to the goals of the dank meme community than the desire to be aggressive, but the question remains: to whom are they transmitting? It has already been shown that this community's message gets mistranslated across subreddit lines. But this discrepancy does not call into question the community's ironic stance—it confirms one fact: those who do not understand the irony are not meant to. The transmission of cool is made *by* /r/DankMemes *for* /r/DankMemes, and serves the purpose of reinforcing the distinction between the insiders and outsiders of the community.

Not always irony's most obvious or exploited quality, irony nevertheless can be used to

facilitate group affiliation among people. In this case, the speaker issues an ironic utterance which "builds in-group solidarity through shared play" (Attardo 11-12). By understanding the irony, the receiver of the utterance acknowledges "you and I are the same" (12). With this knowledge, we can return to Haverkate's insistence that the irony must be recognizable to succeed and we can say that the ironic message is meant to be something of a test: if a viewer shows that she doesn't "get" the joke, or takes offense to the message, then she is revealing herself as an outsider. This aspect of group play and communal affiliation is, I believe, at the heart of the dank meme subreddit—by engaging in the offensive humor of the forum, ironic users are given the chance to function as community members; if they want to portray themselves as savvy they must imitate the ironic performance as well as the apathetic, disinterested coolness that accompanies it. As with coolness, community membership is not "something you can set out to acquire; it is something that is acknowledge in you by others" (Nancarrow 135). And in order to gain that acknowledgement, a memer must not only participate in ironic performance in his creation and propagation of dank memes, he must participate in the boundary-marking of community borders and behavior policing of fellow community memers.

Boundary-marking and behavior policing are social tools unsurprisingly just as present in the digital landscape as they are in the real world. In the Dank Meme subreddit and beyond, memers "demarcate the boundaries of their virtual community by employing the performance of a virtual identity that is highly skilled both at using [community-specific] cultural references and at outing others who fail to employ this identity" (Trammel). If we take the situation of Figure 8, the Mayweather Meme, we can see just this sort of boundary and community reinforcement in the comment section. After the controversy of Mayweather defeating McGregor, user danceflik replies to the original post with a tone of serious argument, complaining that his fellow Reddit

community is “butthurt,” or unduly angered (Fig. 9). The dank memers that choose to reply to danceflik do so not by sincerely correcting him, but rather with irony. They insert the “B” emoji throughout their comments, even in one instance to replace the letter “D,” a usage that serves to signal the ironic stance. AndrewNathaniel and bluepartans effectively perform irony in a way that confirms them as community members while attempting to remind danceflik of the call to irony in a way that reinforces the community’s unstated regulations. Yet, when we say that the Dank Meme subreddit is *ironic*, we must also think of it as *eiron*-ic, because although dank memers perform irony for the sake of their community, we cannot forget that for every *eiron* there is an *alazon* for her to foil. Dank memes would be nothing without that which they mock: the mainstream meme.

Enter the *Alazon*

It is the utmost drive of the /r/DankMeme community to degrade the mainstream, which is held up as a scapegoat for all things mindless, inauthentic, and repressed. Within their own community, it is most certainly the normies that receive the heaviest amount of disdain. Figure 10, for example, is an unironic meme (that is, the denotative and connotative message is the same) that shows a reaction image of what would feasibly happen when a dank memer discovers that he’s laughing at a meme from 9GAG, an image forum very similar to Reddit and 4chan except renown in the dank meme community for being a place where unironic, and therefore normie, memes circulate. The image paired with the caption exhibits the shame that would be associated with the normie culture. Another shows a similar, more aggressive tone of disdain toward the popular news and culture site, Buzzfeed: following the assumed presence of a “buzzfeed Normie” on /r/DankMemes, the meme expresses in large, orange letters taken from the cropped cover of a Mario game, “DIE” (Fig. 10). In expressing their hatred for the



Figure 9: Chastising comments as seen on /r/DankMemes.

mainstream, the creators of these memes chose a less hidden, more aggressive path of communication, although the second meme still covers itself in a small layer of irony when it incorporates the smiling face and intentionally poorly-cropped likeness of Mario, another popculture icon.

Frye tells of many different types of *eironeia* to show up across literature and drama. In comedies, if protagonists, *eirons* are naïve young men thrust into heroism by some force either accidental or fateful, who do not desire to be active players but nevertheless resolve conflict; if supporting cast, *eirons* can be scheming attendants or valets, moving the action of the play forward not by being the active hero but rather by influencing events covertly, unbeknownst to the hero (173). In tragedies, *eironeia* takes the form of the hidden force that creates the fateful, woeful events the protagonist must suffer through—Aphrodite in *Hippolyta* or God in *Paradise Lost* (216). But it seems that our modern day *eirons* take after the form of a different, more famous model. In his *Ethics*, Aristotle would typify (as he loved to do) *eironeia* as the mock-



Figure 10: Two examples of unironic memes from /r/DankMemes.

modest man, starkly in contrast to the braggart. His *eiron* figure "[uses] understatement with moderation and [understates] about matters that do not very much force themselves on our notice." Aristotle's perfect exemplary of *eironeia* was Socrates, who often staged dialogues between philosophers in which he would feign ignorance so that his philosophical opponents might be led (slowly and without direct manipulation) into acknowledging their own areas of ignorance. Here again we see Frye's indirect actor take center stage, but this one relies on wit and cunning to stump his opponents:

> "The [ironic performer], then, deprecates himself and, like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic. Complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgements are essential to his method. Thus, pity and fear are not raised in ironic art: they are reflected to the reader from the art. When we try to isolate the ironic as such, we find that it seems to be simply the attitude of the poet as such, a dispassionate construction of a literary form, with all assertive elements, implied or expressed, eliminated." (40-41)

The digital landscape's *eirons* act exactly in this way, also attempting to hide their true feelings and opinions under layers of muddied insincerity in an attempt to foil their *alazons*.

A good visual metaphor to represent the quintessential relationship of *alazoneia* to *eironeia* would be an envisioning of the biblical story of David and Goliath, the visibly weaker against the ostentatiously stronger. Think of the men pitted against Socrates's hidden wit: Gorgias enters, bragging of his skill in rhetoric, and when he engages with Socrates, who does not aggressively argue but rather plays the role of a humble but curious inquisitor, Gorgias unwittingly partakes in a dialogue that eventually leads him to admit his rhetorical powers are founded on obfuscation, dishonesty, and flattery. Aristotle separates both the *eiron* and the

alazon from the likes of the completely truthful sort of character (the latter being the most desirable), yet he still relegates the two dishonest types into separate, unequal fields. Given Socrates's morally high-grounded *eironeia*, it's not surprising that Aristotle seems to treat *alazoneia* as the worst sort of character while he lays only mild criticism on the gentler, but still based in falsehood, *eironeia*, calling it "in better taste" than the "contemptable" *alazoneia* (Gooch 96).

Yet the *alazon* is an enemy that is all-encompassing and inescapable. Over the course of 2017, the dank memes subreddit began to achieve "trending" status, drawing in viewers at a rate the subreddit had never known, such that what was once a small meme community, a veritable hole-in-the-wall in the internet, has suddenly jumped to being on the internet's radar. As of February 2018, the subreddit has 888,500 subscribers, and the number is only growing (compare this to where the subreddit was at the end of 2016: only about 12,000 subscribers) ("/r/dankmemes metrics"). Ironically, this means "dank memes" has become a mainstream meme genre, with a Facebook page and both a Twitter and an Instagram account, causing those who had once contributed to the community to renounce it as the very thing they first began to mock. This leads to a phenomenon that looks a lot like an act of self-preservation. In /r/DankMemes's attempt to remain authentic and countercultural, as is their *a prioi* purpose, there is an ever-pressing need for each member to push the others further outside the realm of the mainstream. One layer of irony becomes two—a double entendre becomes a triple entendre—burying the connotative message further and further until it becomes unrecognizable.

The memes I encountered on /r/DankMemes seemed to become more and more abstract (that is, the subjects and objects featured in the images lost more and more of their representational or referential qualities). Sometimes, but not always, the memes in these darker

regions referred in a very obscure way to more well-known, mainstream memes, but there was a process that I observed whereby the more a meme was circulated, the more it was appropriated, lost, then re-appropriated, the more nonsensical the iterations appeared to become, the further from any workable meaning they drifted. In the end, there's a certain extent to which the ever-present irony of our post-modern era invades nearly all forms of the counter-culture communication of the internet. They have to be ironic in order to subvert the power of the "normies" the alternative communities seek to mock. Yet constant recirculation seems to spur the movement of a meme from ironic to something that looks absurd, to what I can only describe as something that looks surreal. A stretch away from originality, occurring with constant distribution, would explain the spinning into absurd and surreal elements. Essentially, irony becomes absurd when it lacks a critical or mocking tone, or when it moves toward senselessness of subject. Irony is typically used to convey critique, judgement, or scorn—when it doesn't, the meaning is taken away from the ironical statement, making it removed from its meaning at just one step, which leads to absurdity.

Chapter Two: The Absurdists' Play

The regular purveyor of the digital landscape encounters memes around every corner, especially in social areas, such as Facebook and Twitter. I was no different up until 2016. I was familiar with the mainstream meme—those memes which display comical reactions, relatable though unfortunate situations, themes of self-deprecation, or cute animals—and I was familiar with the ironic meme—those memes which mock, appropriate, and subvert aspects of mainstream culture, like the ones shared at the beginning of Chapter One of this work. Then, I befriended another internet user (Pete, we'll call him) who happened to enjoy a subsection of meme I'd never before experienced. He was a frequent visitor of such sites as Reddit and 4chan, places that function as the primary grounds for meme creation and circulation, the heart of meme culture one could say. One community he subscribed to was none other than /r/DankMemes, from which he would forward memes to me regularly, particularly because we both shared a penchant for ironic humor. At this point in time, I had only lightly recognized that there existed different "types" or categories of memes, that memes carried stylistic patterns; but upon seeing the memes Pete sent me, I began to recognize that there were specific memes that were both wholly apart from the popular, mainstream memes of social media and even beyond the levels of irony that make up most snarky, niche-community memes.

The meme of Figure 11 is not the first nor the last meme Pete would send me of this particular, supremely odd style, but it is significant because it is the first one I saved with the intention of further study. In it, we have a distorted image of Guy Fieri, a popular chef and a figure who reoccurs across dank-style memes. He is pictured next to a jumbled phrase, which has itself been formatted in a style reminiscent of cut-and-paste magazine letters: "Snap my good ass with Italian nachos for ages, daddy," it reads. I responded to Pete immediately with a message

that was roughly equivalent to: “What the heck is this?” “It’s ironic,” he told me, with laughing emojis. I thought, *No—we’ve reached something new here*. At its base layer, I too thought I recognized this meme as an ironic meme: it does have some of the key elements discussed in Chapter One. For example, its intentionally ugly aesthetic keys its audience into the fact that the meme is insincere. The creator, feasibly, is not actually implying a bizarrely sexual request from this good humored Food Network star. Thus, we enter into the territory of ironic memes; the connotative message is certainly different from the denotative message. Yet here I hit a snag: what exactly *is* the denotative message of this meme? In the ironic memes of the first chapter, a meme’s denotative message was overt; on the Dank Memes subreddit, a denotative message was usually something racist, sexist, or else in other ways offensive, and the denotative symbols used were mainstream culture icons; these were appropriated by the memers in service of the connotative message, whose purpose was either to subvert and mock “normies,” or else to act as a sort of Bat Signal to build in-group solidarity with other ironic memers. But what is being subverted here? Why a sexualized Fieri? Why Italian nachos? The entire denotation is, well,



Figure 11: An absurd meme, taken from CollegeHumor.

absurd.

Absurdity is a concept that is both simple and complicated: it is simple because it seems unnecessary to define a feeling everyone encounters, the feeling of odd amusement that occurs when two unrelated things (a cat and a unicycle) are senselessly combined (a cat riding a unicycle). The image of Fieri paired with a disorienting, ridiculous sexual request stimulates that odd amusement of the senseless combination, the absurd. But absurdity is complicated almost precisely because of its simplicity—that is, how can we recognize so universally that a cat riding a unicycle, or Fieri calling his internet onlooker "daddy," is absurd? What is absurdity's nature, and why does it exist? And, more to the point, what is it doing cropping up in our internet memes?

Act I, or They Do Not Move

Albert Camus is regarded as, if not the father of, then certainly the undercover boss of the Absurd. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* figures absurdity as a key part of existentialism, itself a philosophical movement credited to Søren Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century and brought to the next century's eye by a variety of post-WWII modernists such as Jean Paul Sartre (a colleague, though not necessarily close friend, of Camus) in the mid-twentieth century (Blackburn). Though Camus never quite called himself an existentialist, his musings on the absurdity of life are still some of the most poetically quoted of any twentieth century philosopher (Simpson). In Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he presents a universe indifferent to the struggle of any individual's hopes, dreams, or struggles; when the individual in question realizes the futility of her plight, that she is like the Greek figure Sisyphus, doomed to the task of pushing a boulder up a mountain only to have the boulder roll back to the mountain's base at each ascent's completion, her only chance at peace is to accept the futility of her situation and push onward

anyway. The absurd, then, is supposed to represent man's disparate connection to the nature of our existence: the conflict between the human need to find value and meaning in our lives and the ultimate, objective lack of either. As a philosophical movement, existentialism, and its theory of the absurd, "has had relatively little direct influence" within philosophy as a whole; rather, surprisingly, it was literature and the arts that seemed impressed (Burnham).

Most famously, this dejected aimlessness found its way on stage in the plotless, often setless, sceneless, and senseless plays of playwrights like Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), Eugene Ionesco (*The Bald Soprano*), and Jean Genet (*The Balcony*), each of whom wrote the majority of their works in the decade directly following Camus's philosophical essays. Though these playwrights did not set out to imitate one another, the evident similarities of their style and methods was recognized by one Martin Esslin, who then collected these playwrights' works into one overarching category of drama: the Theatre of the Absurd, which he defined and clarified in his 1961 work of the same title. The Theatre of the Absurd seeks to "express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition…by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought," and anyone who has seen one of these plays knows the truth in that description (Esslin 6). Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* eerily mirrors the miserable futility of Sisyphus in its portrayal of two men, Vladimir and Estragon, who spend the entirety of the play's length (and presumably the entirety of their sad lives) waiting for a third companion, Godot, who will never come. Their conversations are filled with abrupt interruptions and circular meanderings, none of it leading to any discernable climax or character development. Similar series of nonsense happen in Ionesco and Genet's works. Esslin describes this rejection of traditional practices of plot, character, language, and staging as an intentional reversal of representational art (7). According to him, the theatre of the absurd was significant for two

reasons: first, it "castigates, satirically, the absurdity of lives lived unaware and unconscious," or serves to criticize the mundane and everyday; second, it brings attention to, literally shines a spotlight on, the absurdity of the human condition as we experience it in a postmodern world (351-352). The protagonist of the absurdist play is completely removed from a world that makes sense, given even himself to the nonsensicality of his situation (Esslin 353). And that's exactly what absurd memers seek to do, becoming the absurd artist and performer in their work with visual texts.

It is both in debt to and with respect to these previous notions of absurdity that I borrow the term and apply it to the memes that will follow, which seem to me most accurately described as "absurd" because, for all the audience's want of logic, sense and meaning, the memer will intentionally provide none. The more I looked into memes similar to that of Figure 11, the more I began to realize there was a completely different style of meme emerging, one that could no longer be defined as merely "ironic." In my initial gatherings, I was able to pinpoint similarities amongst this odd category of meme to the double entendre of irony—the saying one thing and meaning another—except, with absurdity, the "saying one thing" is a muddle of irrationality as opposed to a deliberate opposite. I recall the example of a man standing in the rain and proclaiming, "What a beautiful day!" That is irony, for the statement is the opposite of the truth. It is deliberate insincerity. Now imagine the same man standing in the rain and proclaiming, "I have ants in my shoes!" That is absurdity, for the statement has almost nothing to do with the reality of the man's situation. If in its simplest sense irony is insincerity (see Chapter One), then in its simplest sense absurdity is incongruity.

This separation is not always like oil and water; in fact, more frequently it's like dirt and mud. For example, the meme of Figure 12 might be said to be absurd—the popular acronyms it

refers to (LMAO, LOL, TBT, and FML) are given obviously incorrect explanations. LMAO, "laughing my ass off," LOL, "laughing out loud," TBT, "Throwback Thursday," and FML, "fuck my life" are instead replaced by references to communism; the joke here is given in the question which proceeds these acronyms, which seems to be asking middle class Western parents whether they understand the lingo of the younger generation. The obvious misdirection results in a sharply contrasted incongruity, the mark of absurdity. This meme, however, is one I categorize as an ironic meme, not an absurd meme. Both ironic and absurd memes have clearly opposite denotative and connotative messages, but the ironic meme is one that is masked in deliberate insincerity. The denotative message is suggesting that these familiar acronyms are actually references to communism; but due to their popularity, the majority of this meme's audience would no doubt be aware that the acronyms do not really stand for "love mao," "liquidation of landlords," "talkin bout theory," and "feeling Marx's love." Hence, the memer is playing with irony. The absurd meme's foremost concern, however, is to exhibit a breakdown in connection between the denotation and connotation. Take the second meme of Figure 12 for instance. The speaker of this meme seems to be petitioning the euthanization of the Michelin Man, a mascot for a tire company, which we then see referred to as a "tire golem," reinforcing some sort of

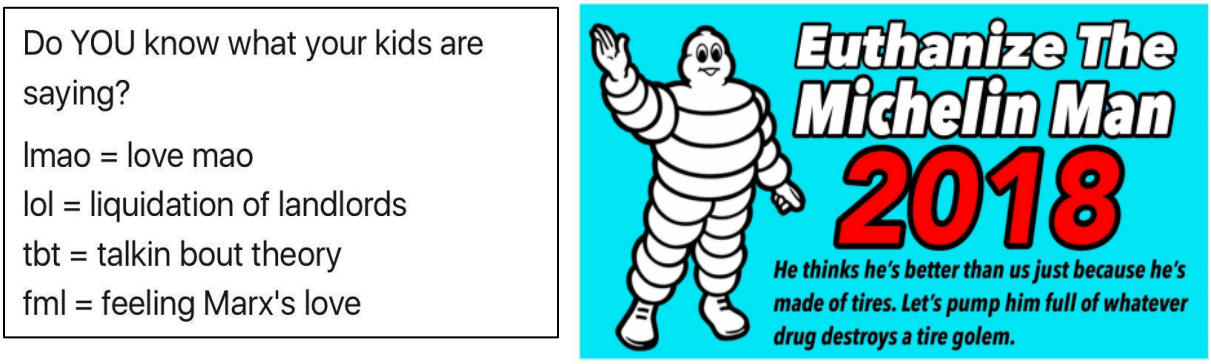


Figure 12: Left, another ironic meme, with absurdist elements, taken from /r/DankMemes; right, a fully absurdist meme, taken from me.me.

villainous persona. The meme is being insincere, it's true—we can be fairly certain that the creator does not really have such a passionate fear of a fictional commercial personage—but the ironic meme's overt, deliberate mockery is gone, replaced by a subtle, rather unsettling type of humor.

Act II, or How Would You Like Your Memes Cooked?

The first meme of Figure 13 was found on /r/DankMemes. In it, we have a heavily filtered, distorted, grainy screenshot of a text message exchange. The Sender (the white speech bubbles) has asked the Receiver (the blue speech bubbles, who ostensibly owns the phone to which this screenshot belongs) what he/she is planning on doing later that night; the Receiver replies, "Working again." The message is not delivered to the Sender, however, which leads him/her to interpret the following conversational return, "You?" as a sexual suggestion; the Sender responds to this suggestion positively, with a winking emoticon. So far, it's just a case of humorous misunderstanding. Of course, at the same time as this message has been received, we see at the top of the screenshot another message, purportedly from "FBI," saying, "You're welcome bro, don't screw this up." The meme's joke lies in the idea that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who has been spying on the Receiver's phone activity, has decided to help out by influencing the messages being sent. Playing with the idea of being surveilled through our electronic devices, the irony comes through in the same spirit as the Illuminati references seen in Chapter One; additionally, irony is signaled through the image's ugly aesthetic. As we've already discussed, the intentionally ugly attributes memers give their creations are directly linked to the ironic message the memes are supposed to deliver. Now look at the second meme in Figure 13. This is a screenshot of a Facebook message, which seems to have the same visual aesthetic of Figure 11: grainy, run through multiple filters, and distorted so that it seems to have

a round, bubble-like stretch in the middle. We have a user going by the name of "Dualshock 2," a type of controller used for Sony's PlayStation 2 video game system, asking why animals don't want to be eaten if they are "made out of food"; then, a user named Cody has left a comment pointing out the fact that an inanimate object has been credited as the poster. There is no backdrop to this joke; no references besides that of the game system made popular in the early- to mid-aughts; it's of course funny to mock the stupidity of the question which implies animals are made of food instead of the other way around; but it's clear here that the mocking of this question isn't the main purpose of this joke. No such Facebook account exists (at least not anymore), and this post is nowhere to be found. What we're left with in the face of oddity, confusion, and ambiguity is absurdity. Implying that an obscure inanimate object from a game system over a decade old would be posting an update on a social media site is absurd. The obvious fallacy of the question in the post itself is absurd. The fact that the creator chose to leave the comment at the bottom of the image, essentially breaking the fourth wall, is absurd.

At first glance, one might lump the memes together; reading this image text as ironic



Figure 13: Left, an ironic meme featuring absurd elements; right, an absurd meme; both taken from /r/DeepFriedMemes

given the distortion and ugliness they share, but there is a key difference between the two of them. The first meme of Figure 13 has an obvious reversal-pattern layer insincerity, key to irony. The FBI is not really a helpful, friendly character, out to help the common pedestrian win a date. This is wholly untrue—insincere. The sincere message which lies underneath this joke may be impossible to know, but one can guess it might be something along the lines of suggesting the FBI is indeed surveilling the population. Now turn again to the second meme of Figure 13: where is the obvious insincerity? Had the humorously idiotic post been uploaded by a celebrity or politician, we could assume a mockingly ironic tone; yet that tone is taken away when the post becomes attributed to an inanimate object. There is no insincerity here, at least not the dual-toned coded insincerity required for irony. That is because this meme is not the ironic meme of /r/DankMemes, from which the FBI meme was taken, but is instead something categorized differently within the confines of Reddit: a "deep fried" meme. In this case, and in the rest of the cases to be analyzed in this section, the ugly aesthetic is appropriated not to signal irony, but instead as a callback to another community's meme guidelines: /r/DeepFriedMemes.

In October, 2015 (about a year after the creation of /r/DankMemes), Reddit user JesusHChristOnABike started /r/DeepFriedMemes, "[for] memes that have been filtered and compressed so much that they're barely legible" (*/r/DeepFriedMemes*). Such memes existed before the subreddit was created to catalogue them—the first instance to be found is from Tumblr user paparoachscarsmp3 (Fig. 14)—but the creation of a subreddit marks the official public recognition of a new, documentable category. Before the creation of its own unique subreddit, deep fried memes were almost exclusively featured on /r/DankMemes. That connection remains today. According to Reddit Metrics, /r/DeepFriedMemes stayed static for

nearly two years after its creation, drawing no new users until just after October, 2016. In November, 2016, it began to experience a small growth in subscribers, potentially from its connection to /r/DankMemes, which had itself begun to gather a crowd following the 2016 election. These numbers steadily grew in number until a dramatic spike in March, 2017 ("/r/DeepFriedMemes metrics"). This spike is most likely due to the "Understandable, Have a Nice Day" meme, which first appeared on Twitter and was itself a response to the then-recent "Whoppy Machine Broke" meme (Fig. 14). The former meme was not directly connected to the Deep Fried Memes subreddit, yet by this time the aesthetic was already recognized and named—in late 2016, Urban Dictionary had created an entry explaining that a deep fried meme was any meme that, through filtering and distortion, had something of a "cooked" quality, resembling deep fried foods ("deep fried meme"); thus, a popular meme such as "Understandable, Have a Nice Day" that exhibited such qualities would eventually lead a crowd to the subreddit where similar memes would be housed. Since then, the subreddit has remained something of an

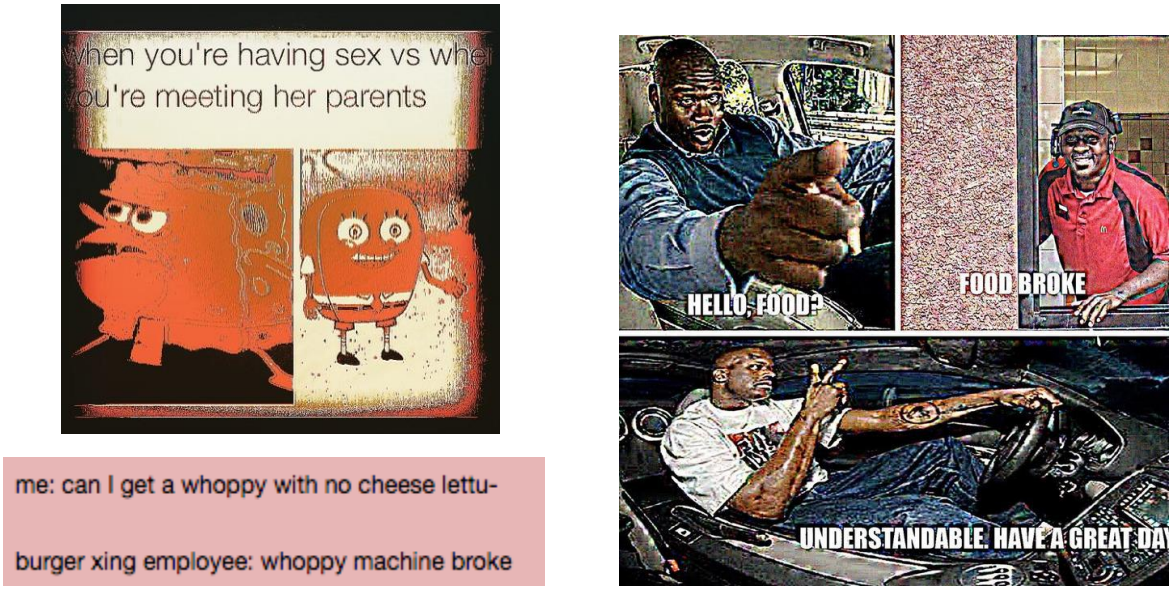


Figure 14: Left, the original "deep fried" meme; right, the deep fried meme that brought the genre to the populace; center, the "Whoppy Machine Broke" meme; all taken from Know Your Meme.

underground community, with its just-over 207,500 subscribers (as of February 2018); for a comparison, recall /r/DankMeme's 888,500, and for an even bigger contrast, compare to Reddit's #1 subreddit, /r/announcements, with more than ten times as many as Deep Fried Memes at 21,350,000.

When one enters the homepage of /r/DeepFriedMemes, one is confronted by a page that reflects the memes of its collection: the banner at the top revolves, showing a moving sampling of granular, deformed images; the text of the forum's name mimics the texture and feel of a burnt Twinkie; should one choose to click a hidden button at the right of the page, one's mouse cursor transforms into a yellow-skinned "OK" hand emoji, which, when hovered over the memes of the page, begins to glow in the space between the curved forefinger and thumb.[4] The page, and many of these memes once enlarged, seems highly reminiscent of the Dank Meme page (seen in Chapter One) in that it is a hyperbolic representation of the aesthetic it mocks. In fact, one can actually think of Deep Fried Memes itself as a spin-off of Dank Memes, considering so much of their material is shared; the difference is simply the unique kind of filtered, distorted aesthetic required in labeling any image "deep fried." The meme analysis site Know Your Meme actually goes one step further and categorizes Deep Fried Memes as a part of a series on Ironic Memes, and indeed the point and purpose of this subreddit may at its core remain ironic ("Deep Fried Memes"). However, the key to the aesthetic and the choices the Deep Fried memers make crosses over the line of irony, where the intention is no longer to subtly subvert cultural norms but rather an intention of absurdity for the sake of absurdity. This isn't just one or two cases of

[4] The "OK" emoji is something of a mascot for both the Dank Meme community and to its wider, ironic spin-off communities. The fact that it glows in the middle is a reference to another meme characteristic that is especially familiar to the Deep Fried Memes page, usually applied to the eyes of a person or person-like figure ("Glowing Eyes").

deep fried memes; the line-toeing of irony punctures nearly every meme of this site, and seems to be a requirement of any meme that seeks community affirmation in the form of upvotes.

The most popular memes on /r/DeepFriedMemes show a tendency to be ambiguous about their ironic undertone, suggesting that it is indeed this ambiguity the deep fried meme genre asks for of its members. One such meme seems to capture the reaction of a memer who has received a "like" (similar to an upvote) on his creation, using a distorted rending of popular meme figure Spongebob Squarepants, main protagonist of an eponymous animated TV show which was incredibly popular in the aughts (Fig. 16). There is certainly a hint of irony in this image: to only get one like on a meme is nothing to celebrate, and so the creation of a reaction image is out of place. That irony aside, how is one supposed to read the bizarre expression of this cartoon character? His eyes are turned downward, his mouth hangs open, and his arms are pulled to the right at an awkward angle; if we look at the unaltered image, a still from the episode "Pizza Delivery," we see that the deep fried version has not only been dramatically altered in color but that a middle section of Spongebob's face has been removed in order to distort his expression. Unaltered, this still was used in a meme popular around 2014, called "Spoons Rattling" for the sound effect that accompanies the scene within the episode and used primarily for trolling ("Spoons Rattling"). Thus, the creator of this deep fried meme chose an outdated, cliché meme and applied it to an ironic situation. However, in doing so, this creator not only used the simple tenants of the ugly aesthetic, which perhaps would have earned the meme a spot on /r/DankMemes, but instead took the creation and altered it in such a way that the expression, colors, and overall composition come across as almost unsettling. It seems clear the purpose was no longer an ironic one, but rather, as stated earlier, to pull the image outside of an ironic context and into the world of absurdity. Much in the same way that the performance of irony is rewarded

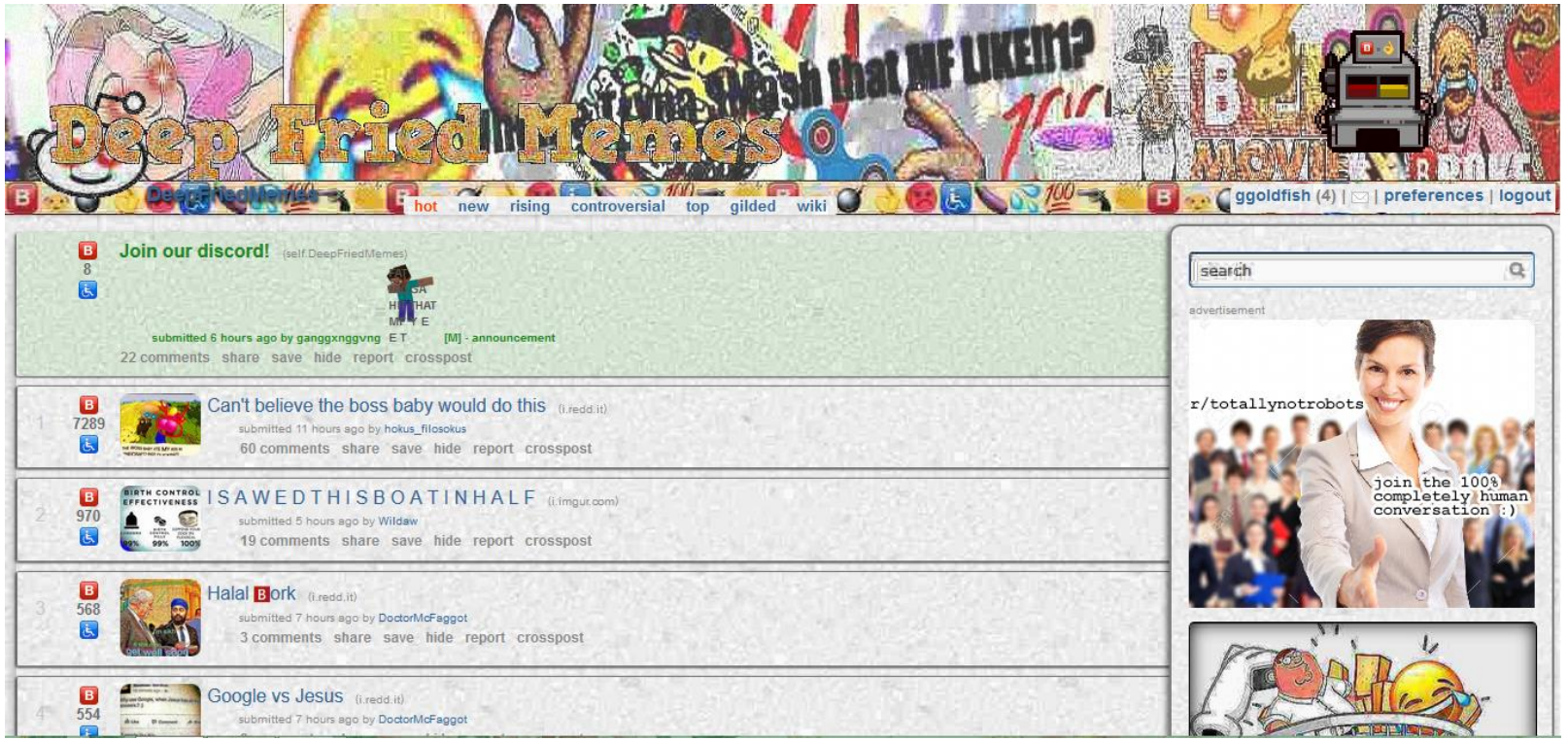


Figure 15: The /r/DeepFriedMemes homepage, taken from Reddit.

by dank memers (or the presence of sincerity is mocked and ridiculed), the performance of the absurd is what the community members of /r/DeepFriedMemes seem to be relying on.

The border between intentionally ironic, intentionally absurd, and ironically absurd can be a difficult one to navigate. It's inaccurate to say that the task is simply difficult—in actuality, it's impossible. That is to say, it is impossible to achieve 100% confirmation of whatever conclusion the analysis of a text online draws. Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (previously cited for their individual work on memes) team up in order to point to, and in fact make an entire book about, this problem. In *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*, they problematize ambivalence (which they describe as "fraught tension… between opposites" [10]), ambiguity, and anonymity, the characteristics of the internet that make the internet so uniquely internet-y. Milner ties this ambiguity to what is known as "Poe's Law," which is, simply put, the inability to know whether a member of the digital landscape is being sincere or ironic. But it's exactly this ambivalence that drives the stretch into absurdity, that encourages the creators of the deep fried meme community to alter their creations such that they may have a distinct flavor, a unique community identity (Phillips & Milner 119). /r/DeepFriedMemes may



Figure 16: Left, the original "Spoons Rattling" screenshot, taken from Know Your Meme. Right, an absurdist meme, taken from /r/DeepFriedMemes.

be forming their identity "*via negativa*"—that is, the individual discovers who she is by discovering who she's not (Phillips & Milner 65). In the digital landscape, the creators of these avant garde memes are staking out a territory for themselves by creating *via negativa*—that is, the absurd meme becomes an icon of the memer's community by being unlike the memes of the normies. Or, think back to Chapter One and the community of /r/DankMemes: we can with some accuracy assume the community members here are college-age white American men of a solidly middle class background by the fact that they mock that which they are not: whether the target belongs to outsider age groups (the elderly or young), racial or ethnic groups (basically, anything non-white), nationalities (with special appeal to stereotypes, like the beret-wearing, cigarette-smoking Frenchman), genders (that which is not the cis-gendered, masculine-performing male), or sexualities (the strictly heterosexual excluded). The dank memer's ability to form his identity within this community relies on his ability to recognize that which is not part of the Dank Meme cultural identity. But absurd memers are doing more than just establishing the boundaries of identity—rather, they are engaging in identity play. When we reach the absurd meme, we are taken out of the ironic play and identity formation we see in ironic memes; instead, memers are given a space in which they, essentially, mock no one in particular but rather an entire *structure*. The absurdist plays with expectations, plays with the boundaries of mockery, and thereby plays with the structure of meaning upon which "normie" communities form, against which ironic memes rebel.

Act III, or Semiotics Enters the Picture

Ironic memes intentionally twist a joke to make fun of the original message, this is easy enough to understand; absurd memes, I argue, retain some level of irony, but twist it so as to pull the new creation far enough outside its circle of reference that the nonsensicality separates it

while still maintaining a base layer of rationality. (The next chapter will deal with what happens when that base layer is removed.) To explain the breakdown of meaning in these images, I'll return to the denotative/connotative system set up in Chapter One. The images of Chapter One had sometimes multiple layers of references to peel through, but regardless each image had the message of sincerity foregrounded (the denotative) and a message of sarcasm backgrounded (the connotative.) Yet this not only applies to ironic texts, but can also apply to images in general. Roland Barthes studied such mechanisms in his image-text collection of essays *Image, Music, Text*. In this sense, and more generally in a semiotic sense altogether, there are two messages being sent. When he studied the rhetoric of the image, he chose to study an advertisement for pasta; he chose an advertisement because he could reasonably assume the creators of the image chose their signifiers with a specific intention towards the message signified (33). For example, the creators of the message would have wanted to signal the pasta's authentic "Italianicity" to their audience—thus, the brand's name, Panzini, traditionally Italian flavors, such as the parmesan and tomato, as well as the Italian flag's colors of red and green, are all pictured (33-34). Memes are no different, being images that are made with specific intentions set into them by their creators. In the case of /r/DankMemes, that purpose was mockery, subversion, and community engagement. For /r/DeepFriedMemes, community engagement remains something that the memers seek, yet what is being subverted and mocked, besides the very act of irony itself, remains a mystery.

Kott and Czerwinski bring semiotics to the absurd in their analysis of the theatre of the 1950s and 60s, the height of Esslin's Theatre of the Absurd. Theatrical productions as a whole, they say, are a collection of signs, some literal, some mimetic, and some symbolic, each which correspond to the similar semiotic terms of icon, index, and symbol (18-19). For example, a chair

at center stage could very well be an icon, that is, a physical representation of the idea of a chair—it's just a chair, meant to be sat in. Meanwhile, the printed image of a tree at the back of the stage, meant for background, could be an index, or a mimetic representation of a tree—that is, it's not a real tree, but represents one. Finally, a portrait of a storm hanging above a fireplace could be more than just a portrait—it can be a symbol that signifies anything from the tense interactions of the plot to the tempestuous relationships portrayed in the acting. Likewise, the gesturing of the actors, too, can be signs; in minimalist theatre, an actress may mimic the pouring of tea when no liquid is present, might even mimic the action of holding a tea cup with nothing in her hands at all (Kott and Czerwinski 19). Yet the audience is ready to interpret these actions, to immerse themselves into the story so far as to willingly take part in the pantomime. The interpretation of these signs seems to an audience a normal part of theatre-going. The theatre of the absurd, then, plays with the standard interaction of the audience, indeed plays with the very notion of theatrical signs altogether. For the absurdist playwright, such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet, the chair at center stage could represent humanity's empty existence, our longing for purpose, or even nothing at all; the "tree" at the back may be nothing more than a twig stuck in a pot of dry cement; the portrait of a storm could be a symbol of relationships present on stage, or else it could be nothing of importance whatsoever (Kott and Czerwinski 21). In absurdist plays, we see an ambiguity about, or even an ambivalence towards, the structures of icon, index, and symbol; within these performances, there could be any mixture of the three, and it's often unclear which is which.

The same confusion occurs within an absurd meme. Whether the representations pictured actually represent real world items is vague at best. In ironic memes, figures and situations are two-faced icons; the FBI in Figure 13 represents the FBI, placed here so that we can give them

facetious characteristics to mock them with. In absurd memes, these lines start to blur. An absurd meme might have an *index,* that is, something that refers back to its referent (like smoke is an index of fire, or the sound of a bell an index of a bell), but more often than not even that is unclear. In the Michelin Man meme (Fig. 12), the foregrounded figure can't possibly be the real tire company mascot (strikethrough icon), he doesn't seem himself to be a figure that points to another inside joke or referent (strikethrough index), and it's impossible to guess what abstract concept he might be representative of, if anything at all (strikethrough symbol). Semiotics is predicated on the idea that signs, relational units of communication, carry bits and pieces of meaning; the understanding that communication is made up of correlative elements is likened to coins by Barthes, "each one of which," he says, "is at the same time the equivalent of a given quantity of things and a term of a larger function, in which are found, in a differential order, other correlative values" (*Elements of Semiology* 14). This currency is what makes up language; these coins, of course, only have value in relation to other coins, as suggested by Barthes above. The different types of coinage are dialects; as a penny will not work in a vending machine that only takes quarters, so too do the dialects of communities have their exhaustible limits. The meaning-making found in /r/DankMemes is not the same meaning-making that occurs in the mainstream meme market, and it is not the same meaning-making that occurs in /r/DeepFriedMemes, which has its own currency.

This "deep fried dialect" can be picked up with a little study in the same way that one can pick up a verbal language. Distinctive qualities of this dialect have probably already been noted by the reader: the "burnt" or "cooked' aesthetic, glowing effects, and a humor (if any is detectable) that relies heavily on a punchline-less, dry, dark irony. Although the recurrence of these themes is enough to classify them, it can also be noted through observing failed attempts

by memers and the reactions such attempts receive. One such meme posted on the site in late 2017 received so much negativity that the meme landed itself on the "Controversial" list, a ranking reserved for posts whose downvotes (unfavorable, opposite of upvote) either equal or outnumber the post's upvotes (Fig. 17). This meme takes the likeness of popular reaction image of an expression made by Tobey Maguire while filming 2007's *Spider-Man 3* (Fig. 17). Maguire made this face in a blooper, so although the expression was not seen in the official film, the image began making its rounds across the digital landscape shortly after the film was released, especially in Rage Comics ("Tobey Maguire Face"). Yet something about this particular deep fried version of the meme didn't land right with its audience, and I feel there are a few potentialities to consider. Firstly, the meme's aesthetic was not "fried" enough; although it is artificially pixelated and run through one or two filters, it's possible there is a level of ugly missing—perhaps the creator should have distorted the middle, as in Figure 13's absurd DualShock controller meme, or maybe cut out a section in the middle in order to blatantly blotch the expression. If not that, secondly, the meme might be too straight forward in its humor, lacking in the subtle, unsettling tones found in the more popular deep fried memes. Here, the creator chose a caption that actually seems appropriate for the expression it's paired with, and such sensible logic is not welcome on this subreddit. This leads me to the third, and I think most likely possibility: the meme is simply not absurd enough for its audience. As noted already, the expression and caption do have a logical link; there is the placement of "bottom text" where normally bottom text would go, which, again, makes *too* much sense. There is a lack of nonsense, a lack of absurdity here. And that lack elicited rejection from the /r/DeepFriedMemes community.

The absurdity the community practices is all in service of the overarching goal of

community forming. As a "quintessentially social phenomenon," humor allows the community members to engage with one another; the absurdist elements serve the purpose of socially bonding them, as irony did in the Dank Meme community (Kuipers 362). Both irony and absurdity gather the majority of their comedic effect from the presence of incongruity. Incongruity theories are the most influential today in the realms of humor studies, but find their roots as far back as Aristotle, who precipitated the theory with his observation that humor arises when a rhetor violates expectations (363). Indeed, this remains true even amongst the absurd memers. Kuiper also mentions a study done by Rose Coser in the mid-twentieth century, a study on humor that was exchanged among the faculty and staff of a hospital; she found that humor helped individuals share experiences, create group solidarity, and form a unique group identity (365). This was in "egalitarian, disorganized" structures, as opposed to stratified, hierarchical social structures of the hospital, wherein jokes help build community identity. This seems closest to the structure of the digital landscape, a place of anonymity and ambivalence, unrestricted for better or worse.

Yet humor, as much as it can socially connect and bond a community of people, can also act as a social-corrective. By laughing at something we are reinforcing the idea that it is

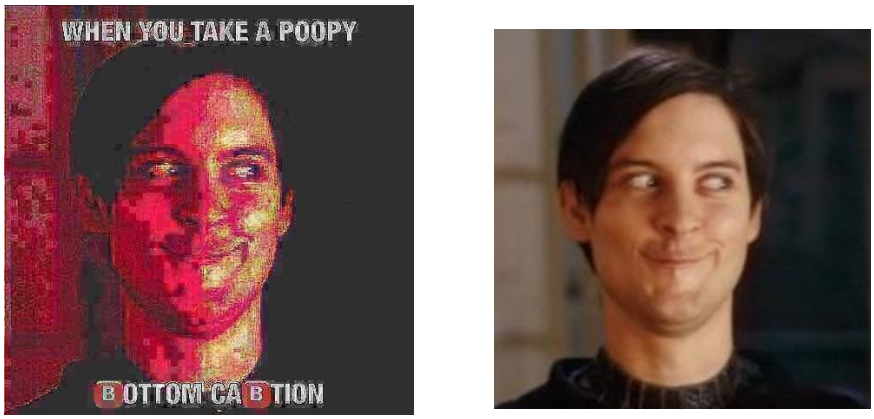


Figure 17: Left, a negative example of a deep fried meme, not accepted by the community, taken from /r/DeepFriedMemes; right, the original "Tobey Maguire Face," taken from Know Your Meme.

something to be laughed at, that it is not normal and therefore laughable. This gives humor an equal function in creating social exclusion. With the Tobey Maguire meme, the original creator was chastised for the poor attempt at creating a deep fried meme. In one exchange, a user, Chiquita_Bananze, shows disdain with a, "No," to which the creator of the meme, DashUni, explains that it's "ironically bad." Chiquita_Bananze's advice, however, gives us insight into what the community finds acceptable: "Make it unreadable put a [B emoji] in poopy do [laser] eyes [in] the Guys face don't use impact fonts and put Some ironic memes in there like [distorted] [crying and laughing emoji]" (Fig. 18). Absurd cinema, too, operates upon this "oscillation between breakthrough and breakdown," an apt description of absurdist memes such as those found on the Deep Fried Memes subreddit (Sterritt 93). The outsiders that, uninvited, choose to engage with the absurd memes of these communities often find themselves confounded for these reasons—that they don't "get it." But it's precisely this which allows the in-group members to reinforce their own community borders. Like the ironic dank memes of Chapter One, part of what allows an anonymous internet user to call himself a member of the group is to perform an awareness of the nonsensicality, of the absurdity that he is interacting with or partaking in. Sterritt notes similar feelings of frustration from the viewers of avant-garde cinema: "Viewers expecting a 'real movie' typically respond to its meditative ethos with impatience, frustration, and antagonism, whereas those who catch on to its methodology and goals may feel the kind of pleasure they would receive from an inspired joke or an ingenious play on words" (99). There is a language that the memers speak, a classifiable dialect, and when that dialect is noticeably altered in a meme post, community members' expectations are violated.

By exploring /r/DankMemes, one can see a level at which the participants of the digital landscape take meaning and make it their own, turning it on its head and hiding their own secret

messages under the cover of irony. In /r/DeepFriedMemes, the users are no longer concerned with hiding any messages at all; rather their collective play stems from the taking of irony and the spinning it into absurdity. Camus once argued that life was absurd because it lacked any pattern or reason, that one could only be happy once one learned to accept life's inherently pointless nature. The very definition of absurd implies a sense of illogicality and senselessness, and this is the spirit of the fried aesthetics these community members seek to live up to and mimic. This, of course, does not imply a complete and utter lack of any meaning; absurdity, as Camus would have agreed, is far from nihilism. But internet memes are not alien to such further removals. Ironic memes mock their referents; absurd memes tear and scatter those referents, as in playful pastiche. If, however, the referential is lost or pulled outside of the referential circle far enough that it can no longer be said to have any callback whatsoever, the meme enters an entirely new playground-like void: the world of the surreal.



Figure 18: A selection of comments taken from /r/DeepFriedMemes.

Chapter Three: In the Wake of (Sur)Reality

In August, 2017, *The Washington Post* published an article by newcomer Elizabeth Bruenig titled, "Why is Millennial Humor So Weird?" In it, she references a handful of bizarre memes to have been risen from the depths of the internet's weirdness and muses on what it says about the millennial generation and our sense of humor. One of her primary targets, and indeed the pair that graces the image which accompanies the article, is the comedy duo Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim, creators of both the "Tim & Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!" a comedy sketch program which originally ran from 2007 to 2010, and "Tim & Eric's Bedtime Stories," similar in theme and running from 2014 to present. To get a good idea of what their programming is like, one need only imagine the following sequence of shots, which made up one of their more popular sketches, "Shopping Indoors." The clip opens with a Home Shopping Network-like setup, and we see a man, "Glen Tennis" (played by A.D. Miles), explaining to his onlooking patrons that they could buy one of the many items before him which seem to all be a part of a collection. As he's awkwardly bumbling through, a caller is connected, who immediately interrupts and insults Tennis with, "You're a waste." The caller continues to berate the salesman, and we see Tennis losing his calm, at first twitching and then grating his teeth and turning red. Just as it seems the salesman is about to break down, the caller reveals himself to be Tennis's brother; though Tennis is visibly shaken, the two laugh off the moment, as it seems to have all been a prank. However, suddenly, catching Tennis off guard, the caller returns to insulting. This time, we see the salesman devolve into a state of madness, breaking down into distraught violence. He begins to break the collectible items, shattering them and shouting back to the caller. All of this is shadowed by an unnerving silence from the studio. Just as things are reaching an alarming tension, the caller quietly says, "I was just messing with you," disrupting

the growth of tension. Tennis attempts to collect himself, and we, the audience, might even believe the sketch is over. We're rudely proved wrong when an eerie third party begins a jittery start-and-stop replay of Tennis's last lines (a sigh of relief, "Oh, boy"), and then an animated sequence invades the scene; Tennis explodes, then is seen as a cutout, dancing to a techno soundtrack and riding a horse through a field under a dark sky. The final shot is of Tennis and his steed coming to a stop in front of a golf hole, while the words, "Space Course: Horse to Horse" is read by an elderly voice-over narration and superimposed across the screen (Fig. 19). Truly, a two minutes and seventeen second span of time that can only be described as, well, surreal. *This* is what Bruenig is talking about—what on earth would have driven the creators of this show to put together such a scene? And how could they have produced fifty more similar episodes, each with equally unsettling, sometimes infinitely stranger tableaus?

Bruenig asks this question not just of the Heidecker and Warheim team, but of the millennial generation altogether. "To visit millennial comedy…" she explains, "is to spend time in a dream world where ideas twist and suddenly vanish; where loops of self-referential quips warp and distort with each iteration, tweaked by another user embellishing on someone else's



Figure 19: Screenshots from the scene discussed above, taken from YouTube.

joke, until nothing coherent is left." Her statement should sound familiar—it's one of the essential arguments I'm making in this current work, that these self-referential quips and embellishments show a movement away from the safe world of concrete meaning. For Bruenig, however, this process isn't caused by circulation and pervasive social factors, as I've argued in the previous chapters, but rather by the growing sense of nihilism fostering in this generation, by "the creeping suspicion that the world just doesn't make sense." She points to the erosion of traditional moral systems, such as religion and the family unit, as well as dissatisfaction with both the job market and politics, all of which (supposedly) gave the generations previous to us a deeper sense of fulfillment and purpose; in the absence of these systems, millennials are lost in "the meaningless, loopy, sometimes-sinister whirling gyre of the moment," most properly expressed in the viral but fleeting nature of memes, at one point sources of innocent gags but which now seem reflections of an existence devoid of purpose. Although I can't say I completely agree with Bruenig's conclusion, she did draw some hard-to-ignore comparisons between the aesthetic workings of these digital landscape creations and the art movements of the post-WWI era. And it's through these connections that we can begin to make sense of the intruding surrealism in the digital landscape.

The Beginning of the End

The nihilistic, nothing-has-meaning attitude Bruenig attributes to millennials sounds a lot like the mindset of another movement: that of Dada. First uttered by Hugo Ball in 1916, "Dada" is a childish word for "horse" in French, and its nonsensical name is only its beginning. In its original Zurich foundation, and spurned by the mounting realization of the horrors the first world war had assaulted upon humanity, Dada was meant to be strictly anti-form, anti-rationalism, and anti-social organization, in the hopes that shaking society's foundation would rumble the

structure into serious social changes (“Dada”). A practitioner of Dadaism questioned the patterns of being and doing that were established, asking what art should be and then redefining the answer received. In a time when “art” was considered that which was unique, original and created solely by the hand of a skillful artist, surrealists shook up the definition This pulling away from traditional styles of art is important to recognize, as it signaled a time when that which was everyday became that which could be handled by the artist—it was no longer the sublime, but the exact opposite, the ridiculous, which would be allowed into the purview of art. (Figs. 21). They weren’t just trying to ignore the pre-established rules of art; they were purposefully trying to remake them.

This “anti-art” was done by its participants in the service of Dada’s crowning motive: to create something radically new (“Dada”). Like the modernism that was flourishing in war-traumatized minds, Dadaism, too, was the result of an irreconciliation of the past and present modes of existence. The post-World War paradigm shift to modernism, however, assisted as not only the Dada movement’s impetus, but also as the movement’s forward motion. This feeling would not only be represented in art, but would bleed into the world of theatre, too. Antonin

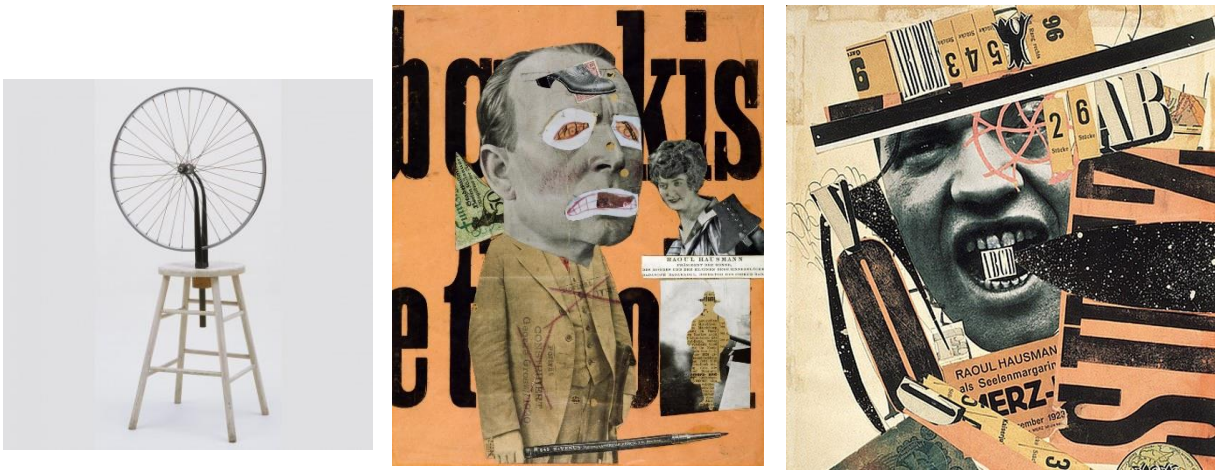


Figure 20: Examples of Dada art. Left, Duchamp readymade; center, Hausmann’s *Art Critic*; right, Hausmann’s *ABCD*; all taken from the MoMA website.

Artaud seemed to have been deeply influenced by the breakages of the rising avant-garde when he put together his theories of performance in his Theatre of Cruelty. By cruelty, Artaud was not suggesting sadism; rather, a sort of tortured attention to the psychological affectation of performance, with "a constant vigilance against backsliding into the old way of doing things" ("Theatre of Cruelty"). Like his modernist, Dadaist colleagues, Artaud was almost violently against any form of realism or rationality, and it shows in his work. Take the one of the last stage directions of his short play, *Spurt of Blood*: "[The Young Man] hides his face in horror. A multitude of scorpions crawl out from beneath the Wet-Nurse's dress and swarm between her legs. Her vagina swells up splits and becomes transparent and glistening like a sun. The Young Man and Bawd run off as though lobotomized" (Artaud). Reading the stage directions, it becomes very difficult to image how a play like this would ever be performed, mostly because of the scorpions, but even before that moment of horror the play is rife with fantastical imagery—at one point, there is an earthquake, thunder, and presumably the voice of God speaking to the characters. In fact, the play was never produced during Artaud's lifetime, and wasn't actually performed until the sixties (Pilkinton). And I can't imagine how they accomplished the feat of presenting, in live form, the twisted, unreal world of Dada.

The visceral, raw nature of the Theatre of Cruelty is a direct result of the renewed efforts of post-WWI artists to create a new form of art through Dada. Men who either claimed to be followers of the movement, or are at least generally regarded as being part of the movement now, include Tristan Tzara, Max Ernst, Paul Éluard, Picabia and Duchamp, and a young writer named André Breton. These names are important because they would stay connected even after the fire of Dadaism flickered and burned out. The end of Dada is typically put as either 1920 or 1923, and there doesn't seem to be consensus as to what caused it—the end is less important than

recognizing that the end happens to coincide with the beginning of another movement, started in 1924 by that very same group of artists mentioned above, whose spokesperson was none other than that young French writer, André Breton. These young Frenchmen joined together and, under Breton's lead, began a magazine which would contain the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*. This new, different movement cannot be mistaken for a simple reiteration of Dada; in the first *Manifesto*, Breton decries realism, a popular mode of literature up to this point in time, attributing to it "mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit" and a sense of "clarity bordering on stupidity" (4). Surrealism is opposite of that: it is fancy, whimsy, and imagination. "Surrealism," he says, "such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete *nonconformism*…" (42). It is "pure expression" (21). But how would that look on paper? In its early days, Breton and his comrades first set about putting their surrealism into practice through stream-of-consciousness writing, during which they would simply put pen to paper and write, in upwards of fifty pages, their thoughts as they experienced them (19-20). Another practice was one based on an old parlor game which would be played among the surrealists as they gathered round the dinner table: one person would begin by writing a phrase or drawing a piece of an illustration out on a sheet of paper; then the paper would be folded to conceal the finished parts and passed on to the next player for another section, until all had contributed and a completed work was fashioned. (This game would come to be called "Exquisite Corpse," from one of the party's first communally-completed phrases: "Le cadavre / exquis / boira / le vin / nouveau," or "The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine.") ("About"). The "*thought-writing*," Breton notes, produced texts which bore the tendency towards "overconstruction," and certain though undetailed "shortcomings," but also, "the illusion of an extraordinary verve, a great deal of emotion, a considerable choice of images of a quality such that we would not have been capable of preparing a single one in

longhand, a very special picturesque quality and, here and there, a strong comical effect" (20).

The images, both drawn and written, produced in this way an "extreme degree of immediate absurdity" and such absurdity is indeed to be recognized in the Exquisite Corpse such absurdity is indeed to be recognized in the Exquisite Corpse drawings, which appear to be hacksawed pieces of unharmonious cadavers, stitched together like an absurdist Frankenstein's monster (Fig. 21). Yet it isn't the spirit of collage that is unique to the Surrealists—Duchamp's objects, Hausmann's posters, and Artaud's play all seemed to slip together the things which seem least likely to be paired. It is not only composition and quality of images that allow them to take the title of surreal, but also something underlying in their point and purpose. That point and purpose is what I have taken into account in my own attempts to navigate the oft-maddening mazes of the internet memedom, and how I have chosen the specific images of this chapter and titled them, lovingly, Surreal Memes.

The Descent into /r/SurrealMemes

About a year after the creation of /r/DankMemes, which was also around the time that the first deep fried meme was created, a Facebook page called Special Meme Fresh posted a meme

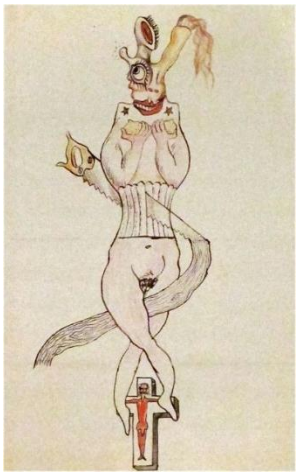


Figure 21: An example of an Exquisite Corpse drawing, taken from ExquisiteCorpse.com

that even today is one of the best recognized surreal memes on the internet (Fig. 22). In this four-panel comic, a disfigured, ludicrous-looking head asks a strange, noodle-legged figure how deep into irony he has traveled, or, more specifically, how many "layers of irony" he has; when the figure replies, "5 or 6," the head insults him, saying he is "like a little baby"; in the last panel, the head demonstrates his superior ironic capability in a comically simple way: by using the slang, "succ." Supposedly, the head has just blown away his competition; indeed, there are multiple levels of irony to the usage of the word here. "Succ" as slang had risen in popularity as a reference to oral sex since its first use on 4chan in 2014, but in every case its use was given in obviously ironic situations, employing other ugly aesthetics ("Succ"). The last panel uses deep fried tools of distortion, which also mark the irony. Yet although this meme, "Layers of Irony," is assuredly an ironic meme, it is not a standard dank meme. It's clear from our analysis in Chapter One that the dank meme appropriates the mainstream in order to mock the mainstream; but "Layers of Irony" has no incorporation of the mainstream; instead, its only references are the dank meme community, through its use of "succ," and the absurdist meme community, through its use of the deep fried visuals. Though the denotative level of this meme seems to mock those who cannot appropriately bury themselves in irony, the connotative "Layers of Irony" is mocking the ironic, and maybe even absurdist, meme community itself. This meme is important for that reason, that it marks a point when the ironic meme communities became self-aware, but it is also important because it is the introduction of the Meme Man into the digital landscape.

"Meme Man" refers to the absurdly-rendered 3D head which functions as the mascot for the surreal meme community, specifically the aforementioned Special Meme Fresh Facebook page (Fig. 24). Although uncertain of where the bizarre head first appeared, the creator of Special Meme Fresh revealed that he took it from 4chan ("Meme Man"). The origin is less



Figure 22: One of the original "surreal" memes, taken from Know Your Meme.

important than the fact that, in becoming the mascot for this page, a powerhouse of surreal meme



Figure 23: Left, the original Meme Man and, center, Orang Min, both taken from Know Your Meme; right, surreal meme featuring Meme Man, taken from /r/SurrealMemes

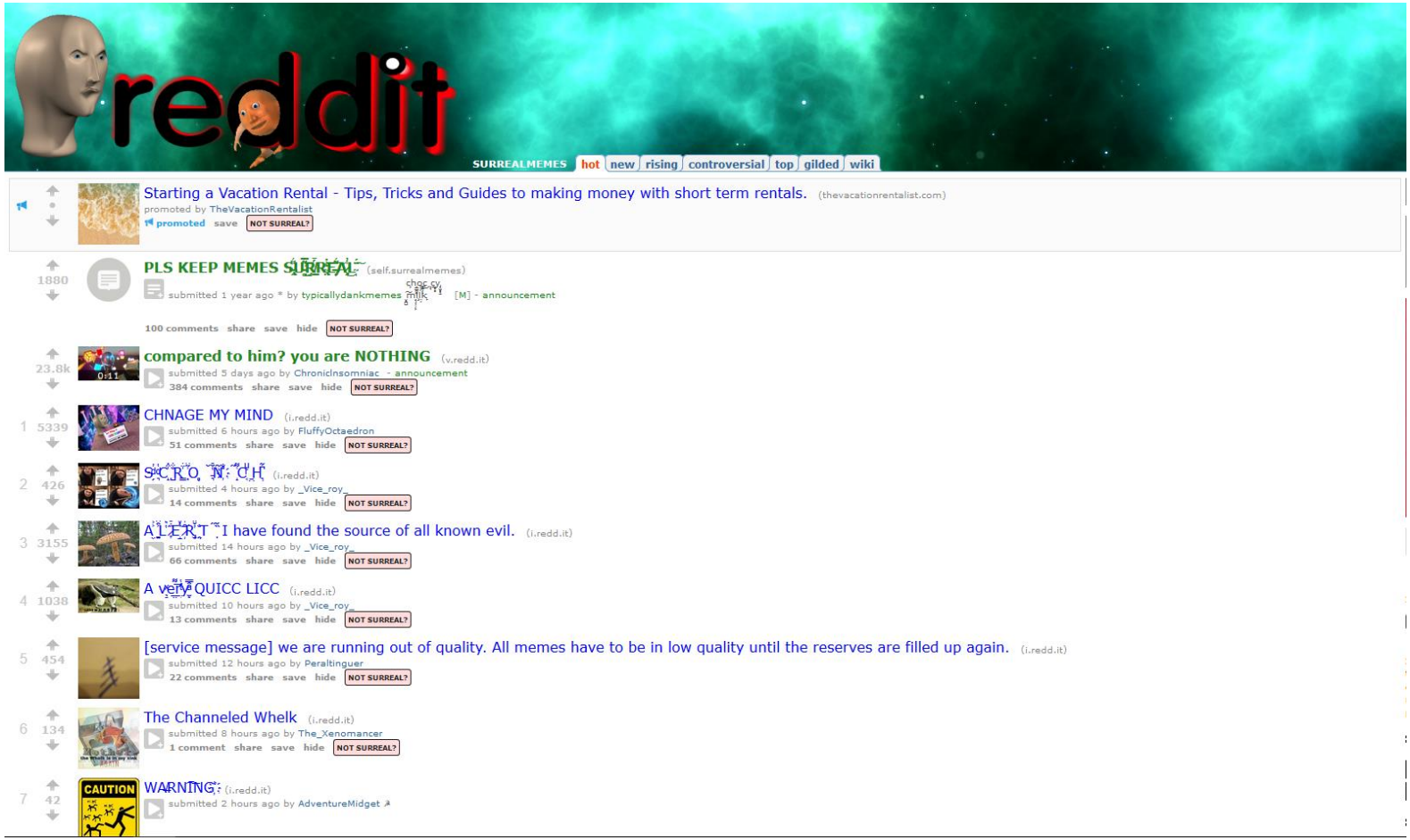


Figure 24: A screen capture of the Surreal Memes subreddit, taken from /r/SurrealMemes.

creation, circulation, and distribution, Meme Man has since become a recognized symbol and staple of surrealist memes at large, appearing daily in new meme creations (Fig. 23). In 2016, Reddit user magicsdevil devoted a subreddit to such surreal creations, with the appropriate title /r/SurrealMemes. Although it is its own subreddit, it has origins in the broader community of ironic memes, as had /r/DeepFriedMemes. At almost 250,000 members as of February, 2018, it is slightly more popular than the more-niche community of Deep Fried, but substantially smaller than the father of ironic memes, Dank Memes ("/r/surrealmemes metrics"). Its page is rather pleasant, compared to the sister subreddits. In contrast to /r/DankMemes's obnoxious neon colors and /r/DeepFriedMemes's grainy beige, we have a simple white background and a colored banner which features the page's name and their mascot, along with another popular surreal character, "Orang Min," an anthropomorphic, frozen-faced orange, often Meme Man's partner-in-crime (Fig. 23). But the page's pleasant exterior does not equate to an open invitation to outsiders (Fig. 24). According to the page itself, "Surreal memes are (usually humorous) memes that are in a surreal style or contain surreal content. Such memes may be difficult to understand for mere mortals. In the future most memes will look like this" (*/r/SurrealMemes*). Their reference to outsiders as "mere mortals" is ironic, but a look into the features memes reveals truth to the deadpan sentiment.

A strange, inhuman tone seems to be a quality that runs throughout the surreal memes of this subreddit and might even be on of their most recognizable characteristics. One such meme features both the Meme Man and his sometimes-companion, sometimes-foil, Orang Min, overlaid into a painting of a renaissance man picking fruit from a table; Orang Min's speech comes across in Mandarin, to which Meme Man replies, "Sorry, I don't speak mandarin [sic]" (Fig. 25). Commenters on the subreddit tell us that the orange is saying something roughly along

the lines of, "Yes, to be consumed is part of my plan, fool" (atrociously translated, as if by Google Translate, they note), which transforms this meme from a joke of miscommunication to a situation where one is perhaps nefarious and the other is an unwitting accomplice ("傻子"). The translated image gives both Orang Min's somewhat sinister expression and Meme Man's somewhat oblivious expression more sincerity. In irony, the perceived message would be simply a cover, underneath which a sincere message is hiding. In this meme, I cannot detect a hidden message, and so an ironic attempt by the creator seems unlikely.[5] Additionally, absurdity lies in an intentional and obvious nonsensicality, such as the horribly unattractiveness found in the deep fried memes. Here, we have neither, which only lends a sense of "flatness" to the meme's humor; that is to say, the meme's punchline, that Orang Min actually wants to be eaten, does not hit the audience like a punch at all; if the audience gets the joke, which would require either independent research or a knowledge of Mandarin Chinese, the final awareness of Orange Min's intention might only roll over the audience as a gentle wave. This "flatness" and odd sincerity is a common trope of the surreal meme, and might even be reminiscent of the readymades of Duchamp, in that the art as presented is not meant to provoke incredibly deep thought, but instead is meant to simply *be*.

Chapter Two demarcated the border between ironic and absurd, a border that is often

[5] It should be noted here that I am not ignorant of one layer of irony present in this meme, and that is a layer of dramatic irony. If the audience is aware that Orang Min's character wants to be eaten, it becomes ironic that Meme Man will do just that, unaware of his compliance to the orange's plan. I gloss over this fact in my analysis because I think this layer of irony is a separate sort of irony to the one I have used chiefly up to this point in my work. I would like to acknowledge, however, that this type of irony might very well have been the intention of the meme's creator, not just because it is a humorous situation to portray, but perhaps because the sudden use of an altogether different type of irony than the kind popularized on sister subreddits such as /r/DankMemes is itself a kind of irony that subverts the expectations of the ironic meme audience. And if that is the case, this memer is certainly not at all "like a little baby."

difficult to stay firmly on one side or the other of. It's the same when surrealism is thrown into the mix; it can be difficult at times to discover whether any given meme is ironic, absurd, or surreal at its base. For example, the meme of Figure 26: at first glance, it seems to carry the qualities of a deep fried meme (heavily filtered, distorted, glowing eyes); then we read the caption attached to it, which seems to describe in overly-descriptive language the process of walking; since walking is indeed the action which the figure pictured is performing, we might then be tempted to read this as an oddly sincere text, much like the surreal memes above. But this meme, which was found on /r/DankMemes, is an ironic meme, and here's why: by combining the walking figure and the caption that describes walking, a remarkably easy action for most people, with the distortion and effects of the deep fried meme genre, the creator is actively insulting the intelligence of absurdist memer—implying that any meme, even one as unfunny as this, will be taken as impressive if the amateur runs the image through multiple filters. This meme, then, is using irony to mock members of the sister subreddit, /r/DeepFriedMemes. That's not to say that surreal memes are incapable of partaking in the shared meme play of Reddit—the



Figure 25: A surreal meme featuring Meme Man and Orang Min, taken from /r/SurrealMemes.







Figure 26: Top, an ironic meme, taken from /r/DankMemes; bottom left, the original Distracted Boyfriend meme, taken from Know Your Meme; bottom right, a surreal rendition of the Distracted Boyfriend meme, taken from /r/SurrealMemes.

most popular meme of all time on the page takes from the popular "Distracted Boyfriend" meme and gives it a surreal twist, in which, instead of a man being caught staring at another woman on the street by his girlfriend, we see the same man seemingly sucking the other woman out of existence (Fig. 26). Surreal memes appropriate the images of the internet with unique motives. As discussed previously, dank memes take in order to mock; deep fried memes take in order to play; surreal memes take in order to disrupt, which has always been the modus operandi of surrealists.

Disturbance

The grandfathers of surrealist art seem constantly to come to mind when one explores /r/SurrealMemes. It's indeed hard not to think of the entire page of Surreal Memes being a tribute to the surrealist movement begun by Breton when memes such as Figure 27 seem to be direct references to such artists as Dali. Such apparent connection to the surreal art from which the subreddit takes its name means other comparisons to the art form must be made. In his first *Manifesto*, Breton claims the world of language and expression for the territory of his surrealists. Accordingly, the purpose of their movement was to reinvigorate a language they found dead at



Figure 27: Left, a surreal meme, taken from /r/SurrealMemes; right, *Elephants* by Salvador Dali, taken from the MoMA website.

the turn of the century, and the resurrection would take place through a devotion and principal faith to the *image* language could produce. It no longer mattered whether two words made sense put together, so long as the juxtaposition produced a vivacious, subconscious image within the reader. As Anna Balakian describes, the surrealists sought to weed out tired, overused clichés from their poetry, prose, and art, even to the point that they would attribute to words the wrong meaning and glue together collages of incongruous colors, shapes, and figures (145). "Images constructed according to this notion," she says, "contain a dose of absurdity and that element of surprise, which… was to be one of the fundamental resources of the modern mind" (Balakian 149). Similarly, as concerns our surrealist memers, are they merely laughing at the mediocrity they have found themselves in by cutting together their absurdist pastiches, or is it possible that they are trying to give memedom new life by rebuilding the images from the ground up?

The surrealist concerns herself, like Duchamp and Breton, with bringing the things which we take for granted in our everyday lives and remixing them, sometimes into something completely unrecognizable, which points "to a sustained concern with phenomena of perceptual

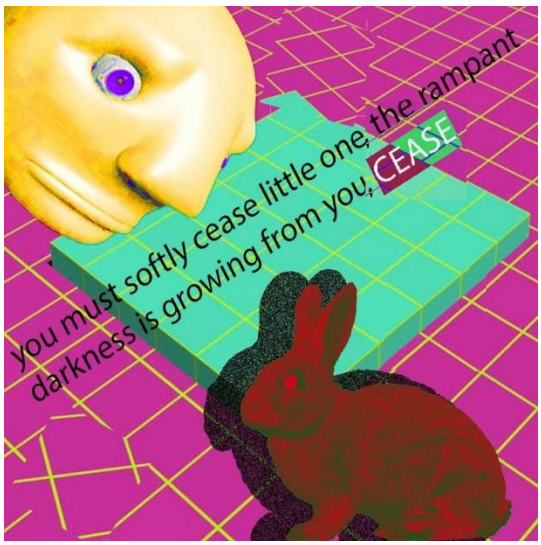


Figure 28: A surreal meme, taken from /r/SurrealMemes.

or representational distortion" (Fotiade 10). Meme Man, for example, challenges the audience's perception of what a human figure can be in a meme; before this figure emerged, memes would most often make use of stock photos, or cartoon drawings, all of them realistic portrayals of people; if making fun of amateur artists, they might go the route of Rage Comics and have stick figures with comically misshapen expressions, but the use of poorly-drawn human figures was in service of mockery, not as a means of making an audience think twice. Meme Man, however, does that—makes the audience think twice, disrupts the expectation. The meme of Figure 28 produces an unsettling feeling similar to the deep fried memes of Chapter Two, but its distorted pieces do not have any callbacks to other ironic memes, as deep fried memes usually do; rather, here, we have incongruous, unrelated images (a disfigured 3D modelled head similar to Meme Man, a distorted, red-colored image of a rabbit, both imposed on a *Tron*-like, neon grid background) that are not references to anything else, that do not pull on the humor of other meme creations. It's a disruption of the typical meme format—in fact, it's utter destruction of it.

Like their forbears in Dadaism, surrealist memers celebrate "soft obscenities, scattered humour, visible puns and everyday objects at the core" (Bright). Along with this, many of the same requirements that Breton set aside to define the surrealist image can also be applied to the surrealist meme, namely: 1) that the image contain contradictions; 2) that the image begin "sensationally, then abruptly [close] the angle of its compass"; and 3) that the image be hallucinogenic in character (Balakian 152-154). Taking a look again at the memes of this chapter, such as those in Figures 27 and 28, we see those exact characteristics continued. These "nonsequential" and "psychic" connections between elements are "the trademark of authenticity" for surrealists (Balakian 147). But that last note, that of "authenticity" requires more extrapolation. Reinventing and reinvigorating the language and art of their day was a top priority

to the surrealists of Breton's time, but the practice of this reinvention seemed to also be a part of a performance of authenticity. In "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," Rosalind Krauss tells us that avant-garde art, despite its years of morphing through the hands of cubists and Dadaists and surrealists, always had one paramount goal: the theme of originality (157). The desire to remain authentic and original was what drove so much of their radical reinvention, and it continues to be a motivator for the memers of /r/SurrealMemes, who seem to always seek to pull their creations farther and farther away from the ironic base from which they originated.

It is this drive that pushes the abstracting process of memes, not a growing sense of nihilism and hopelessness, as was argued by Bruenig concerning the "weird" humor of millennials. Being original and showing oneself as authentic through the creation of newer, stranger, more nonsensical memes is what this particular community values. If a meme is ever posted that seems to lack a quality of originality, the meme is ridiculed by the community. In one such meme, user BunnyColvin23 uploaded the simple image of a fish along with the caption, "Don't drink water after eating fish b'coz the water may cause the fish to swim and then u will feel gulugulugulugulu in ur stomach [sic]" (Fig. 29). The comments do not reveal specifically why this meme is not considered fitting of the subreddit, but the post is nonetheless abused by fellow community members, calling the original poster a "normie," a terrible insult to memers of this and other ironic communities (Fig. 29). One feasible reason for the rejection is that the image does not have enough of the collage or ugly aesthetics, favored among surreal memers; but another comment suggests a detection of inauthenticity may have been the true taboo: "Its just an Indian meme..Gulugulugul is onomotopia for your stomach churning [sic]" (Fig. 29). This commenter specifically lays out a critique that this meme cannot be a surreal meme because it belongs more appropriately to the "Indian meme" subcategory, due to the presence of an

Indian onomatopoeia. Would the meme have been thus criticized if the creator had chosen a different sound-word, especially a standard English one like “blub-blub-blub” or “gurgle-gurgle”?

Uniqueness is indeed an important, driving force in art, and the uniqueness that /r/SurrealMemes seeks within its creations echoes the uniqueness Breton and his fellow surrealists sought. Though surrealists seek to be “critical rather than complicit” in the social worlds they inhabit, the digital landscape provides an opportunity to connect with like-minded critics; such a position among peers allows them to be equally released from social mores, critical of conformity and, most importantly, able to adopt a sort of necessary egotism (Haynes 32). Essentially, though /r/SurrealMemes, and meme communities like it, praise the values of authenticity, creativity, and individuality (the tenants of “uniqueness”), they are still all the while trying to form a community boundary within which there is some sense of cohesion—or sameness. When Segev, et al., conducted their study on the quiddities (or singular essences) of meme families, they found there was a tense interplay of a meme family’s uniqueness and coherence, like two energy sources feeding into the same stream; uniqueness was measured by the distance between a meme’s singular attributes and the attributes of the mainstream (the most common generic attributes in the entire sample); what they found was that “the more unique the shared attributes within a meme family [were], the higher the difference between shared attributes within and outside a meme family”; in other words, surreal memes are able to be so distinctive only because they share among themselves a uniformity (425; 428). This means they inhabit the spaces of both authentic and inauthentic, one together and yet one apart, neither here nor/and there—much like a dream.



[–] **FlamesEmoji** 62 points 9 months ago

NOT SURREAL. DISQUALIFIED.

permalink embed save

[–] **chagas_disease** 31 points 9 months ago

$N^{O^{R>m}}$ {ie}

permalink embed save

[–] **QueenCharla** 27 points 9 months ago

This is the least surreal meme I've ever seen in my life

permalink embed save

[–] **enmes** 20 points 9 months ago

Oh, when a still image becomes elderly enough to accumulate dust in the back of my mind, I do not feel entertained in seeing it multiple times.

permalink embed save

[–] **nonouiswrong** 14 points 9 months ago

Its just an Indian meme..

Gulugulugul is onomotopia for your stomach churning

permalink embed save

Figure 29: Top, an unsuccessful surreal meme and, bottom, the comments that accompanied it, taken from /r/SurrealMemes.

Memeing and Dreaming

A sign is anything which points to or determines something else; that a sign often carries a message, and that this message has both a denotative (face-value) and connotative (implied, unsaid) side, which sometimes but not always carry the same meaning; that these signs, then, can be either icons, indexes, or symbols, depending on how far away the sign is to representing its message (an icon being an exact representative, an index being a pointed representative, and a symbol being a representative only insofar as one is aware of the connection). In Chapter One, I discussed ironic memes, which I liken to signs whose denotative and connotative messages are dissimilar, but especially dissimilar in that one message, the denotative, is deliberately insincere; we can think of them as indexes pretending to be icons. In Chapter Two, I discussed absurd memes, which I liken to signs that are deliberately ambiguous about their status, playful even; we can think of them as sometimes icons, sometimes indexes, and sometimes symbols, interchangeably. Surreal memes, however, are almost exclusively symbols, severing the traditional connection that an audience might have to an image.

Surrealism is predicated on the ideas of symbolism. Balakian compares symbolism to what is supposedly its opposite, naturalism; except, as she points out, the two perspectives are not as opposite as one, and even many of the practitioners of the perspectives, suspects. Both symbolism and naturalism sought to portray life in a true manner, without all the glamour of romanticism; symbolists such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud believed that the efforts of the naturalists to only catalogue the truth in the barest sense was a fruitless effort—language, they thought, was incapable, and, therefore, it was the symbolist's job to "recreate language…through the use of symbols, [creating] patterns of meanings based on symbolic representation and allusion rather than direct statement" ("Symbolism"). Yet, even in their efforts to be unlike the

naturalists, the symbolists realized humanity's incapability of overcoming natural forces and social limitations; both saw death as our most formidable, and ultimately undefeatable, enemy; and both "concur in accepting the helplessness of man's condition on earth" (Balakian 38). Symbolism was popular at the turn of the twentieth century and is no doubt an influence on the surrealist movement that came later. For the surrealist, there is the object with a lack of meaning inherent in it. But that's the point.

Breton defined surrealism thusly in his first *Manifesto*: "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express…the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern"; he tells us that surrealism's utmost concern is "in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought" (22). In my research for surrealism, I was surprised by how often dreaming appears as a metaphor for the art. Bruenig told us that millennial comedy is "a dream world where ideas twist and suddenly vanish." I certainly think of a dream when I see the memes of this chapter, or the meme of Figure 30, in which a clock face has as its numbers more clock faces. This meme seems



Figure 30: A surreal meme, taken from /r/SurrealMemes.

reminiscent to me of the ways that Breton himself described one of his first encounters with surrealism, which came in the form of a phrase and accompanying image; they came to him late at night, seemingly from the depths of his subconscious: “There is a man cut in two by the window” were the words, and he admits that had he the ability to draw he would have immediately set to sketching out the picture that came to his mind, “of a man walking cut half way up by a window perpendicular to the axis of his body” (17-18). This image, and the phrase with it, he felt was something of a character “never seen,” that is to say, unique in the world (18). Affirming the dream-like quality of these surreal memes, Breton’s surrealism was a combination, a resolution, of the dream and waking states of mind, into an “absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak” (11).

Dreamers are taken to “the sources of poetic imagination” and given a sense of freedom to create whatever they please, things that cannot be made in the physical world (Breton 15). Surrealism seeks to get as close to that creation as possible. According to Breton, the logical thought through which we attach logic and attribute meaning to the things we perceive are merely rude interruptions, unwelcome. In surrealist art and thought, the mind works of its own accord, generating phrases and images without, or at least with minimal intrusion of, the consciousness interfering by attempting to make sense of them—think back to the automatic writing and corpse drawing. When surreal memers piece together their creations, they are letting a dreamer’s subconscious overtake them, driving them to pair that which the normies find unpairable, borrowing equally from their own imaginations as from their community’s collective collection (for it is the balance of unique/similar that promises the meme’s success). Bruenig did manage to interview one of the members of that odd, surrealist comedy due, Heidecker and Warheim. The way Warheim describes what he assumes to be the appeal of his comedy also

seems unignorably dreamlike: “It feels interesting to live in that surreal moment versus the horror of reality sometimes… But I just feel like it’s fun to watch our show, and you are transported to another dimension of similar things, but it’s not real, so you’re just like ‘ahh’ . . . it’s a pleasant surreal world.” A dream-world. That is the place you are transported to when you enter /r/SurrealMemes, a place where Meme Man and Orang Min will take you into outer space to see strange, deformed but fantastic creatures. In their realm, nothing makes sense and everything is taken to such a bizarre extreme that even the referential material of their spaces seem to break down into nonsense.

Conclusion

The communities I've analyzed in this work, those of/r/DankMemes, /r/DeepFriedMemes, and /r/SurrealMemes, all share memes which have been categorized under the broad label of "Ironic Memes" by *Know Your Memes*, master catalogers of the digital landscape's meme sphere. Obviously, in my work, I've strained these two subreddits out and put their memes into separate categories, but I've done this (if I may be honest) with no small amount of discomfort. It's difficult to tell exactly how ironic, how sincere or insincere, memers are trying to be when their creation is released from their hands into the digital landscape. Phillips and Milner cannot emphasize this one idea enough: the internet is an ambivalent zone. Not ambivalent in the sense of "unsure" or "undecided," as I was ambivalent about the decision to somewhat-arbitrarily create absurd and surreal meme categories, but rather a "polysemous" ambivalent, in the sense of, as they say, "cases that could go either way, in fact could go any way simultaneously, immediately complicating any easy assessment of authorial intent, social consequence, and cultural worth" (10-11). When the memers try their hand at irony, as the memers of Dank, Deep Fried, and Surreal Memes do, they are signaling the fact that they are insincere about whatever opinion is being expressed within the confines of their creations. Dank Memers, for example, laugh in the face of those who take offense to their offensive comedy, because those who "don't get it" reveal themselves to be outsiders. In fact, it's honestly likely the memers' attempts at absurdity and surrealism are insincere, and thus ironic, in and of themselves, and the matter of my taking seriously their memes signals to everyone that I am indeed an outsider. I can only imagine what they'd think of this study, my unabashed exercise in over-explaining a joke.

Imagine my horror when I first began this study, when I interpreted every sexualized

objectification of a woman, every racial slur, as completely sincere. Similarly, at his height of popularity, researchers LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam found that conservative viewers of Stephen Colbert, host of a parody news show, "not only processed the messages [of The Colbert Report] as targeting liberals, but also processed the source as being conservative, Republican, and disliking liberals" (224). This is called "biased processing," and they found that the result of this misinterpretation had a deeper cognitive effect:

> "It appears… that biased processing serves a function of reinforcing individually held political beliefs and attitudes. Thus, when conditions for biased processing exist (e.g., Colbert's deadpan satire) polarization is likely to result. As individuals on each side of the political issue interpret the source as targeting the opposition and agreeing with their own viewpoint, the two opposing sides are likely to strengthen their own position as "the correct position," thereby leading to a deeper divide between the two groups." (LaMarre, et al. 226-227)

This may not be so important to note except to consider that racist/sexist/homophobic individuals viewing ironic memes might be interpreting the ironic offensiveness of the page with complete seriousness, and that seeing their viewpoint "validated" in such a way could indeed be a way of strengthening their positions. As someone who does not hold these beliefs, it is difficult in many circumstances for me to tell whether the creators of these memes are attempting to be ironic, perhaps even offering a veiled critique, are truly racist, sexist, or homophobic, or else are simply being trolls who are doing it for their own personal gratification, "4 the lulz." Whether dank, deep fried, or surreal memes encourage negativity remains to be seen, but one outcome their negative cyclone did do is spurn the creation of a reactionary movement: /r/WholesomeMemes.

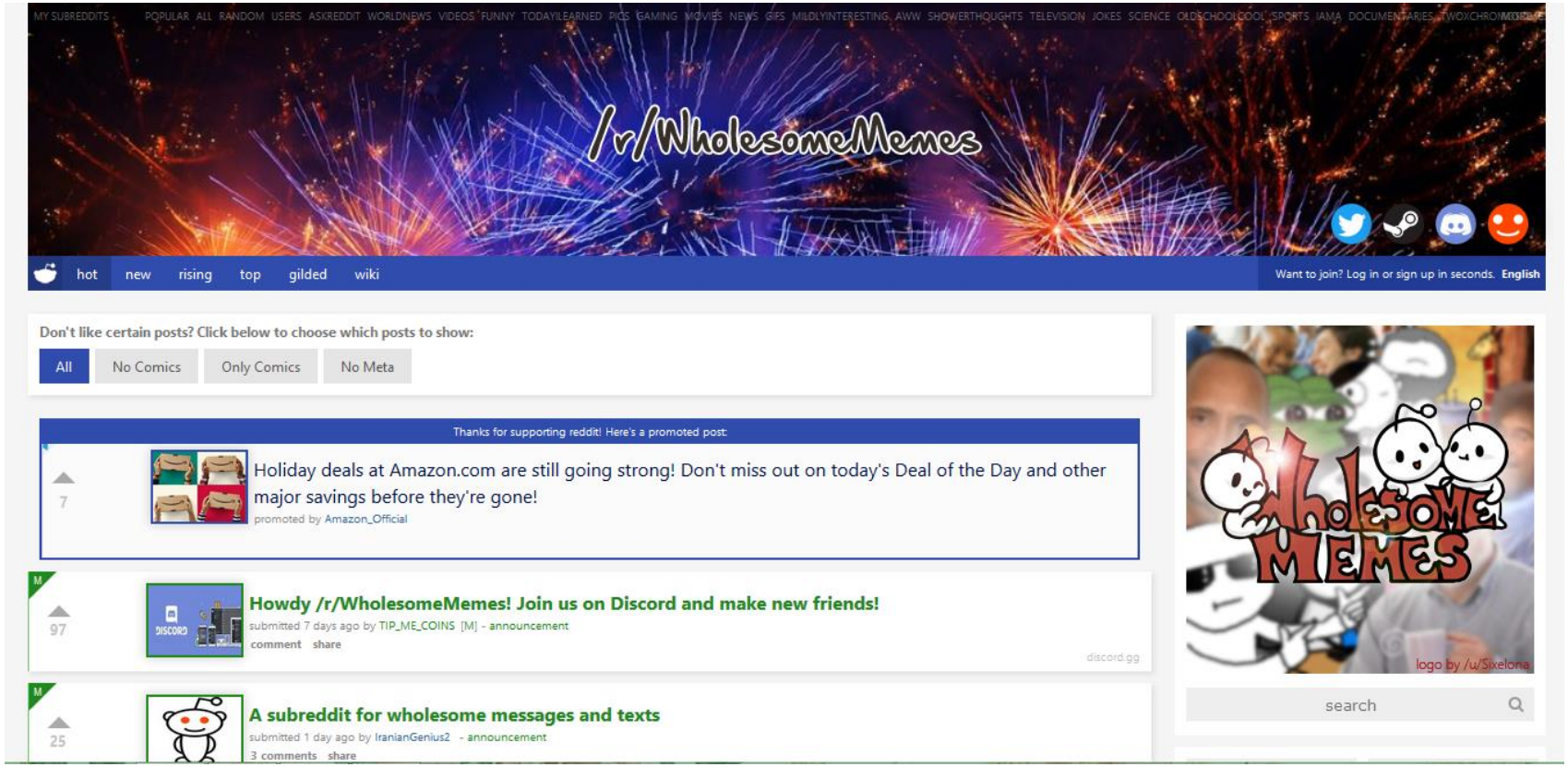


Figure 31: The /r/WholesomeMemes homepage.

The Wholesome Memes subreddit was created in 2016 with the express purpose of subverting the negativity being popularized by such fellow subreddits as /r/DankMemes ("Wholesome Memes"). It's about as straightforward as it sounds, and that is intentionally so. When one enters the subreddit, the homepage seems a brighter, more welcoming alternate reality to the one shown on /r/DankMemes (Fig. 31). Its background is plain and text legible, and the title "/r/WholesomeMemes" superimposed upon the image of fireworks even changes to a rainbow pattern when a mouse hovers over it. All this stands as a direct contradiction to the loud, demanding atmosphere of /r/DankMemes or /r/DeepFriedMemes, which comes across as so busy it's intimidating. Additionally, a guest on any of these subreddits might start off with immediate confusion if he or she is not already familiar with the dank meme subgenre, because the subreddit itself offers no explanation beyond sarcasm. This is not so on /r/WholesomeMemes. Here, a simple scroll down to the information section of the page (normally found on the right near the top) reveals a complete explanation of what "wholesome memes" are, encouraging those who are yet unfamiliar to be one step closer to being a member of the community. Among their definition of the wholesome meme are such requirements as that it is "devoid of corruption or malice," has "no snark or sarcasm," "conveys support, positivity, compassion, love, affection, and genuine friendship," and, lastly, "subverts a generally negative meme to be more positive." Unlike ironic meme communities, whose point and purpose seem fatuous if not dubious at times, /r/WholesomeMemes is well aware of exactly what it hopes to accomplish, and that is to be subversive. But this time the subversion comes in the form of sincerity.

The rise of /r/WholesomeMemes, a subreddit which beats out even /r/DankMemes's membership at over 1,200,000 subscribers as of February 2018, reflects not a death of irony, but rather a broader rise in the appeal of a new type of irony: post-irony. When something is "ironic"

it has overtly insincere overtones. Oddly, faux-ironic overtones bend meaning back around onto itself such that a "post-ironic" image actually portrays a sincere message. Like many other "post" movements (think post-modernism), the members seek a departure from an old way of doing things. The wholesome memer calls out her intention with such explicitness, but even if such subversive intention were not highlighted one would easily be able to recognize this subreddit's appropriation of other popular meme formats. In their efforts to subvert more overtly negative meme formats, they maintain many of the same visual hallmarks of their competitors, namely the ugly aesthetic. In Figure 32, they intentionally distorted the images of their meme creation in order to convey an individual and his dog excitedly running towards one another, mimicking the distortion of the memes we've seen in Chapters One, Two, and Three, normally a signal of irony; Figure 32 incorporates a stock photo with the watermark conspicuously left intact, but rather than using the smiling faces to ironically pair them with a dark, absurd, or surreal message (as our other meme communities might have), /r/WholesomeMemes attaches a text distinctly lacking in any irony—here, the bright, happy stock photo family is genuinely bright and happy. It's not that the wholesome meme community is trying to out-do or upstage their counterparts so much as it is an effort taken to combat the grim march forward of the other with an overwhelming call



Figure 32: Wholesome memes, taken from /r/WholesomeMemes.

to arms. Again, we cannot know for sure what these memes' purposes are—for example, do creators of wholesome memes really have the world of Dank Memes in mind, and are they being intentionally antagonistic? To what end? Their direct appropriation seems an obvious nod to Dank Memes, and so it does not seem hard to argue that this meme culture seeks to invert the message of the other.

Whatever the answers to these questions reveal, they can be tapered by other, more uplifting facts. /r/WholesomeMemes, two years younger than its dark-sided brother, raced past /r/DankMemes in popularity faster than anyone could have expected, with a massive but steady rise to over a million subscribers (and counting) since its inception in 2016 ("/r/wholesomememes metrics"). This is an amazing feat, one that begs the question of how such a spontaneous jump could occur. The simple answer is that /r/WholesomeMemes found a wider audience in its usage of the positive, post-ironic voice. One of the two creators of the wholesome memes subreddit, who goes by the username poppwall, said in an interview that s/he believes that the subreddit "has provided some much-needed positivity in an accessible format" in a time when humor on the internet has reached strange, "surreal" peaks (Jackson). The communities of Dank, Deep Fried, and Surreal Memes reward their members for being derisive and exclusionary; when an ironic memer shares a creation abstracted to the point that it will only be understood by a small grouping of insiders, the memer succeeds in reinforcing a community boundary that alienates more so than it welcomes. Such restrictive communities have nowhere to grow. On the contrary, /r/WholesomeMemes has open doors, where sincerity and genuineness are the qualities rewarded, where any image macro can be appropriated and reinvented so long as the end effect is to subvert hatred. And there seems to be a larger number of people trying to be wholesome than ironic.

The ultimate effect of this meme play, whether it is the play of /r/DankMemes, /r/DeepFriedMemes, /r/SurrealMemes, or /r/WholesomeMemes, has yet to be seen, and the extent to which memes will continue to be abstracted from their mainstream counterparts, and where exactly such abstractions will end, is unclear. It is clear, however, that memes have played an integral part in the formation, propagation, and continuation of these online meme communities. My main focus in studying such communities was to track the process by which meaning can be pulled away from an object, and how such extractions affect the communities at large. To that end, this project sought to explore the abstract turns of our contemporary internet humor and its usage in digital meme culture, mimicking and seeking to find for myself Gries' methodology of "eventfulness." What I hope readers take away from this project is to see the interconnected nature of our communicatory practices, that eventfulness of participation, in the digital sphere. As meme culture can spur the creation of an ironic retaliation in the form of dank memes, and those dank memes become the basis of inspiration for myriad meme communities onward, least of which being the deep fried, surreal, and wholesome meme communities, so can our likes, shares, tweets, and reblogs spur endless action and interaction across the digital landscape.

Although in this paper I have explored some of the aspects of what makes memes so fascinating, I'm aware that there are many more questions raised by this study, and still so much more about internet humor genres that want for investigation. What my research does not cover, and what other researchers might find answers to, is the abstraction of non-graphic memes, such as memetic expressions and performances, or the broader cultural implications of such digital weirdness. My study does, however, expand a fascinating area of research that is deeply in need of such expansion; I also think it is one that could be vastly important to the realms of

participatory politics at large. Memes are a genre of internet creation that nearly all internet participants have access to. The nature of the meme makes space for taking, sharing, and evolving in a way that few, if any, other communicative web resources do. The abstracting path of any given meme is only one of the many ways we can study how a meme communicates a message to an audience, or how that audience can interpret or receive said message. Any anonymous user can choose to imbed potent meaning into the body of a meme and then share it, but when such memes go viral they attain an eventfulness that lives and breathes on its own, giving an immense amount of voice and power to populations that might not have it outside the internet (both for good and, potentially, for bad). By studying how and why such memes are created then shared, we might get a clearer picture of how internet cultures act and interact with one another—and if internet cultures are just copies of "real" human cultures, as I believe they are, we can gain a deeper understanding of the nature of interpersonal human experience, and the nature not only of abstracted meaning in the digital landscape, but maybe IRL too.

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Vita

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