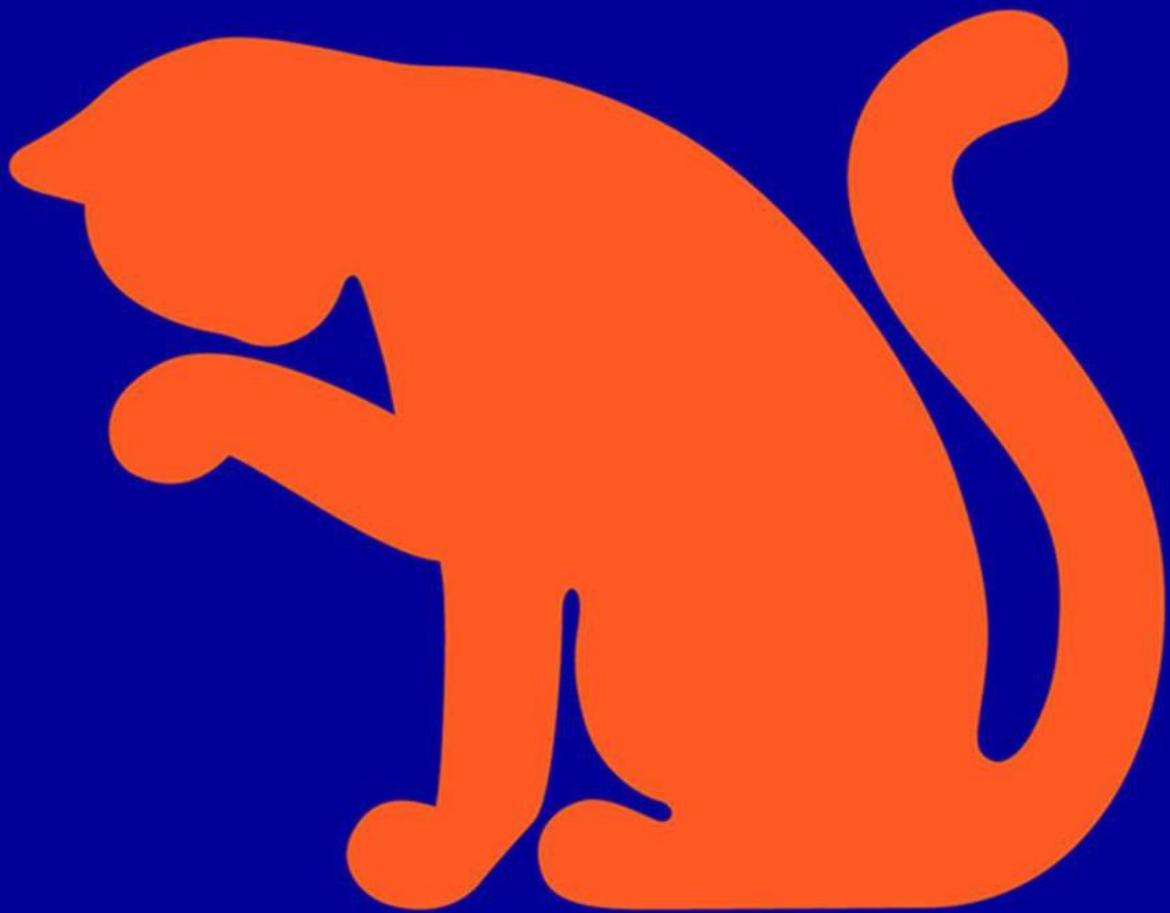


CAN
JOKES BRING
DOWN
GOVERNMENTS?



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3. THE MEME

The notion of the “meme” was introduced by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in the late 1970s as a way to describe what he called a “cultural gene.” Memes are units of culture and behaviour, which survive and spread via imitation and adaptation. Examples of memes are dances, catchphrases, greetings, hairstyles. On the internet, they can be pictures of cute cats or unicorns; they can be Rick Astley videos or perverse sexual images. Memes play a distinct role in protest; they seem to be to the resistance of today what “political posters” were to yesterday – the embodiment of shared ideas in a community. They can be JPEGs, or rumours. Indeed, part of their appeal is that memes seem to spread spontaneously. Paul Mason, the BBC’s travelling chronicler of all things crisis-related, found that “with the internet [...] and above all with the advent of social media, it’s become possible to observe the development of memes at an accelerated pace [...]. What happens is that ideas arise, are immediately ‘market tested’, and then are seen to either take off, bubble under, insinuate themselves into the mainstream, or, if they are deemed no good, disappear.”¹⁶ Mason contends that “[for] activists, memes create a kind of rough alternative to representative democracy.” But he seems unsure as to their potential for permanence; are they anything more than “small cultural portions of the zeitgeist”?¹⁷

Richard Dawkins was looking for a model that would explain how culture spreads and disseminates among people. In doing so, he applied Darwinian principles to phenomena of human creation and imitation. “Cultural transmission,” Dawkins said, “is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution.” Genes are replicators. What is their cultural equivalent? The unit of transmission or imitation proposed by Dawkins has itself proven memetic; it is a ruthlessly pervasive idea that applies to phenomena we see all around us. He explained the name:

‘Mimeme’ comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’, or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with ‘cream.’¹⁸

There are three qualities that define the success of memes: longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity. *Longevity* indicates how long a meme can last. *Fecundity* applies to the *appeal* of a meme, whether it is *catchy* and thus likely to spread. *Copying-fidelity* is about the strength of a meme to withstand mutation in the process of copying and imitation. It determines how much of the original core remains intact when the meme is in transmission. All three criteria also apply to jokes, but the joke was not mentioned by Dawkins as an example of a meme.

Some suggestions in this direction were made, however, by the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, a friend of Dawkins. Hofstadter was convinced that memes looked a lot like self-referential patterns, which would render them not only survival-minded and selfish – but also fundamentally absurd. An example of such self-referentiality is the Epimenides Paradox. The Cretan thinker Epimenides stated that “All Cretans are liars.” The intricacies of this message, which says, “this statement is false,” were explored by Hofstadter in his seminal book, *Gödel, Escher, Bach*.¹⁹ Hofstadter brought memes to the attention of the readership of the *Scientific American* in the early 1980s, right before the idea caught on with the general public. Jeremy Trevelyan Burman reconstructs:

In January of 1983, Hofstadter published an essay that directly discusses his interpretation of the memes proposal. This was inspired, he said, by letters from readers of his previous columns – in particular, by letters from Stephen Walton and Donald Going, who suggested that self-referential sentences of the sort discussed in *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (e.g., ‘This sentence is false’) could be described as being afflicted by a kind of meaning-virus: self-reference parasitizes language, makes it inconsistent with itself, and then encourages the reader (as carrier) to find or construct new instances of meaning-breaking self-reference.²⁰

As Burman notes, “[both] Walton and Going were struck by the perniciousness of such sentences: the selfish way they invade a space of ideas and manage, merely by making copies of themselves all over the place, to take over a large portion of that space. Why do they not manage to overrun all of the space? It is a good question. The answer should be obvious to students of evolution: the sentences do not do so because of competition from other self-replicators.”²¹

Memes are not phenomena *of* language; they are phenomena *with* language. From words that simply “annotate” a meme, conveying its minimally required meaning in a given context, to words that become an

integral part of the meme's functioning. The standard internet meme is an image captioned with heavy type, superimposed on it "for humorous effect" (says Wikipedia). The sentences that are thus part of the image create some kind of strange loop or self-reference; but they also involve tacit knowledge on the part of the viewer. An example is the portrait of the Boromir character from the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, captioned with a sentence starting with "One does not simply..." In the original film, the actor Sean Bean says: "One does not simply walk into Mordor. Its black gates are guarded by more than just orks."²² The "One does not simply..." meme has this sentence completed in different ways:

One does not simply grow his dick six inches in three easy steps.
One does not simply topple a Ugandan warlord by pressing "like" on Facebook.
One does not simply log out of a friend's Facebook without making him gay.

A fictional, but widely known, point of reference is tinkered with to create new implications, to the point that one no longer thinks of Tolkien and Peter Jackson at all. But the remainder of that commonly held reference point, the tacit knowledge, which is that I know that you know that I know that particular part of *The Lord of the Rings* enables the joke, *any joke*, that follows. If, for instance, the same sentence would be based on a film that no one has ever seen, its mention would never achieve the same immediate impact. A meme can tap into a collective memory and transform the "outcome" of a commonly held starting point to different ends.

Further study into the nature of self-referentiality was done by Susan Stewart in her legendary book, *Nonsense*. For Stewart, the category of "nonsense" is opposed to the category of "common sense making" through which what we think of as reality is established. By categorising something as "nonsense", "the legitimacy and rationality of sense making was left uncontaminated, unthreatened."²³

It is not difficult to see a fundamental political procedure at work here. Isn't it exactly the day job of most politicians to *manage* reality and sense-making, deciding what *others* get to see as nonsense and what as legit? One is tempted to think here of Labour leader Ed Miliband's June, 2011 condemnation of nationwide strikes in the UK. In a BBC interview,

Miliband gave the same answer to each different question posed to him by the journalist. “These strikes are wrong ... both sides should put aside the rhetoric and get around the negotiating table ...”²⁴ Time and again, Miliband hammered out the same words. His drone-like repetition of a single, studied phrase laid bare a structural protocol of governance, an inability to deviate from a script – even more preposterous when you think that Miliband is supposed to lead the opposition rather than govern the country. “Milibot,” as the curious speech exercise became known, is an example of what Mark Fisher subsequently labelled “reality management.”²⁵ It showed the impossibility of conducting “opposition” within the governing neoliberal frame, and the desperation of a politician trying to stay inside of it.

Indeed, argued Stewart, “all discourse bears reference to a commonly held world. The discourse of common sense refers to the ‘real world.’ The discourse of nonsense refers to ‘nothing.’ In other words, it refers to itself, even though it must manufacture this ‘nothing’ out of a system of differences from the everyday world – the common stuff of social life – in order to be recognised as ‘nothing.’”²⁶

Nonsense also involves an element of “play.” Boromir’s “One does not simply...” bounces off from a widely known, and also slightly ridiculous phrase, and then goes on to take completely different directions with it. Stewart notes that

Playing at fighting may be “not fighting,” but it is not fighting on a different level of abstraction from other kinds of not fighting such as kissing, skipping rope, buying groceries, or singing “Happy Birthday.” Play involves the manipulation of the conditions and contexts of messages and not simply a manipulation of the message itself. It is not, therefore, a shift within the domain of the everyday lifeworld: it is a shift to another domain of reality.²⁷

Memes take on a wide variety of forms and formats, but they do their work right in the human brain. Time, explained Dawkins, constitutes a major limit on the success of individual memes. No one person can do more than only a few things at once. Consequently, said Richard Dawkins, “if a meme is to dominate the attention of a human brain, it must do so at the expense of ‘rival’ memes.”

Digital networks and social media do not dissolve the limits in attention that the human brain can give to any meme, but they do more or less solve two out of the three criteria that, according to Dawkins,

determine a meme's success: longevity and copying-fidelity. Longevity of a meme in a digital network is in most cases guaranteed; a file may very well never be erased, and exist as long as the server exists that stores it. Then, copy-fidelity is guaranteed if a meme spreads by forwarding and reblogging a digital original. The meme's distribution into the gene pool is then completely without loss of quality. If a meme spreads by *imitation*, changes made in the process are still traceable when compared to an "original." Memes tend to be most successful if they get both copied *and* imitated.

When it comes to the meme's intrinsic fecundity digital networks don't give easy answers. Fecundity can't be presupposed just by something being on the internet. For every successful digital meme there are many thousands of failed attempts. Many internet memes share distinctive features shaped by the unwritten rules of their commonly held world – be it software used, the online forum inhabited, a language spoken, or a set of aesthetic preferences. This, in turn, has led to the predictable misconception that anything produced following those unwritten rules is bound to become a meme. This is not the case. Successful memes balance their reference to a commonly held world with an element giving them a strikingly new meaning. The more "advanced" a meme is, the more its meaning will be implied by manipulation of the context in which the meme appears.

On November 18, 2011, Fred Baclagan, a retired FBI agent, sent an e-mail to his contact list:

Hello all, I was very disturbed to find this in my inbox this morning: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHg5SJYRHA028>

The link leads to the music video of Rick Astley's 1987 UK Charts, and Billboard Hot 100 No. 1 hit, *Never Gonna Give You Up*. The video is posted on YouTube under the title "RickRoll'd," and has been viewed 66,833,023 times, and counting. Baclagan's two Gmail accounts had been broken into by a hacktivist group called Antisec; his messages had been dumped online and Antisec made Baclagan aware of this fact by just sending him the Rick Astley link. Such is the power of a successful meme's manipulation of context. In common parlance, being

“Rickrolled” now means having been hacked and knowing it; Astley’s song is a kiss of death. Baclagan was, in turn, inadvertently rickrolling his own contacts by just forwarding the Astley link. The origins of rickrolling lay in an amusing prankster meme on 4chan and other internet forums, where a seemingly promising, interesting and relevant link would lead an unsuspecting user to Rick Astley. It is a *gotcha* of sorts, which brings you “face-to-face with the ridiculous.”²⁹

Instead of merely entrapment in a false choice, the rickroll transports the user to what Susan Stewart called “another domain of reality.” Instead of some parallel dream world, this is more of a conceptual overhaul in which all prior sense-making is erased, including the original meaning of Astley’s own video.

Astley floats on an all-in, ready-to-roll commonly held world; like Boromir, there is tacit knowledge involved, of an audience’s awareness of Rick Astley and his song. This is knowledge of the type “it’s that guy/that song again” rather than “this is a young Rick Astley performing Stock Aitken and Waterman’s 1987 monster hit.”

But unlike the Boromir meme, the Astley video, as a meme, comes to imply a whole new set of things even *without* the superimposition of any new content.

The economist Thomas Schelling, in a 1958 experiment, famously found that when two people are to meet in New York City, but have not agreed on a place and time to do so (and have no way to coordinate their movements), they are likely to expect the other to show up at the clock in the middle of the Main Concourse of Grand Central Station at 12 noon. Schelling called such a space-time convergence a “focal point.” Focal points arise not out of a prior agreement, but out of expectations. Memes can be focal points in man-made information space, in absence of a prior agreement. For example, the word “Tahrir Square” is a meme, shorthand, for the entire Arab Spring. Many (in fact, too many) people who have never been to Tahrir Square refer to it with intimate familiarity, and expect others to understand what they mean when they utter the word “Tahrir.” In London in 2011, “Tahrir Square” street signs began to appear; streets seemed, indeed, to become psychologically primed for

revolt; its possibility was being introduced to areas where people might not have otherwise expected it. Tahrir in “memespace” converged with Tahrir in “meatspace”³⁰ as a self-evident focal point.

While Schelling lay bare the “prominence or conspicuousness” of focal points, later analysis compared focal points to conventions, or “common expectations or regularities.”³¹ It is a meme’s ultimate reward to achieve the platinum status of “regularity”; but it is also the moment that its evolution has come to a halt. *Never Gonna Give You Up* has achieved such status; even retired FBI agents now get the in-joke. In an ecosystem of expectations, memes cash in on the primeval instincts that both sustain and continuously undercut the order of common sense that determines their place. Richard Dawkins claimed that a meme’s dominance could only be curbed by rival memes. Any rival of a dominant meme must cash in on the same type of lowly desire which makes you devour tabloids and horoscopes; if one meme is low, its challenger must be lower, until the cycle is broken and a new one begins. Some of these open secrets of fecundity have been probed by Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, founders of the subversive British acid house group, The KLF. Their *Manual* to create UK No. 1 chart hits is extremely relevant to meme creation. In it, the duo sets out to amusingly prepare the reader to write, produce and release a UK Number One hit single. Drummond and Cauty develop a fairly comprehensive view on what it takes to reach a top position in the charts in the late 1980s. A *Smash Hits* music journalist named Neil Tennant had already laid some groundwork for this with his Pet Shop Boys seminal hit *West End Girls* – a UK and US Number One in 1985, its mood and lyrics alluding to, but not spelling out, class war in Britain.

Drummond and Cauty, in their song writing and production, promote a ruthless exploitation of the oasis of fecundity that is our gene pool. They reserve special praise for Stock, Aitken and Waterman – the latter-day golden boys of the mixing room – who wrote and produced one hit after the other and dominated all the charts around the last half of the 1980s. Drummond and Cauty appear overjoyed at the inherent fecundity of Stock, Aitken and Waterman’s production of monster hits. In particular,

they admire *Never Gonna Give You Up* by Rick Astley. Right when Astley “hit the first line of the chorus on his debut single it was all over – the Number One position was guaranteed,” write Drummond and Cauty:

“I’m never gonna give you up”

It says it all. It’s what every girl in the land whatever her age wants to hear her dream man tell her. Then to follow that line with:

*“I’m never gonna let you down
I’m never going to fool around
or upset you.”*

GENIUS.³²

Stock, Aitken and Waterman produced not just songs but also entire acts. They “invented” Bananarama, “created” Dead or Alive, “developed” Rick Astley, and “engineered” Kylie Minogue – each of them a platinum meme by itself. Stock, Aitken and Waterman’s primary genius was, for the KLF, not so much in the overall stories their songs tell, but in the way catchy phrases are used. Stock, Aitken and Waterman are “able to spot a phrase [...] a line that the nation will know exactly what is being talked about, and then use it perfectly:

“Fun Love and Money”

“Showing Out”

“Got To Be Certain”

“Respectable”

“Toy Boy”

“Cross My Broken Heart”³³

The three producers were themselves invisible, almost anonymous, behind the one-hit wonders they produced. They achieved their outcomes “masked” as Kylie Minogue or Rick Astley; looking like a baroque lollypop Marquis de Sade on one day (Dead or Alive), a proto-Rihanna R&B star (Princess – whose hit song is aptly called *Say I’m Your Number One*) on the next. Appearing as photo model secretaries (Mel & Kim), or pre-cybernetic, exploitative glam punks (Sigue Sigue Sputnik), each of Stock, Aitken and Waterman’s avatars landed in the charts’ top echelon out of nowhere, but always well below the bar of good taste. They changed the memetic landscape forever, and then disappeared.

Rival memes are rival dreams – the game is on not for a little bit of attention, or a little “like” here and there, but for a massive attack of the lowest common denominator, a rapture of the underbelly. Stock, Aitken

and Waterman understood how such a project might be structured. While, indeed, internet memes use many elements floating in the common gene pool, these elements are almost always original acts by others; focal points and common references in a sea of information. Stock, Aitken and Waterman's "anonymity" behind the identities of their one-hit wonders was later eclipsed by the more overall facelessness of electronic dance music.

Enter the Lolcat

Stock, Aitken and Waterman are the original "coders" of Rick Astley and thus, by proxy, of the "Rickroll." The trio is not known for its political activities, but that doesn't matter; the internet meme version of any piece of original work is not likely to sustain any of its intended values. The inherent ridiculousness of Boromir and Rick Astley qualifies an *indifference* to their original meaning, which is why the Rickroll meme is disruptive as a form while its "content" can consist of pure Stock, Aitken and Waterman.

Many contemporary electronic images found on the internet are mere byproducts of the omnipresence of digital cameras. But they may lose that sense of innocence. A good example of an innocent image supercharged by the internet is the Lolcat. Lolcats are pictures of cats, superimposed with texts. Things are at their most hilarious when one tries to describe this type of image and its intended effect in a neutral manner; Wikipedia on February 21, 2013 found that a "lolcat (pronounced/ 'lɒlkæt/ lol-kat) is an image combining a photograph of a cat with text intended to contribute humour. [...] LOLcat is a composite of two words, 'lol' and 'cat'. 'LOL' stands for 'Laugh out Loud' or 'Laughing out Loud'; hence, lolcats are intended to be funny and to include jokes."³⁴ There is also something funny about seriously discussing "I can has cheezburger", one of the best-known Lolcat memes. It is hard to discuss this trying to make sense. Cats are not eager to please; they are not likely to give in to any false choices presented to them. A Lolcat is the exact

opposite of a Milibot; whereas Milibot desperately tries to force his puzzled listeners into “sense-making,” Lolcat jumps out of the frame in which the false choice offered still seems to make any sense at all. Cats are today’s political animals.

Every era, every generation, has to construct and reconstruct its political beliefs, and subsequent visuals, out of the stuff that surrounds it at any given moment. Protest signs will be made out of the cardboard, paper and textile available at that given time and place at a local hardware store; there is no hardware store selling “political” cardboard, so even at that material level, a transformation always has to be made. The same goes for the visual stuff of the internet; every generation will construct new, “political” beliefs out of it; out of all kinds of stuff, which seemed initially non-political. This is especially striking when, in Europe, a not merely “non-political” but “post-political” generation grapples with its own politicisation under the aegis of austerity, neoliberalism, and financial-managerial-political corruption. For example, the cutting-edge Leftist political journal *Kittens*, published in London by The Wine and Cheese Appreciation Society of Greater London / Kittens Editorial Collective, features radical leftist writing *only* alongside photographs of cute kittens.³⁵ The strangest thing is that this combination further radicalises the message; *Kittens* acknowledges head-on the self-politicisation of an information space in which we were supposed to merely *enjoy ourselves*. In the absence of a “properly political” visual expression at hand, the stuff that is readily available, the internet’s equivalent of cardboard, gets politicised just like Astley became the “Rickroll.” In other words, every bit of visual information on the internet can, through the spectre of self-politicisation, become revolutionary, because it exists in a shared gene pool. Cats are especially useful and relevant. In *Wired* magazine, Gideon Lewis-Kraus has tracked the origins of the Lolcat back to Japan, where it is tied to a culture of online anonymity.³⁶ In a sense the Lolcat is to the average person what Sinitta was to Stock Aitken and Waterman. Lewis-Kraus traces why cats are so successful as internet symbols; he cites research about the relation between depression in humans and domestic cats. Indeed,

your cat will like you best if you pretend that you don't desperately want to play with it all the time. ... The more neurotic the cat owner – the more desperate for fuzzy comfort and nuzzly security and unconditional affection – the briefer the interactions that damn cat would allow.

And so,

What we do on the internet is mostly “like” things, and while liking them we wait for our own content to be liked. We check our analytics as we await retweets. This is where the cats come in. A cat will not retrieve some dumb object so that you can throw it yet again ... That goes against everything cats stand for. Or more often sit. It's not just that cats are unable to be anything but real; it's that cats both know they are performing *and* couldn't possibly care less about how their performance is received ... What an internet cat does is thus confront us with how cravenly we ourselves court approval. A cat, if it decides to love you, will do so only on its own terms ... and the less you need it, the better loved you are going to be. The reason the lolcat says “oh hai” is because he only *just noticed*, and certainly doesn't care. ... He doesn't worry about you or what you think. ... Thus is the internet cat the realest cat of all.³⁷

The Harvard University professor Ethan Zuckerman has put forward what he calls a “Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism.” Zuckerman proposed that with the user-generated content of the “web 2.0,” “we've embraced the idea that people are going to share pictures of their cats, and now we build sophisticated tools to make that easier to do. As a result, we're creating a wealth of tech that's extremely helpful for activists.”³⁸ Zuckerman maintained that the *network standard* built for sharing innocent cat pictures has the resilience to then also carry the exchanges of political activists. Memes prove that this network standard can politicise the forms appearing in it – from Rick Astley to the Lolcat.

Memes on the internet descended from the in-jokes of the first, academic, users on the earliest bulletin boards. But in the mid-2000s, places like 4chan mass-produced and weaponised the online meme. They were vehicles of trolling and pranking to achieve the “lulz” – the open-ended making fun of the ridiculous. This is what drives 4chan, the anarchic culture around it and, to a certain extent, Anonymous. The internet, to 4chan, is a refuge from work, obligation, class, and name. It is a place where nothing really makes sense or is supposed to do so. Its single objective – the lulz – made 4chan into a pressure cooker for internet memes, and later, hacktivism. In a leaked 2011 threat assessment about the hacktivist network Anonymous, the US Department of Homeland Security National Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Center mentioned the meme, defining it as an “idea, behaviour or style that spreads from person to person within a culture,” whereas the lulz is “often used to denote laughter at someone who is a victim of a prank /malicious activity, or a reason for performing an action.”³⁹

Mememes offer no explanation as to exactly why some of them work and others don't. They are hard to orchestrate at a larger scale; their success is always also an accident. Sheer quantity is about the only working strategy available. Mememes can be compared to the evolution of the blues, and are perhaps a new "slave music" for the internet. Drummond and Cauty in *The Manual* recall how every music is a reconfiguration of what came before and how "the complete history of the blues is based on a one chord structure, hundreds of thousands of songs using the same three basic chords in the same pattern. Through this seemingly rigid formula has come some of the twentieth century's greatest music."⁴⁰

4. JOKES

Imagine a joke.

Imagine a joke that hits, again and again. A joke that self-replicates until it becomes the inescapable, omnipresent truth that hovers over each and every one of your political opponents.

Why jokes? And why now? Here's why. Jokes are low budget. They are among the cheapest goods we all have access to; they don't cost anything, and they work. They are austerity-proof. Jokes, like laughs, are contagious, even if their intention is deadly serious. Governments the world over are fortifying themselves against their own citizens, and most of all against their jokes. But jokes easily pass through the walls of the fortresses. *The joke is an open-source weapon of the public.*

Monty Python as early as 1969 fantasised about a joke so funny it could kill; whoever heard it or read it would die laughing. "Joke warfare" would be the military deployment of jokes by opposing armies.

The original maker of a joke often, and ideally, remains anonymous. He or she is truly a designer. We consider a designer here to be any form-maker, regardless of material; design is merely a few decisions on a form and its boundary—in jokes, this consists of what is said and importantly, what is not said. Jokes are mobile; a joke catching on means it is forwarded. With online social media and mobile internet, jokes are no longer dependent on purely oral transmission, television, or print and paper. Such is their longevity and copying-fidelity that only the slightest remainder of a joke embedded in a new form can still carry the original.

Reality management, or sense-making, is establishing a frame in which certain things can be claimed not to have happened. Jokes are by virtue of their disruption of an existing order of "sense-making" very unwelcome guests in an age of austerity. We must cut spending now, there is no time for arguments, these are serious times demanding serious decisions, and so on – precisely the protocolar opiates issued by every technocrat in power today, which deny every alternative its right to sense-making, in the true spirit of capitalist realism. A governing class of bankers is

extremely keen on being seen as simply those who know best – the smartest guys in the room, to quote the title of a documentary about Enron. The parliamentary alternatives to those bankers are always either fuming (racist) populists or powerless factions of the former Left, endlessly regrouping, and arguing internally. For the austerity elites this presents a terrific opportunity to get away with their own looming power vacuum. Jokes can expose this vacuum. At the same time, there is a (growing) in-group that *gets the joke*. That in-group can equal almost the entire population of a country. In early 2011, Issandr el Amrani wrote about Hosni Mubarak – for decades, the butt of jokes when still president of Egypt:

What would happen if you spent 30 years making fun of the same man? What if for the last decade, you had been mocking his imminent death – and yet he continued to stay alive, making all your jokes about his immortality seem a bit too uncomfortably close to the truth?

Indeed, as Egyptian actor Kamal al-Shinnawi adds, “The joke is the devastating weapon which the Egyptians used against the invaders and occupiers. It was the valiant guerrilla that penetrated the palaces of the rulers and the bastions of the tyrants, disrupting their repose and filling their heart with panic.”⁴¹ Jokes are an active, living and mobile form of disobedience. The Seriousness and Trustworthy Nature of Western Government has slowly but surely eroded the practice of the open ridicule of their power; we’ve simply unlearned it. Comedians – a few effective ones exempt – preside over their jokes like Steve Jobs used to over the Apple brand; such jokes remain the property of their maker wherever they travel, and this is not the type of joke we intend to glorify here.

Jokes, in the past, were considered for what they really are: incredibly dangerous political weapons. The court’s jester was employed by the king, and was free to say whatever he wanted, but unfree to say it to anyone but the king. The jester’s speech was free because the jester was, as a political subject, unfree; his serfdom to the monarch could, depending on one’s angle, be regarded as imprisonment or safe haven.⁴²

At the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner it is customary for the US President to perform an act of self-parody in front of a laughing and applauding press corps – the same journalists who are supposed to

hold him to account. The Dinner reveals how absorbing parody into power neutralises critics and renders authority intangible. The civil rights journalist Glenn Greenwald describes it as “the purest expression of the total blending of political power, media subservience, and vapid celebrity in one toxic, repulsive, and destructive package.”⁴³ Just like capitalism’s capacity to co-opt its critics, the adoption of humour by power renders it less vulnerable to scrutiny. The smartest is the king who, indeed, is his own jester.

The joke is the highest form of power. Activists have the action and they live the life. Theorists have the words and they know their stuff. But the joke unites both perspectives. Jokes, when politically effective, perform what everybody knew but couldn’t say. The Arab Spring has seen memes that did nothing more than expose how the system works—such as the YouTube video, *Tunisie: Qui utilise l’avion de la présidence de la République?* created by the award-winning activist blog Nawaat. The video documents, with the aid of plane-spotting pictures and the Google Earth interface, the Tunisian presidential plane on its ongoing European tour, or, more accurately, the president’s wife’s shopping spree with taxpayers’ money.⁴⁴

The Ben Ali story is told with inescapable effect. The crucial element is the video’s accompanying music, which gives it memetic grandeur. Indeed, its chilling score of pseudo-Wagnerian bombast is both keeping the viewer glued to the screen, while parodying, and thus ridiculing, the baseless fanfare of power. Meanwhile, in Google Earth, Tunisia’s presidential plane hops between Geneva’s Cornavin airport, Milan Malpensa and Paris Orly in a corrupted fashion frenzy.

Memes and jokes as political tools

The meme has escaped the confines of internet forums, and is becoming a tool useful to targeted political struggles. This is illustrated by a series of interviews and essays published over the course of 2011 by the London-based ultra-left think tank, Deterritorial Support Group (DSG), which

examined the meme in the wake of the emergence of Anonymous as a geopolitical force of influence. In an interview with *Dazed*, DSG asserted:

Within the past few years, memes have started to take on a totally different function, and what would have been perceived as a slightly pathetic bunch of bastards in the past are today global players in undermining international relations – namely in the complex interaction of WikiLeaks with Anonymous, 4chan and other online hooligans. There's no coherent analysis to be had of this at the moment. However 'lulz' also demonstrate their potential as part of a policy of radical refusal to the demands of capital. When asked by liberals 'Do you condone or condemn the violence of the Black Bloc?' we can only reply in unison 'This cat is pushing a watermelon out of a lake. Your premise is invalid.'⁴⁵

Responding to a sensical question with a meaningless answer is an effective tool to negate the politics of the frame in which the question was posed. And politics has become so dispiriting that it inspires a Dadaist troll mentality. The question, “do you condone or condemn,” is a trap, a *gotcha*, intended to force all opposition to accord to a neoliberal frame – in other words, it is an exercise in sense-making. The absurd response refuses to participate in this exercise. It removes itself from the frame.

The political theorist Aaron Peters, presenter of ResonanceFM's epochal *Novara* radio show, contends that jokes are one among a series of political instruments, and should be used in concert with them. Says Peters:

The joke as a disruption of the symbolic order is useful in taking on the antagonist not through a formal and recognisable disagreement in *content* but instead as an attempt to negate the *form* of legitimate rational debate as they might have otherwise naturally presumed. Central to political contention, from protests to riots is disruption. Disruption of the circulation of goods and services during an industrial strike, a disruption of the reproduction of space with an occupation, a disruption to all social relations (or at least many of them) with the riot or insurrection. The joke, as one manifestation of the disruption of symbolic order can be seen in a similar vein in that it disrupts the circulation of discourse and is not *meant* to happen at the level of form when one engages in 'politics'. One sees this in jokes on placards at protests or stupid costumes – when protests aim at this alone they appear impotent and a meek attempt at 'subversion', which is ultimately bereft of power. This itself might be understood as the symbolic disruption of order as opposed to the disruption of the symbolic order, a key difference between spectacle and antagonism. However when combined with other protest repertoires, the occupation, the strike and the riot such 'jokes' become disconcerting for decision-makers. For instance amid the fires, darkness and violence in Parliament Square (from both police and protestors) on December 9th, 2010 (the apex of the UK student movement), the only visible speech acts were frequently jokes, such as 'comedy' placards. It is this mixture of the disruption of the symbolic order at a number of levels, both the physical and the communicative that disconcerts the powerful the most. When one has physical disruption but maintains a communicative order with demands then such disruption is still capable of mediation. However – when done at both the level of the symbolic and the physical the powerful inevitably ask, '*what do these people want?*' One can not surmount counter-claims through 'debating' in content, instead, negation of the form and structure through which they seek to extend their identities and reproduce themselves as agents should be seen as imperative.⁴⁶

Coming Insurrection, accessed March 20, 2013,

<http://www.mediafire.com/?ztoijwzmzd2>

13. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

14. Jay Babcock, "Report on 'The Coming Insurrection' book launch at NYC Barnes and Nobles, Sephora, Starbucks", *Arthurgmag*, June 15, 2009, <http://arthurgmag.com/2009/06/15/report-on-the-coming-insurrection-book-launch-at-nyc-barnes-and-nobles-sephora-starbucks/>

15. The Invisible Committee 2009, 111-112.

16. Mason 2012, 150-51.

17. Ibid.

18. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 192.

19. "Epimenides was a Cretan who made one immortal statement: 'All Cretans are liars.' A sharper version of the statement is simply 'I am lying'; or, 'This statement is false'. It is that last version which I will usually mean when I speak of the Epimenides paradox. It is a statement which rudely violates the usually assumed dichotomy of statements into true and false, because if you tentatively think it is true, then it immediately backfires on you and makes you think it is false. But once you've decided it is false, a similar backfiring returns you to the idea that it must be true." From Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an eternal golden braid*, (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

20. Jeremy Trevelyan Burman, "The misunderstanding of memes: Biography of an unscientific object, 1976-1999," *Perspectives on Science* 2012, vol. 20, no. 1, Boston: The MIT Press, 86-87.

21. Ibid.

22. downtownbingosaga, "One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor - The Origin Of Memes", *Youtube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r21CMDyPuGo>

23. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense. Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. (Baltimore and London: the John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 6.

24. Max Farquar, "Ed Miliband These Strikes Are Wrong", *Youtube*,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZtVm8wtyF#I>

25. Mark Fisher, "Reality Management: Hack-gate, Hari, Milibot and the Cyber War," *Open Democracy*, July 8, 2011,

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/k-punk/reality-management-hack-gate-hari-milibot-and-cyber-war>

26. Stewart 1980, 13.

27. Stewart 1980, 28-29.

28. See Antisec, "Fuck FBI Friday," November 18, 2011:

<http://pastebin.com/NwN8ehFW>

29. *The Guardian* describes the transformation of the Rickroll from a simple prank into a resistance strategy as follows:

It's called the 'rick-roll'. You're innocently browsing an apparently useful website and see a link to something else that might be of interest, but when you click through to that destination you instead find yourself confronted with Astley's boyish smile, his manly croon, his awkward 1987 dance-moves. The link was a fake, a trap, a dummy with the nefarious purpose of... bringing you face-to-face with the ridiculous. As with so many stupid internet fads, the rick-roll trend had its start at 4chan, a message-board whose lunatic, juvenile community is at once brilliant, ridiculous and alarming. 4chan users had taken to 'duck-rolling' each other - tricking one-another into viewing a video of a, er, duck with wheels. In the spring of 2007 some enterprising prodigy branched off from this into the rick-roll. And the rest is history." "Of late, however, rick-rolling has begun to permeate the mainstream. It comes mostly courtesy of Anonymous, a diffuse group of hackers and activists who have declared war on the Church of Scientology in an initiative called Project Chanology. Organised without official leaders or hierarchy, Project Chanology manifests itself in Denial Of Service attacks against Scientologist websites, stupid YouTube videos, and in-person protests at Scientologist centres worldwide." See

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/mar/19/news>

30. Computer geek jargon for "the physical world."

31. See David Singh Grewal, *Network Power. The Social Dynamics of Globalization*. (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2008), 61.

32. Jimmy Cauty, Bill Drummond, *The Manual. How To Have A Number One The Easy Way*. (London: Ellipsis, 1998 [1990]), 67.
33. Ibid, 67-68.
34. “Lolcat”, *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lolcat>
35. Gruppen, *Kittens #3*, <http://gegen-kapital-und-nation.org/sites/default/files/kittens-03-web.pdf>
36. Gideon Lewis Kraus, “I’m in ur internets, kontrolin ur mindz.” *Wired*, September 2012, 131.
37. Ibid, 156.
38. Ethan Zuckerman, “The Cute Cat Theory Talk at Etech”, <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2008/03/08/the-cute-cat-theory-talk-at-etech>
39. See Project Mayhem, accessed February 25, 2012, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/80286138/Project-Mayhem-2012-12-21-2012-11-11-Imagine-We-Leak-It-ALL-DHS-National-Cyber-Security-and-Communications-Integration-Center-Bulletin-Warns-Agai>
40. Jimmy Cauty, Bill Drummond 1990, 55.
41. Issandr El Amrani, “Three Decades of a Joke That Just Won’t Die,” *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/02/three_decades_of_a_jo
42. See "Fooling Around the World: The History of the Jester; An excerpt from *Fools Are Everywhere - The Court Jester Around the World*", <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/640914.html>
43. See Glenn Greenwald. “Dog-training the press corps.” *Salon.com*, April 30, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/04/30/dog_training_the_press_corps/
44. Nawaat, “Tunisie : Qui utilise l'avion de la présidence de la République?”, *Youtube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRW2BJOewcc>
45. Huw Nesbitt, “We Will Fight, We Will Kiss”, *Dazed Digital*, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/10260/1/deterritorial-support-group>
46. Aaron Peters, e-mail interview with author, March 23, 2012.
47. “Condescending Wonka”, *Quickmeme*,