



Memes of Late Capitalism

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Contents

- 1. Introduction 3**
- 2. Literature review: 4**
- 2.1 Historical Context 4**
- 2.2 Digital Culture and Social Media 8**
- 2.3 Internet Memes..... 12**
- 2.4 World of Memes..... 18**
- 2.5 Meme formats..... 20**
- 2.6 Memetic Arts..... 23**
- 2.7 Cultural Critique 27**
- 3 Methods..... 30**
- 3.1 Research Philosophy 30**
- 3.2 Internet pages as a digital ethnographic site 32**
- 3.3 Role of Screenshotting and downloading in Digital Ethnography 35**
- 3.4 Observation..... 37**
- 4 Late capitalism 39**
- 5. Metamordanism..... 42**
- 6. Hauntology..... 45**
- 7. Memes of late capitalism and reflections 48**
- 7.1 Memes as a critique of capitalism 51**
- 7.2 Memes as a weapon of Capitalism 52**
- 8 Conclusion..... 54**
- 9 References..... 57**

1. Introduction

Memes have become a sophisticated vehicle for both expression and critique in the fast paced paradigm of digital culture; especially within late capitalism. So besides being mindless constructs that enforce laughter, memetic artifacts represent themselves in a way to become snapshots of the systems they express and participate. As symptom at least, memes are both an essential site of knowledge for grasping the cultural and social conditions of contemporary capitalism because they can underpin as much as challenge capitalist ideologies.

The primary focus of this thesis is on the ambivalent position memes have in late capitalism; are they a critique from within, articulating an oppositional vision beyond what is structurally possible for radical politics? Or do they play a role in upholding the systems of oppression that they seem to deride and is it them, then, functioning as an arm of capital action under the guise of resistance? By employing the framework of digital ethnography and analysis, this study attempts to unpack a broader understanding on how memes can serve not just as mirrors but also (co-)constructors or shapers of social norms in terms cultural materiality.

Using the way memes function in digital spaces such as social media platforms, this research intends to excavate what deeper cultural meanings they carry and how those look on a plane of understanding for digital discourse concerning late capitalism. This thesis critically examines memes in order to determine whether or not they are potent in effecting cultural change, or inherently meaningless against capitalism. The research underscores the need for further study of memes, which are defined as cultural artifacts that can alter social behavior and even facilitate widespread cultural change at both a contingent and systemic level.

2. Literature review:

2.1 Historical Context

The very word meme arises from the process of memetic replication, which is actually borrowed from biology. The term was coined by an evolutionary biologist by the name of Richard Dawkins. He puts across the idea of memes in his book *The Selfish Gene* by drawing an analogy between genes and cultural transference. Dawkins defines memes to be units of cultural transmission, much the same way genes are in biological evolution. Indeed, he writes explicitly in his book, "Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (Dawkins, 1989, p 192).

Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*, chapter 11 of explains the origin of the word "meme," drawing inspiration from the ancient Greek root "mimeme." He saw a connection between "meme" and words like "gene."

In his words, "We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'" (Dawkins, 1989). Dawkins further elaborates, "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* " (Dawkins, 1989).

The term "meme" started to trend suddenly and took a much dramatic course than the original idea that Dawkins described. Now, when people talk about "meme," they mean funny pictures of people, videos, or pieces of text that are copied quickly and exchanged with intrusions through the internet. Mostly, they are making small changes. This contemporary reinterpretation preserves the replica concept of culture, only it has moved into the Information Age—information now travels at extremely high speeds. What has happened is that the very concept of memes has grown to now include a huge swath of digital content in its meaning, affecting social media, marketing, and even political movements. Perhaps in a way, Dawkins's work opened the path not only to understanding

how culture evolves but also for showing how information moves in the age of the internet. His notion regarding memes still presents one of the strongest influences on ways by which academics and ordinary people study internet memes today.

Another author Idil Galip in the field of digital culture, in their research paper refers to Dawkin, and further points out that These memes have been successful and persistent amongst humans, much like a virus that spreads, taking hold in the minds of everyone who sees them and prompting them to recreate the meme through various forms of cultural transmission (Galip, 2023). This analogy of contagious success, used to discuss the popularity of specific cultural elements, is directly linked to Dawkins's explanation of how memes propagate themselves within the "meme pool," a space where memes jump "from brain to brain through a process that, in a general sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins, 1989).

Regarding these highly contagious, or successful, memes, Galip refers to English neuropsychologist Nicholas Humphrey declares that planting a successful meme in someone's mind is akin to a parasite taking over their brain, turning it into a tool for the meme's spread, just like a virus might hijack the genetic machinery of a host cell (Galip, 2023).

For example, according to the Italian cultural theory author Roberto Terrosi, even as Dawkins's book was an attempt to cash in on the current public interest in genetics and undermine various theories of group selection, its central concept ultimately sought to turn conventional wisdom, regarding the gene-body relation, on its head (Terrosi, 2024). Conventionally, evolution is a process based on changes at the genetic level, which are transmitted through successive generations, thereby leading to physical and behavioral adaptation. Dawkins adds a further dimension he calls cultural evolution. The central theme of the world of cultural evolution is the evolving exchange of ideas, behaviors, and information through time. It has been centered around memes acting as the elemental units of cultural transmission, just as genes code for biological instructions. In this way, by understanding memes, we understand how cultural evolution works. Indeed, Dawkins goes so far as to discuss how genes and memes can interact. Memes can thus make us

behave in ways that finally have a bearing on the expression of genes. That is the wider view of evolution—not in terms of bodily changes but pertaining to ideas and behaviors evolving across cultures (Dawkins, 1989).

Before Dawkins, scientists, among them the Italian geneticist Cavalli-Sforza and the Australian-American biologist Marcus W. Feldman, were already working on similar notions of cultural propagation, examples of which Dawkins provided by mentioning genes. Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman do not use the term "memes," as did Richard Dawkins. Their focus is on quantitative analyses, modeling of cultural transmission, rather than the concept of memes as units of cultural transmission. While their work was in concurrence with some of Dawkins's ideas on cultural evolution, Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman found it more fitting for their purposes to express mechanisms of cultural inheritance and change using more exact and scientifically rigorous terminologies and frameworks (Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, 1981).

Basically, what is happening is that the idea of cultural evolution was sort of brewing along, and "meme" was just the term proposed by Dawkins that managed to stick. However, not everyone in Terrosi likes the word "meme." The more traditional "cultural trait" is retained by at least some academic biologists, such as Boyd and Richerson. It may be useful to broaden this use of the term "meme" from Dawkins' original narrow definition to a more broad and inclusive definition that encapsulates a range of cultural expression (Terrosi, 2024).

The key concepts in the understanding of meme functionality in digital landscapes include transmission of culture, cultural evolution, and information diffusion. These processes detail how, especially with regard to memes, cultural elements may come into existence, transmit, and then change over time.

It's a process through which one generation transfers culture to another in the form of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and artefacts. The channels through which such transmission occurs are language, rituals, art, technology, and the like. In the digital age, memes stand strong as a channel for cultural transmission because they make it possible

to have fast and wide sharing of ideas across different audiences. According to Milner (Milner, 2016) , memes themselves act as units of cultural information that copy, mutate, and evolve through sharing, commenting, and remixing across different platforms (Milner, 2016).

Cultural evolution refers to the change of cultural practices and artifacts across time. Whereas biological evolution may be brought about by genetic mutations and natural selection, cultural evolution is driven by human creativity, social dynamics, and technological advancement. One can understand this process of cultural evolution in relation to memes as a change in formats, themes, and styles occurring through social and political events. Shifman (Shifman, 2014) explains how the memes change meaning in their rewiring and recontextualization, demonstrating changing values and concerns of a society (Shifman, 2014).

Cultural information spreads through the transmission of cultural elements from one society or community to another. Transmission is facilitated by several channels, such as migration, trade, communication technologies, and the internet. As Memes are basically digital, the reach given to them by social media therefore adds to their velocity in gaining transmittance of cultural information. As Zuboff says (Zuboff, 2019), the digital infrastructure of a Facebook or Twitter accelerates meme diffusion, which transforms these simple ideas or images into formidable tools of social connection and manipulation (Zuboff, 2019).

In order to do this, one must turn to the concepts of culture transmission and evolution; more specifically within the scope of the thesis. If it is possible to perceive the ways through which a meme is generated then a person would discover the mechanism in which they are situated within our daily digital contexts and their actual impact on a society's cultural norms and values. Within such a context, studying the evolution of culture is crucial for understanding how memes change over time as well as how they may relate to changing group attitudes and behaviors.

It is also significant in a situation where this kind of dissemination of cultural information indicates a shaping function of the digital platforms for configuring contemporary culture. What memes tell us about digital virality and how different conditions contribute

to the likelihood that some will succeed or fail with it are knowledge that we can really benefit from while having critical reflections on ways which memes can become agents of social good instead, or rather means through which stereotypes are spread in addition to false information.

Limor Shifman in her book *Memes in digital culture* claims that Dawkins has taken the analogy of meme too far. This effort was criticized not only because memes behave very differently from genes, but also because equating culture with biology narrows and oversimplifies complex human behaviors. It doesn't take into account the intricacies of how cultural information spreads. They mention the polarized debate around memes, with some claiming they explain everything and others saying they explain nothing (Shifman, 2014). Some interpretations, like Susan Blackmore's, suggest that humans are merely hosts or vehicles for memes, implying a diminished role for human agency in the process of meme diffusion. Shifman refers to Blackmore that she contends that this view is not inherent to the meme concept itself but is rather a particular interpretation. In contrast, other scholars, such as Rosaria Conte, emphasize the active role of humans as intentional agents in meme transmission, making decisions based on social norms, perceptions, and preferences. This highlights the limitations of Dawkins' broad definition (Shifman, 2014).

Secondly, Dawkins' definition for stemming from biology and overlooking the communication aspects of memes. Since memes are spread through online interactions and sharing, the communication aspect is crucial. Dawkins' definition doesn't address this. Also, His definition fails to capture the variations and complexities of online memes. The concept of "memeplexes," which are groups of related memes. These variations and interconnections are essential aspects of internet memes that Dawkins' definition doesn't consider (Shifman, 2014).

2.2 Digital Culture and Social Media

Memes can be anything. Memes have multiple purposes and will sometimes poke fun at topical cultural events, others times it may praise elements contemporary culture. But a large part of memes criticizes the social and economic exploitation by using technology. When viewers understand that the digital revolution was constructed using money from the military and corporations, those same people can see how these memes make visible power structures in our digital world. In contrast large tech companies has since seized a central role in internet where the it was design to originally bypass centralized control. Through this history we can understand why some memes are so popular: because they remind us of the contradiction between that to which the internet and digital technologies might have opened up—the possibility for democracy—and what it has actually turned into, a place where corporations rule much in line with late capitalism.

In his 1950s and 60s, Robert Hassan explains in *The Condition of Digitality: Post-Modern Marxism for the Practice of Digital Life* to describe huge machines used mainly by governments and large corporations to do data processing as well as scientific calculations. One of the other significant advancements occurred with the creation of integrated circuits, or microchips, during the late 1950s. These miniature packages packed several transistors and other electronic components on a silicon chip, aiding in the shrinkage of computing power (Hassan, 2020).

The first pioneer in the realm of packet-switching, which was going to give robust communication later on earned funding to an experimental network funded by ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency of the United States Department of Defense.) for research activities worldwide with new technology use started 1960s using ARPANET. Meanwhile, the 1970s saw the introduction of personal computing exemplified by Ralph Roberts opening a store front brokerage and with it an Altair 8800 that gave small businesses PC power. The 1980s saw the rise of IBM and Apple with their computer products, as well as Microsoft emerging to be a software powerhouse. The World Wide Web launched in the early 90s, along with consumer-friendly browsers like Mosaic soon followed by Netscape made sharing information worldwide a much easier experience. Dial-up internet access began to proliferate, fundamentally changing the way we

consume information and communicate while early chatrooms and message boards set the stage for today's social media boom (Hassan, 2020).

In *Digitizing Race; Visual Cultures of the Internet* Lisa Nakamura takes up questions about access which are racial and gendered against “digital life. She later refers in the text to this 1990s phenomenon when digital culture began spreading as an extension at least of exercise speech/expression. In the mid-90s with a commercialized internet; we departed from text and command line interfaces. Of course this was back when dial-up connections were the norm, and expensive. This price would have been a huge obstacle to low-income families (Nakamura, 2008). This includes data revealing the Internet is a fundamental demand, yet also available literature research: for instance on the digital divide and income which signifies that when you have low-income individuals; at increased level they lack access to internet. Historically, minorities such as the Black and Hispanic (or any marginal group) communities in US lived way below poverty lines. This economic disparity would have almost certainly led to lower rates of internet access among these communities (Nakamura, 2008).

But in 1998, and then again in both 1999, as well by the year of 2003 major technological advancements existed; even if their looked availability on-the-internet with social media that was already available by people before the resulting evolved technology-native multimedia-by-then had developed too. (Google 1998, LiveJournal 1999, MySpace launched in mid-2002 but open to general public from beginning of the year)

This era allowed people to break from the strict social structures and create their own identities as well as destinies for themselves. This matched the emergence of internet and social media. These outlets offer both exposure and connectivity which has never been this high since the most intrinsic sense of human being. We could create online identities to project a certain image or thought, we shared our voice and created for others around the globe — even in similar circles (Zuboff, 2019).

Online persona curation is the practised moulding and display of one's identity in digital arenas. In this way, people can pick and choose the aspects of them they want to be known, creating an ideal version that fits official or unofficial demands as we need. As such, everything Lisa Nakamura (2008) tells us about how digital platforms allow a

human to both manage and perform their identity in assuming new ways of presenting oneself deserves sustained critical reflection. Comment moderation is not the same, it involves curating profile pictures and posts etc that form part of an image you want to portray.

Similarly, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) also discusses how social media platforms cash in these performatively constructed identities. The information is collected from users freely consuming content in order to build user personas, which will hence dictate what kind of advertising time and space can be sold based on them — the users content creators have been essentially turned into a salable asset. The curation described above is an illustrative form of commodified, which captures this dual status between being turned into curators with relative control over their public self-presentation and sets as mere space for monitoring or exploitation by platform owners to sell related goods/services.

According to Milner (2016), it has important social implications in how we are able to curate an online identity. Users can create or join communities around shared interests and values, giving them a sense of belongingness and communal identity. But this carefully crafted self can give rise to a gap between one's online reality and offline appearances, promoting the possibility of authenticity issues and poor self-image.

It also served to alienate. People had new freedoms to express themselves on the internet. They lived in an era in which anyone could be empowered by their ability to connect with others online. And then, at its most brutal level — even as parts of our culture were making clear how much human agency and economic opportunity was possible elsewhere but remaining shuttered off from them digitally. The digital landscape features such limited agency because of elaborate problems like economic inequality, algorithmic control and the extractive practices within surveillance capitalism. Pretty much every single social media platform in existence gives us the tools we need to write our own story and connect with others, but at an economic and technological level this is almost always limited agency that constantly pisses off users. The prerogative to present as a constructed self against the impotence people might feel in front of economic forces or algorithmic restrictions (Zuboff, 2019).

In this chapter, we explored how memes operate within digital culture and social media practices as productive tools for expression and critique. Milner discusses how memes serve as a reflection of, and challenge to social, economic and political landscapes by democratizing the process of creating content (and passing it along) (2016). Yet, as Lisa Nakamura (2008) has shown us: economic barriers and historical inequities keeps people not only off digital platforms entirely but who can also fully engage in digital space. In the book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) as a concept from Shoshana Zuboff, refers to the observation that digital platforms exploit user data by in turn limiting agency of the individual; algorithms shape what people experience online for maximum engagement and revenue. Robert Hassan (2020) situates this within the context of a historical trajectory of digital technologies as driven by military and capitalist imperatives — from an internet that heralds in democratization to one where corporate power proliferates. Memes criticize these power structures and they can reveal social and economic imbalances not in the way that an article or a news show would, but through humoristic critiques: reflection on our culture (Shifman, 2014). Examining these dynamics are critical to both a nuanced critique of digital culture, promotion of more equitable engagements with digital media and engagement in activating memes for the purpose social goods.

2.3 Internet Memes

Most memes are meant to be funny of course, but sometimes they can represent a pretty powerful form satire that taking concepts from the world and turning them on their little selves in real late capitalist life — income disparities, imperialism-lite as modern neo colonization. This paper investigates deeper into the dimension of memes, it asks many important questions about postmodernist ideology and their real-world efficacy along with whether they are more appeal to particular generation or not. We will explore the meaning of this by digging deep into why memes that have become an integrative part in a generation disillusioned with traditional narratives, can help readjust older narrative armoures while creating their own language to criticize within and inform at any point

capitalism takes new form.

This paper will examine the greater context of memes in postmodernist ideology, and how they permeate into a reality larger than life itself — as well as discovering if one generation is more addicted to them. Why are memes so appealing to a disenchanting generation, and how are they defining the latest mode of resistance in critiquing an ever-morphing landscape of capitalism.

Memes have become not just methods of communication, but a form of millennial culture — The effects on memes resulting from this new digital era may differ largely only across generations as it has emerged under their own circumstances. Millennials and Generation Z, both born after 1982 have grown up in a different world from that of their Gen X predecessors~ very little is the same as it was for kids back then. Thus, they have a new kind of digital literacy and an appreciation for the sarcastic or ironic humor embedded in what memes are (Milner, 2016).

Milner (2016) identifies memes as a type of participatory media that allow users to participate in cultural and political issues and many cases accessible. This participatory element is particularly appealing to newer generations which require more inclusivity and a level of democratization in content creation. They use memes to express their frustration and ideas about society, particularly themes of economy and politics that are structured within late capitalism. This form of expression is considered genuine and immediate. (as opposed to the traditional media that are often seen as biased or slowing)

We previously touched on memes in which Richard Dawkins, the biologist described them as fuzzy ideas – "a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 1989). He described this abstraction as a huge problem when trying to describe an internet meme. The examples of memetics in Dawkins are vast— from beliefs in God to jokes—meaning it is not immediately obvious what constitutes an example of a meme and merely illustrates the point (Shifman, 2014). Since this answer is ambiguous, there remains confusion and debate. One faction holds that memes are ideas living in our brains; and another argues it is impossible for an idea to exist only as pure

information without material form (in other words, thoughts = objects + actions within the world). There's a school of thought that even anything imitable is a meme Shifman notes for example that central to the meme idea is "the claim made by some theorists (most notably Susan Blackmore) that humans are no more than mere vehicles for memes, if not [a] complete denial of human agency in this respect" (Blackmore, 2000). These approaches are equivalent to an enormous catchall of societal things; it may be equally as intriguing, but tells us nothing about the way in which civilization scratching one another and spreads (Shifman, 2014).

The emergence of social media facilitated a new era of meme propagation, which are more complex and often has more than the purpose of constructing humor. This gives rise to internet memes as a significant aspect of contemporary culture. Despite ongoing discourse and critique, memes continue to play a crucial role in cultural evolution, shaping shared understandings and communication in the digital age (Christopher, 2019).

Dan Bristow on his book is *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production* mentions that memes are usually on the lighter side drawing off a humour or satire based memes unfortunately overpromoted all around. He also concurs that memes consist of image, video or text forms with the intentions to propagate ideas, opinions and social commentaries (Daft Punk). Not only do memes often draw on cultural references and phenomena, but also can function as speech acts of dissent or critique in the ecology of online discourse. Moreover, memes also as portable that is a good or service can be easily spread and changed over networks hence they are able to adjust rapidly transversely moved social media sites (Bristow, 2019). Memes propagated at breakneck speeds on different online platforms are similar to commodities circulating in capitalist markets. In *The World Made Meme*, Ryan Milner explains that because the making of a meme is essentially rooted in popular culture (often referred to as pop) and by extension capitalism. That is, he points out the way that memes are produced for collective circulation and how they themselves circulate through transformation in a similar manner to commodities within capitalist markets (Milner, 2016). All memes ever, no matter what their intents or aspirations are produced in a capitalist mode of production and consumed

within capitalism as through the circulation of commodities (Bristow, 2019) perpetuating this system more generally.

In the book *Memes in Digital Culture* — Limor Shifman argues why a meme is not simply one image/one video/one phrase, it is not really a medium (in fact, it's a network of related content items that share some kind of common core) (Shifman, 2014). This reading moves away from the traditional conception of memes as cultural replication and change tools, to a richer, more connected view on internet culture; with defining online-memes not just in terms of medium but also as another collection agency. This chapter aims to further the consideration of this media/cultural phenomenon by examining how internet memes serve as means for communication, cultural commentary and social engagement.

As highlighted by *Memes in Digital Culture*, a meme is not just one picture, video or any other phrase. Instead, it is an assemblage of similar things a longer list the focus on same core elements (Shifman, 2014), with this conceptualization, presents a significant departure from the prevailing concept of memes — content: distinct patterns; form and inside: decisive orientation. Content: The ideas or messages that the meme expresses Form refers to how the meme is physically presented, such as an image macro (text written over a picture), video clip, or hashtag. Stance refers to the way in which meme locates itself with respect to its message and audience, including tone (Shifman, 2014). Shifman adds that memes are, in fact created from other memes: they reference each others. Memes live and breathe by being copied, circulated and distributed as users share them while they propagate across the web. the cultural transmission of nits and the evolution toward a sophisticated view arguable closer to that afforded viruses than perhaps memes. This chapter investigates this media/cultural phenomenon, suggesting that internet memes are not merely catchphrases or synchronicities but rather expressive idioms used as a form of communication, cultural commentary and social engagement.

Examples Illustrating Content, Form, and Stance in Memes

In the digital era, memes as one type of culture media product still demonstrate different characteristics to others in communication not only on content but also form and stance. Memes: Memes are content and one example is the “Distracted Boyfriend” meme, originating from a stock photo in which a man looks at another attractive woman while his significant other observes her disapprovingly. The more fundamental notion is that of distraction or temptation, often represented in humorous images showing a shift in attention or loyalties (Shifman 2014).



Image: Distracted Boyfriend meme (reddit)

Form wise, image macros are a classic illustration of it. Often these memes simply include a well-known photograph or piece of artwork with text overlay, such as the "Success Kid" meme. A recognized image paired with a certain type of text bold white lettering and black outlines makes up an image macro that sets its form —both the sight recognizable component— or at least it should to label as such (Milner 2016).



Image: Success Kid meme (instagram)

For examples of stance in memes, we can look to the “Pepe the Frog” meme that started off as a light-hearted joke but eventually evolved into something politically exigent and forceful. The meaning here is more nuanced, because the affective tone of Pepe's

expression and its relationship to textual articulation changes based on context: sometimes funny or clever, other times ironic if not offensive (Nakamura 2008).

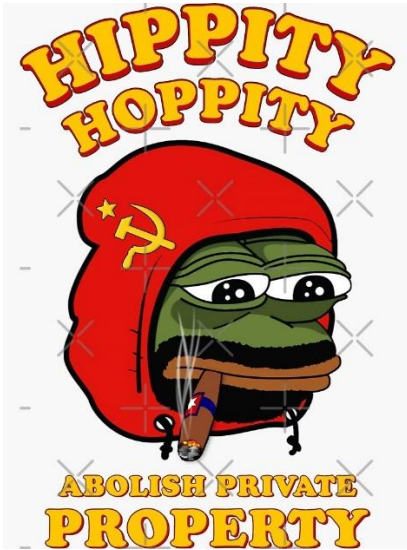


Image: Pepe the Frog meme (Reddit)

In these examples illustrate how content, form and stance play in internet memes which forms a context of transmission as well evolution within digital culture. The focus on internet memes as a media and cultural phenomenon begins to demonstrate their implications upon communication praxis and the role of culture in digital space.

Memes are worthy of investigation on another level, too: the way they fundamentally work in modern capitalism. The underlying inequalities in the digital economy are exposed through this process. Even though users can create and share memes for free on the internet, information about this content is collected, stored and utilised by those platforms. In the words of Srnicek (2017), he claims that, “in the twenty-first century, material advanced capitalism had come to focus its energy around separating and applying a single form regarding manual: data” (Srnicek, 2017, P. 32). That data extraction is a core feature of the business models for top social media platforms that capitalize on user-generated content with ad-supported, targeted advertising and other kinds of commercial activity.

Here, what might appear to be a relatively democratic and participatory behaviour in the

sharing of memes is fundamentally enmeshed with these more capitalist logics under capitalism incentive structures around value extractive business model priorities over free labour and data control. This imbalance of power is clear: users create valuable content and data, yet do not manage to get paid the same way platforms benefit from or wield control over that input. The novel aspect of this privilege serves as one example and an illustration that further interrogation is needed: who gets to decide how memes operate in the sphere of capitalism? On a large scale, it likely depends upon ones creative freedom provided by their use — yet at what cost are certain people extracting from these interactions?

This creates an "asymmetry of information" - users do the work but platform owner's profit. This could be a class relationship, with users as a subordinate class generating information for the benefit of the platform-owning class. This inequality is further obscured by the platform design, making it impossible to truly measure the value users create. This hidden exploitation, is what fuels the rebellion behind memes (Wark and Wark, 2019). So, the general audience focuses on the content that flows through platforms (circulation) and misses the role that the platforms themselves play (dead labor). In other words, they often see the value of things based on what they appear to be made of, rather than the labor that went into making them. There is a common fetishization of this circulation, the movement of data and content (Wark and Wark, 2019).

2.4 World of Memes

Memes are a new world on the internet that has created its logic, and mythologies. Fathom this world, one must go into this world Each step from the creation distribution, modification and redistribution holds its own importance. This is a cycle that occurs over and sometimes very indefinite period of time, until one day memes just die. That said, meme communities are also aware of the phenomenon of not overcooking a certain meme too soon.

Memes are brief online commentary that can be humorous, satirical or insightful. Though

these may often appear playful, under the surface lies a complex relationship between form and function. These kinds of analyses are how we can learn from memes about social and political issues that shape our world (Bristow, 2019). This divide with our approach is illustrated well by Shifman (2014), who argues that it is important to see memes in terms of the content, form and stance they take. Content, according to Shifman is the ideas and ideologies conveyed; form as physical constituents/aspects of specific textual or multimodal objects (adjectives describing texts) and stance in how actors relate themselves to a text. However, Bristow is more interested in the dynamic interplay between these components than their separation as entities — he posits that this interaction provides a deeper understanding of social-political structure. In this approach, rather than dissecting memes into more discreet elements as Shifman does do in her analysis of memetic templates nodal points are viewed holistically; these integrated cultural artifacts should be understood to generate multiple layers of meaning and function at once.

The way we define meme communities are also not as straight forward. Memes evolve as a living body independent from the current flow or mainstream beliefs.

Online communities really took off in the 1990s, and memes play a big role in forming and maintaining these groups. Memes require fluency—an understanding of community in-jokes and values, the details that people “get it”. Such a fluency is in the nature of social currency which indicates that someone has invested time to get to know and understand group (Galip, 2023).

The broader trend or cultural norm that a meme may reflect, but within an online community they are also part of the narrative and culture. Computers quickly triangulate taste, keep bringing people with the same preferences together (homophily), and then exclusively make them all warm in their online meme beds. The medium of a specific community dictates the way they interact with each other. A cross-sectional survey which compared two meme communities -4chan and Instagram- showed that on 4chan, where there is anonymity and the pace of communication is very fast as viewers see posts in

real-time after their publication, a lot niche community-specific ironic or irreverent language use takes place within memes. Conversely, on Instagram meme communities are more about the pics and aesthetics. How Personal Branding on Instagram overlaps with memes too (Galip, 2023).

Other than these two platforms Reddit also plays an important role in meme creation and distribution. However, Reddit is known for in depth discussions on memes and its origins. The term memelord is derived from this platform as they are known as the experts of memes. In platforms like Instagram and Facebook shitposters are the key figures for distribution of memes. Shitposting is the most efficient way to grow and reach to larger audiences as roles like memelords are not as fast producing new contents.

2.5 Meme formats

Before one can adequately understand the role of memes within late capitalism and these crucial formats in which they operate, driving much of their popularity and virality is a visual element that manifests in image or video-based memes cropping up across various social media platforms. While audio could technically come into play, it is the video that captures attention most easily and encourages participation. If we are to drill into how memes come about, what forms they take and the transitions that occur throughout their lifecycle in digital cultures- you first need to understand these things — meme typologies. The subsequent chapter looks into these foundational categories operates more through examples in the mode of a toolkit and how they map onto actual objects from reality along with references to other memes as well, ultimately preparing us for enhanced analysis within the purview of meme culture today.

Classification by Content Type

According to the popular Reddit account and website "How to Do Things with Memes," memes can be divided into three main categories (Milner, 2016):

Practicalities: This section discusses differences in practices between creators and communities. It studies the ways that memes are used as a form of communication, to express identity and communicate with followers. This would allow for niche communities to see meme formats that are relevant to their particular subcultures.

Lore: How well the meme ties into reality and how it interacts with other ideas. The lore of memes includes everything that sets the cultural, historical and social conditions for their meanings. Memes frequently come with pop culture and current events references, as well as historical ones — creating a sort of palimpsest that is best decoded by people having the right contextual knowledge.

Category: This category covers those things that getting a given meme rolled-out does. This includes both the functionality of memes as a communicative medium and their rhetorical effect — what do they function to accomplish when we share or consume them on digital-native environments? Memes can also offer social commentary, laughter or a method of political activism.

Technical and Literacy-Based Classifications

"Know Your Meme" and other meme analytical websites, along with various authors, have further divided memes based on meme literacy and technical aspects. According to Galip (2023), these categories include:

Reaction Photoshop: Memes made by changing existing images to serve a reaction or for emotional purposes. Usually this comes in the form of funny or exaggerated edits to well known images. A reason reaction photoshops are an ideal format is that they provide immediate and unambiguous emotional responses.

Photos Fads: Memes resulting from a craze where users imitate a given type or style of photos, usually causing them to be super popular. Enjoy with a collection changes. Because no real photo fad would be one unless it played to the viral nature of trends,

promoting them as very inclusive and easy ways for people create photos that tap into popular culture yet manoeuvred by individual creativity.

Flash Mobs: Utilized a novelty form of entertainment where people would begin singing and dancing — like an orchestrated conga line — caused the organizing stir, before it could even be video taping and spread across the web. Flash mobs reveal a process to an extent, the performative meme that expands with activity from digital and physical acts.

Lip synch: Videos in which individuals lip-sync to songs, speeches, and other audio clips; often with a comedic or satirical twist. Performance and mimicry united, lipsynch memes frequently reframed familiar media in a novel context.

Misheard Lyrics: Memes of commonly misheard song lyrics, frequently with hilarious reimaginings. These memes drop re-lyriced lines, and they simply work because the original lyrics are recognized for what they were intended to be — humor extracted from their alteration.
Recut Trailers: Memes created by editing trailers of movies or TV shows to present them in a different genre or context. Recut trailers demonstrate the transformative potential of media editing, reinterpreting familiar content in innovative ways.

LOLcats: Photos of cats that have had captions added to them in LOLspeak, a unique and intentionally incorrect form of English (Dawkins 1976). Among the earliest and most enduring formats are lolcats, seeking to deliver humor while keeping things simple.

Stock Characters: These are memes that revolve around a recognizable character archetype and often feature captions that align with the stereotypes about how the characters would behave. Stock characters are a time honored way of using types to portray more complex social dynamics or personality traits.

Rage Comics: Examples of Rage Comics are simple hand-drawn comics which circulate across the entire web, illustrating ordinary experiences and annoyances where a group of recurring characters occur. (Galip 2023) Constancy in tone and expression emerge as

they're all brewed from the same template, a riot of reaction shot rage comics. Among these, the most popular formats are reaction photoshop, photo fads, and stock characters.

Analysis

Memes are online artifacts that capture the essence of a generation. They are not merely the funny bits, but also a commentary on larger social, political and cultural trend.

Reaction photoshops, as well do a good job of portraying how Society reacts to political events (to most people) in picking out that meme where it really represents the complex sentiments, into 1 image that is shareable. This is part of what Shifman (2014) describes as the “cultural logic of late capitalism” in which memes take both commentary and commodity form (Shifman, 2014).

The collaborative elements underpinning memes, as recognised by Jenkins (2006), drive their function for creating digital communities. Other memes, such as photo fads, provide the natural response because they form a community of users in charge for producing and sharing them. Such a participatory culture not only makes content creation more accessible and decentralized, amplifying such communal identities (Jenkins, 2006).

Moreover, the technical literacy to both read/create memes is part of their digital rhetorical practice. The transmedial processing of digital content is crucial as Douglas (2014) argued for it being a necessary competence in the culture of participation. This is what memes, in their many forms and variations as a skill are capturing (Douglas, 2014), therefore making it both tool for individual expression and collective action.

2.6 Memetic Arts

As we discussed before the origin and nature of internet memes. Memes however is a cultural phenomena that has outgrown from internet and social media and evolved itself within the mainstream art forms. From painting to music film every medium has some memetic influence in arts.

Memes continue to invade the territories of the whole art world, acting as a new collision point between popular culture and traditional art forms. As presented by the digital artist Memesis, the memes provide man with new, sometimes ridiculous, perspectives on classic works of art by introducing references to the culture of the time and digital iconography in general. It is this crossing of genres that makes the result so accessible and relatable to a wide audience, much like a meme does, but possessing historical and aesthetic depths similar to traditional art. Memesis offers an excellent example of how these very memes are taken out of their common settings and merged into pieces within the context of classic art that amuse and set one to thinking (Holý, 2021).

Yet probably the most compelling fact about this intersection between memes and art is that, through this, it mirrors the turn that pop art took during the middle of the 20th century when artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein drew on popular culture, mass media, and advertising for a number of works that were able to break through the barriers placed between 'high' and 'low' art (Öhrner, 2022). Here, in much the same way, it is done for parody or social commentary on contemporary themes, as it was done with the use of cryptocurrency in Memesis. When an artist takes from internet culture through memes like the Doge or the terminology 'hodling' in the case of cryptocurrency and inserts them into their pieces, it really ends up being a visual vocabulary of this new digital age. It does this in much the same way that pop art did for consumer culture reflection in its time. In this direction, works such as "American Crypto" by Memesis bring it into relevance with the use of visual and thematic meme devices to comment on the shifts in society at large and more particularly the growing influence of cryptocurrencies. This marriage of styles, coupled with different messages, further proves how far the memes have grown from the simple Internet humor to a form today, both legitimate and a powerful medium, being a bridge modernizing the digital culture and traditional artistic practice (Holý, 2021).

Some of these memorable film moments have become the stuff of viral meme legend, but likewise it can occur in reverse. A well known example is the Spider-Man pointing meme. This meme is from a 1967 animated series wherein the authentic Spiderman seeking out

his imposter who has been performing criminal activities in his name (Trump, 2023). It has over the years been a favourite for viral sharing and meme-ification. It would later come back to be in the public eye in, amusingly but a bit bizarre way this time — *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* for not taking it as itself that is so widely recognized and remade into meme culture what scene now interpreted as.

This is just one example of scenes from both TV and film have been co-opted into popular memes, like the Spider-Man meme. And yet, the power of memes goes further still — even shaping ideas for entire movie plots based on meme-culture tendencies. These movies frequently flout conventional filmmaking norms — embracing the surreal, and at times even coming off as if they were purposely made to be “bad” in a providential way that tickles meme-crazy fans. Before we get onto more modern (timeless-ish) examples though, there's Tommy Wiseau's *The Room*. While the original bloom of internet memes had not yet blossomed at that time, *The Room* is a testament to budding meme culture and an earlier mix between films and memetics.

The Room has a cult following, in fact one could say viral presence because it is so bad — but oh my goodness gangster — this makes identifying The Best memes using the film even easier. From Tommy Wiseau's inexplicable pronunciation of errant phrases, to its egregiously long, poorly-edited sex scenes; *The Room* manages almost everything in uncomfortably awkward and botched fashion (though the film is clearly unsatisfied with how much it neglects any semblance of natural human behaviour.) —everything that falls just south of regular decorum makes for easily-prime meme material. Its unintentional humor, replete with dreadful acting, over-the-top continuity errors and an irrational plot make the film a camp classic in its own right — one that meme culture excels at both embracing and magnifying (Katherineluck, 2020). Nevertheless, its cult following has persisted and myriad references litter meme culture as well as the broader internet discourse, ensuring that *The Room* remains relevant in a way to many other films lost-to-the-ages are not. Since then, it has gained cult status alongside the ironic self-awareness of a meme becoming so abstracts that new meaning is left onto different layers.

We can also claim it is not solely a meme film, also a "Meme of Late Capitalism," *The Room* works as biting commentary on traditional movies while more or less insisting that

audiences take the lead in interpretation over industry standards. Meanwhile, we have releases like *The Room* that tell a weird story in an entirely nontraditional way and keep doing things with narratives that no major filmmaker would think of trying (Bonaime, 2023). The subversion plays into the hands of late capitalism ' mutation and contestation of institutions (Davis, 2022). What has additionally contributed to the film's afterlife: its repurposing by audiences, who have used and reused *Groundhog Day* in much the same way someone might a meme (Shifman, 2014). This move from industrial dominance to public empowerment is based on a defining feature of late capitalism feel; that the worth even meaning, any action really depends on being actively co-opted redeployed by the people rather than what it was originally designed for (Bonaime, 2023) (Jameson, 1991). Such is the answer to why *The Room* voluntarily affirms a stale model of film making, but it also gestures towards more given cultural and digital dynamics.

Juno Miles, a rapper on TikTok has been blowing up recently with some of the "worst" raps you have ever heard. He's got a song about Martin Luther King and the lyrics are just as unconventional – but unforgettable.

“Ayy, Martin Luther King, shoutout to big bro
 If it weren't for big bro, I wouldn't be rapping, though
 If it weren't for him, I wouldn't even be here rapping this shit
 Trapping this shit, stealing shit from my family and shit
 Can't forget about Malcolm eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-X
 And Rosa Pa-a-a-a-a-arks
 I feel like we made it out the pa-a-a-ark
 But it don't matter because I'm Martin Luther Ki-i-i-i-i-ing
 That 'N-word' had a dre-e-e-e-e-eam (*Juno Miles - Martin Luther King (Official Video)*, 2023)”

Juno Miles, represents the meme of Late Capitalism; where cultural critique and capitalist commodification blur continuously. By allying humor, absurdity and de-glorified recording production Ray Dodds' art simultaneously critiques as it is part of late-capital. During an interview with Anthony Fantano, Juno Miles confesses that he in his music embraces mistakes and unorthodox sound choices, leading to really raw undeveloped production quality that is far from highly produced mainstream hip-hop (Fantano, 2023). This can be read as a sort of inversion to the traditional roles we might find in music and directly reflects that swing between sincerity/irony — another hallmark of our Digital

Zeitgeist and meme operation within the realm late-capitalism (Shifman, 2014).

The style of Juno Miles' music also works the same as internet memes, serving the audience to some while others may be free players in how they interpret and reproduce it. Starting his own memes and letting them spread naturally, across platforms such as TikTok and SoundCloud — it mimics the way digital spaces encourage for-memes-by-for-mems-maker growth (Milner, 2016). At the very heart of this new digital age is a participatory culture in which the meaning — and value — of content often depends on how it gets remixed, repurposed or re-imagined by tech-savvy audience. Thus, Juno Miles learns to transmute the material forms of his demons into affective labor — both through or against other semiotic languages that come to dominate later releases not out for another year with references so recent you and I lived it in real time.

2.7 Cultural Critique

There is no getting around it: memes now dominate the online landscape, becoming an arena that binds us in humor. But a closer examination shows that it is more complex than this. We can look at how memes function within the larger ecosystem of all online activities and discover downsides as well potential upsides. By understanding these complexities, we can navigate the meme ecology more thoughtfully and learn how to better deploy their socially catalyzing powers with an as-close-to-balance effect.

One important point to reflect on is service fetishism. Platforms that enable meme sharing pose as a great service —literally, creating and connecting over memes. In other word, making and distributing memes is incredibly popular, which actually fulfills the user on a base level. Instead, satisfaction acquiesces the ulterior motive of these platforms which is data mining. This becomes useful data for a platform, the meme. This data is a gold mine

for targeted advertising, designing user experiences and in some cases even tweaking the political discourse (Reed, 2019).

The emphasis on user experience is weaponized. The platform sells itself as exactly that: a utility, your playground. Yet, beneath its facade of entertainment is the stark truth that users are producing high adds-value content (only when their data can add value) for little to no compensation. The joy of making a meme that makes you and others laugh hooks us in; it blinds us from questioning the mechanisms underneath (Reed, 2019).

Another dimension to the critique of humor comes from French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre. Humor, particularly slapstick comedy is a little bit of an escape in Lefebvre's mind but the laughter doesn't differ into true change. That view also happens when you like online laughter such as memes. We can post our powerful political memes with scathing social commentary, but that does not automatically translate to doing the real work offline. Critiquing is free of consequence — it becomes an achievement in itself because we feel like sharing something (Bown and Russell, 2019).

The point here is not to prove there are everything inherently wrong with memes. Actually they can be used for satire, social commentary and even community establishment. They are a way of packaging small packets of information quickly and in an easily recognisable format, which also helps to create culture among groups that feed on these online memes. They reach a large audience through humor and brevity, going viral to shape public conversation.

Which, of course is all fine until you look at it in the context of late-stage capitalism and platforms wanting to exploit our desire for connection (and humor) downstream. These are also platforms that profit off of user-generated content (i.e., memes) and extract this data to feed the algorithmic advertising machine. The benefit for the platforms is immense, yet there are few rewards offered back to users other than another drop in a sea of contributors giving fleeting recognition or just processing likes and shares. Users might contribute to the bottom line of a platform, but they are rarely offered any meaningful share in return — illustrating its inherently lopsided nature.

In the future, we must treat meme culture like adults. We need to understand the means — data mining, gaming user experience and offering open commentary opportunities on trite observations — by which these platforms work, lest we lose ourselves outside of reality. Maybe then, memes can be elevated from being just an digital amusement park to a serious social weapon.

French Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre's critique of humor adds another layer to this analysis. Lefebvre argued that humor, particularly slapstick comedy, offers a temporary release but doesn't translate to real change. This perspective can be applied to online humor, including memes. Sharing a political meme with a biting social commentary might make us feel empowered, but it doesn't necessarily translate into real-world action. We become trapped in a cycle of critique without consequence, lulled into a sense of accomplishment by the act of sharing itself (Bown and Russell, 2019). Lefebvre's work points to the problem of satiety in comedy, where the act of laughing provides a false sense of resolution without addressing the underlying issues .

This does not mean that memes are a bad thing. When used correctly they can be a great day of satire, social commentary, and even community building. It is an issue of the context of late-capitalism, in which these platforms use our desire for connectivity and we humor to make profit with little reward. The commodification of user endeavours to fuel an economic paradigm that win in favour the few and at a loss for many as Zuboff (2019) writes about.

We need to think more carefully as consumers of meme culture going forward. The machinery being applied — removing data, changing how we interface with the platform or even offer criticism of it in a way that is meaningless hyperbole all while continuing to be dependent on these platforms. In doing so, memes could be more than just a digital bazaar of laughs, but an instrument for real social change. This, according to writers and researchers like Zuboff and Lefebvre is the very nature off meme economy with social-political consequences that hinder our ability make most out from what we can do in making memes for a better world.

The participatory aspect of memes highlights their utilization in the building of digital communities. In this context, photo fads or memes that emerge from someone's creativity and gain huge popularity play a crucial role in creating a sense of community among users who make them and share them (Jenkins, 2006). In addition, the existing participatory culture equalizes content creation and allows for the empowerment of the collective self and movement as seen in political meme attacks. Memes also serve as a form of digital rhetoric due to the technical literacy required for proper creation and understanding. In this sense, as observed by Douglas (2014), the re-interpretation and remixing of digital content emerge as one of the vital abilities in the digital age. Various models of memes play this ability, thus enhancing their use for individual expression and community interests.

In addition, the power (for lack of a better term) to meme translates beyond digital interactions. They shape actual behaviors and cultural norms, often being centerpieces of social movements and political activism. If we compare the circulation of memes in a broad variety of digital platforms to that being centered on capitalist markets (Milner, 2016) it indeed strikes you how uncannily alike both processes are by now. The commercialization of memes meanwhile begs important questions about the property rights — and monetizability — of cultural content, underscoring wider issues with digital culture.

3 Methods

3.1 Research Philosophy

This research uses digital ethnography through participant observation as the first method in exploring "Memes of Late Capitalism." This is in line with the requirement to analyse

how digital culture, and most critically meme culture operate within a late capitalist sociocultural framework.

Digital Ethnography as a Research Approach:

Digital ethnography is a more subtle modality to get into cultural practices and interfaces in digital spaces like memes where they are not just funny images, but acts of resistance. By using this method, it is then possible to recognize that online spaces are not just places for the posting and passing of information but also participatory co-constructed environments where users enter into on going processes of meaning-making. According to Denzin (2017), digital ethnography permits researchers to plunge into the present, unveiling that memes are mirror images of and counterscripts against tentacles that reach deep within late capitalism.

In addition to the applied context utilizing digital ethnography, such work is further informed by Pink (Pink, 2015), for whom working with sensory and affective dimensions of media are considered key elements in understanding anthropologically while these new forms. As digital artifacts, Memes are woven into the affective economies of the Interwebz — where partisanship and affirmation collides with humour and satire to produce discourse. Combining these elements, the research will use digital ethnography to examine what collective identities and resistance strategies form in a context of late capitalism.

Observation Method in Digital Spaces:

This detailed examination depends on observation: both participant and non-participant, a systematic analysis of the meme culture unfolding in real time. The technique consists of systematically browsing online platforms, observing practices, and analysing meme production as well as circulation.

Wolcott's (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017) discussion of observation in qualitative research highlights the need to pay attention the nuances of change within a community being observed. In digital, that means grasping the tacit norms of values and rules in terms how users show up. Because the memes are all out in their original home—the social media

platforms and websites where they were made, passed around or contested—one can now analyze how these cultural expressions mirror late capitalism whilst also challenging it.

Ethical Considerations:

Digital ethics are essential to take into account, especially in digital ethnography and observation as online interaction is public but personal. In the spirit, we adhere to the guidelines provided by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2011), where this research will privilege the privacy and autonomy of participants; informed consent is obtained if necessary, all data anonymize individuals identities. As in all online communities, doing research on them requires a bit of ethical caution: the separation between public and private is often thin.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) tell us that traditional approaches to counteract inherent bias in the social sciences have been disciplinary procedures with an observer at a separate remove from what is observed, but absolute detachment has generally proven elusive. They argue that observation is not a neutral ground, but rather the researcher social position and experiences are embedded in it thus shaping what they see. Correspondingly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue that researchers should also be invited to disclose their cultural predispositions as well as the inevitable subjective features of what they are doing — we can never forget that observation is culturally rooted in a social context situated within power relations. As Marcus (2011) argues, it is this recognition of the moment brought to bear subjectively along with diligent observations that are required in order for us all to experience and interpret a more reflexive interpretation of what we study.

3.2 Internet pages as a digital ethnographic site

The first step of digital ethnography is to identify groups and pages that are targeted toward the meme culture. Hine (2015) argues that in order to understand cultural practices of meaning making, researchers need to identify both the spaces online where these are enacted—digital ethnography requires immersion.

Instagram: This is probably the fastest growing meme format, where pages with higher follower counts and more engagement are better performing. You can find them by searching hashtags like #memes, #dankmemes or general research themes. The hashtags linked to pages that are dedicated specifically for posting and engaging with meme content, making them centers of memes culture (Murthy 2008). On top of that, meme aggregators and massive followings large pages are often key in disseminating these trends.

Facebook: Search by keywords such as "meme groups", "funny memes" or 'political satire". Although the access to private groups may require more steps (e.g. need an invitation from someone and ask them if you join with your profile), due it is possible that niche communities that exchange specific types of memes occur in forums like this one (Garcia et al., 2009). As we emphasized in the ethical guidelines for digital research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), researchers must play by these groups rules and code of conduct to engage responsibly with them.

Reddit: Reddit content is unfortunately not easily accessible although it employs a subreddit structure to organize and filter post groups, thus making an interesting meme research ground. For example, the subreddits r/memes and r/PoliticalHumor are particularly good places to watch memes be created (and debated about) in real time. Because of the structured nature of subreddits, there are unique ways to deeply explore content themes and how communities engage with select memes.

Observing Key Profiles

Once the relevant groups and pages are identified, the next step involves observing specific profiles and contributors within these communities. Observation in digital ethnography, as discussed by Pink et al. (2016), involves identifying key actors who significantly influence the community's cultural production.

Influential Creators: These are users who consistently produce high-quality meme content and have a significant following. Their posts often set trends within the community,

attracting substantial engagement and shaping the discourse around certain themes (Hine, 2015).

Active Commenters: Observing users who frequently comment on meme posts provides insights into how memes are received and interpreted. These users contribute to the evolution of memes by adding context, variations, or additional commentary, which is crucial for understanding the participatory nature of meme culture (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

Moderators and Admins: Individuals who manage groups and pages play a crucial role in shaping the content and rules of engagement within the community. Understanding their motivations and actions offers a deeper comprehension of the community dynamics and the types of memes that are encouraged or discouraged (Murthy, 2008).

Analyzing Comments and Engagement Metrics

As part of this we consider presence, and here it is like to be watching lives but with meme pages you get less likes etc so other aspects (such as comments) can tell us more. It provides quantitative as well as qualitative data, to understand the cultural impact of memes.

Comments: Study the comments on top memes to see examples of how people are talking about certain topics within the community. Memes are very rich in subtext, as this happens to be the main thing people reveal when making comments on a meme - it's your primary and shared understandings vis-a-vis cultural references that vibrate throughout community (Garcia et al., 2009). This kind of qualitative data is irreplaceable in underpinning any interpretation of the social and political valences properly conducive to their analysis within an overarching postindustrial structure, or as Zuboff (2019) terms it: late capitalism.

Likes and Shares: How popular a meme is can be determined by following engagement metrics like likes, shares etc. Through analysis of such metrics, researchers can identify the memes that are most resonant with a community as well as come to understand patterns of meme consumption (Milner 2016). The men on the fringes of irony, for

example, were prone to traffic in other sorts of memes than that mean; this data illuminates how users who respond to particular types of meme humor differ from one another demographically, and provides an instantiation-specific account about its current state. deeming digital as a technical artifact

Reposts and remix culture: (generally a practice on Instagram / Reddit) — Reposting or remixing of memes is not so rare, especially online. Observing how such meme undergoes this cycle can be used as a very valuable tool to analyse the processes of cultural transmission and evolution that in digital communities (Douglas, 2014). The practice is an example of the participatory nature of meme culture—that users play roles in producing and spreading content—which reinforces Jenkins' notion (2006) about digital rhetoric.

3.3 Role of Screenshotting and downloading in Digital Ethnography

The use of screenshots is essential because it enables time-capsule—like snapshots that capture interactions and content as they were at the moment in digital spaces, which especially pertinent to conducting ethnography. The importance of closely recording visual and textual elements to maintain data integrity and accuracy in the context, is articulated by Murthy (2008) as well as discussed by Hine (2015). Rather, the value of this method lies in analyzing memes that may depend on both image and text to carry subtle connotations.

Screenshotting can be useful for researchers in multiple ways, including:

Provide Context: Screenshots maintain the original meme with context that includes comments, likes, shares and dates. This kind of contextual information is essential in order to understand how different audiences see and evaluate memes (Pink, 2016).

Maintaining this context is essential to provide a broader view of digital interactions and the cultural work that memes do.

Preserve Accuracy: Because digital content can be updated, deleted or changed fairly quickly (posts modified), the screen shots serve to freeze a version of record in place that

allows for direct citation/context and analysis back into the original materials as they existed at first encounter (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This method is the central to attention of accuracy and determinacy in digital ethnographic explore.

Analysis: Screenshots provide a deeper dive for context and identification analysis, also sharing ease which means can cross check easily while if we screenshot it subtly then to analyse memes is much more beneficial. Releasing such data would expose very subtle information about the dissemination of meme spreading, the talk generated by them and to provide an insight into their cultural significance (Hine 2015). There are no stable digital cultures and few ways to critically analyse this data for anyone trying to get anything useful from digital media.

Downloading in Digital Ethnography: Downloading digital content extends the capabilities of screenshotting by allowing a research to gather on entire blocks of data for more complex analysis. Capturing images, videos and other metadata in meme research enables a detailed analysis over time of how memes exist as culture (Pink, 2015).

The benefits of downloading include:

Data Archiving: When researchers download data sets, they are archiving this content for the future and can come back to it when necessary. This is vital for research because of data these studies collected can be analyzed based on how meme culture changes were tracked over time (Hine, 2015). That archiving is crucial if we are to keep a living, breathing record of the digital life that surrounds us.

Content Analysis: Any data can be queued for multiple types of investigation, such as visual analysis, textual analysis and metadata. He maintains that such a multidimensional perspective would provide tools of assessment for monitoring trends, themes and the genealogy of memes across platforms (Murthy 2008). The generalizability of our findings is critical to a broader discussion on the potential consequences of meme culture online.

3.4 Observation

Observation — one of the characteristic procedures in qualitative research involves a systematic, largely objective view about social interactions, behaviors and practices within naturalistic settings. This thesis focuses on the relationship between memes and late capitalism: a survey where we observe how and why people create, distribute, consume & understand them amidst digital screens like Instagram, facebook or Reddit. This chapter discusses the use of observation to study these phenomena and illustrates ethical implications, methodological challenges.

The Role of Observation in Digital Spaces

Observation in digital ethnography involves immersing oneself in the virtual environments where memes are shared and discussed. Unlike traditional observation, which is typically conducted in physical spaces, digital observation requires the researcher to navigate online communities and platforms. This method is particularly effective in studying meme culture, as it allows the researcher to capture the fluid and rapidly evolving nature of digital interactions. By observing how memes are posted, shared, and commented on in real-time, the researcher can gain insights into the social and cultural meanings embedded in these digital artifacts (Hine, 2015).

In fact, in digital ethnography observation refers to how the researcher immerses themselves into virtual environments where memes are both exchanged and talked about. While traditional observation usually happens in real-world locations, digital observations may take the researcher to online communities and platforms. The method has proven well-suited to research meme culture where digital interactions are fluid and evolving at a fast pace. The ethnographer can learn about the social and cultural meanings of that class of networked digital artifacts by looking at memes being posted, shared, and commented in real-time (Hine, 2015).

Identifying Relevant Online Communities

In order to exploit observation as a research method effectively, you need access to the appropriate online communities and platforms where meming occurs. This might mean following some of the big meme accounts and trending hashtags if you spend a lot of time on Instagram, or joining various groups that share memes frequently. Meme communities are easier to observe on Reddit due to the nature of subreddits. Further, subreddits such as r/memes & r/dankmemes and the more positive counterpart to both of those: r/wholesomememes which they all show a vast area where we can see different demographics interact with meme culture (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011).

It is crucial to pick the right communities with diversity in perspectives and different voices too. It is the people who make memes, but it is also those that comment and lurk as part of larger discourses. You may discover other aspects of the data, such as understanding why different audiences respond positively to certain types of content by looking at comments or examining likes and shares (Hine 2015). Observation is a foundational method in qualitative research, offering a means to capture the dynamics of social interactions and cultural practices in their natural settings. In the context of this thesis, which examines the interplay between memes and late capitalism, observation serves as a critical tool to understand how memes are created, circulated, and consumed across digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit. This chapter outlines how observation can be employed to explore these phenomena and addresses the ethical and methodological considerations involved.

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shared, and commented on in real-time, the researcher can gain insights into the social and cultural meanings embedded in these digital artifacts (Hine, 2015).

Digital observation also involves monitoring the algorithms that govern content visibility and user engagement on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Reddit. These platforms are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by the underlying economic imperatives of late capitalism, which influence what content gets promoted and what remains obscure.

Understanding how these algorithms function and how users interact with them is crucial for unpacking the power dynamics at play in the circulation of memes (Hine, 2015).

Identifying Relevant Online Communities

To effectively use observation as a research method, it is essential to identify the right online communities and platforms where meme culture thrives. On Instagram, this might involve following popular meme accounts and hashtags, while on Facebook, it could include joining meme-focused groups. Reddit, with its subreddit structure, offers a more organized way to observe meme communities. Subreddits like *r/LateStageCapitalism*, *r/TheoryOfReddit* provide fertile ground for observing how different demographics engage with meme culture (Angrosino and Rosenberg, 2011).

When selecting which communities to observe, it is important to consider the diversity of perspectives and voices within these spaces. This includes not only the creators of memes but also the commentators and lurkers who contribute to the broader discourse. Reading comments and analyzing the number of likes, shares, and upvotes can provide additional layers of data, revealing what resonates with different audiences and why (Hine, 2015).

4 Late capitalism

Capitalism has undergone a significant metamorphosis. Initially focused on efficiently producing and selling goods, capitalism shifted to manipulating desires and emotions to create a market for attention. This transformation was fueled by the rise of big

corporations and advertising after World War II. These corporations, funded by massive government projects and public finance instruments, needed new ways to sell all the products they were now capable of producing. Advertising executives figured out how to tap into people's emotions and nostalgia to create a desire for these goods (Varoufakis, 2023).

Living under capitalism it is often not easy to differentiate its character transformation. The general perception of people living in every era is that they are living in the latest time in terms of technological inventions and knowledge production. However, when we go back to academia, often we find the conditions we live in is described by authors many years ago. It is also true with the capitalist era we live in. Observing the economic and social straggles, many would think that this might be the late stage of capitalism. This is the end of an era and we are at the doorstep of something new. This idea might be challenged by the original authors who came up with the term itself.

Fredric Jameson popularized the concept of late capitalism in the 1980s, particularly in his influential work "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," published in 1991. In this work, Jameson argued that late capitalism represents a distinct stage of capitalist development characterized by globalization, consumerism, fragmentation, and the commodification of culture. He contended that late capitalism is marked by the global expansion of capital, the dominance of consumer culture, the disintegration of social and cultural structures, and the transformation of art and culture into commodities. Jameson's idea of late capitalism emphasizes the ways in which economic and cultural forces intertwine, shaping social relations and individual experiences in profound and often disorienting ways.

What 'late' generally conveys is... the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and more dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-

pervasive. (Jameson, 1991, p10).

Fredric Jameson also talks about the intricate process of periodizing late capitalism, emphasizing the complexity of its emergence and the multifaceted factors contributing to its development. He discusses how the transition to late capitalism involves a combination of economic, social, and cultural shifts, with technological advancements playing a pivotal role. Jameson suggests that while the economic groundwork for late capitalism began in the post-World War II era, the cultural conditions became apparent during the social upheavals of the 1960s. He argues that late capitalism is not just an economic system but also a cultural dominant, shaping aesthetic production and societal norms (Jameson, 1991).

Jameson also argues that the term "late capitalism" has come to describe a specific historical stage of capitalism distinct from both classical capitalism and earlier ideas of "late capitalism" like those of the Frankfurt School. This new stage is characterized by features like globalization, a new international division of labor, and the rise of multinational corporations. The cultural and economic developments don't necessarily happen at the same pace, and the cultural aspects of "late capitalism" (like Postmodernism) emerged from the social transformations of the 1960s, while the economic groundwork was laid in the 1950s. However, the term is politically charged and implies a critical perspective on capitalism (Jameson, 1991). It suggests being critical of capitalism, even though it doesn't predict capitalism's demise. The term's power comes from its implication that economic and cultural changes are intertwined. It blurs the lines between how money and ideas shape society. This can tick off critics who believe cultural trends deserve independent analysis and that focusing on "late capitalism" forces everything into an economic framework.

The reason behind Jameson's claim is that traditional cultural resistance might be outdated in "late capitalism." Previously, cultural resistance involved critique from a distance, a separate space from the dominant capitalist system. This critical distance is what allowed for oppositional art and ideas. Therefore, he says "...slogans of negativity, opposition, and subversion to critique and reflexivity -- may have been, they all shared a

single, fundamentally spatial, presupposition, which may be resumed in the equally time-honored formula of "critical distance. "No theory of cultural politics current on the Left today has been able to do without one notion or another of a certain minimal aesthetic distance (Jameson, 1991, p47)." He is clear about the idea that "late capitalism" has collapsed its distance with cultural resistance. Culture is now everywhere, even resistance movements are somehow absorbed by the system. This makes traditional resistance tactics like negativity and subversion seem ineffective.

However, Jameson does not say resistance is impossible, but that new forms are needed. He proposes a "cognitive mapping" aesthetic, where cultural movements would focus on helping us understand and navigate this new globalized capitalist space.

5. Metamodernism

The internet, meanwhile abounds with memes that the digital age provides a glut of metamodernism. Memes are a style of humor as well and combine sarcasm with any claim on reality, thus they epitomize the ideals or goals of metamodernism. In this respect, they can be an emotional release valve — providing the public a cultural conduit through which to voice its real feelings and frustrations about those feeling. Which memes will be used to discuss who dies and which for complete silliness is a reflection of the conflict, captured here by its frequency in one internet format (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010) (Storm, 2021).

For example, a meme could get at the importance of social justice but with humour or snark making sure to take some wind our sails. Just think about the world of online culture—where users continuously negotiate their own identities, beliefs and emotions in light of fast-paced change. It is this embrace of opposites that captures the essence of metamodernist strategies for dealing with a world where simultaneously x and not-x may both be (partly) true (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010).



Image: Dog this is fine meme. A comic of a dog sipping coffee in the middle of a coffee house setting with the wallpaper showing how “this is fine”. But a fire spatially invades the space, potentially dangerous, with the ceiling and roof showing signs of damage. The comic humorously depicts the dog calmly saying "this is fine" while the environment around it is chaotic.

On one level, the meme is symptomatic of exactly these postmodern experiences of absurdity and denial often associated with dealing with profound problems (Shifman 2014). The meme also gains an extra touch of irony out of the fact that it is seriously used at times when there actually *is* social or political ferment and, hence, its adoption feels slightly more real. The balance that the dog strikes with his calm response to catastrophe resonates in its search for continuity within chaos, capturing again the post-ironic compromise between crushing disillusionment and personality strength (Shifman, 2014) (Storm, 2021).

Another example is the "Pepe the Frog" meme, which has changed over time in different cultural contexts, alternating between serving as a political statement tool and a representation of light-hearted internet culture. This duality exemplifies how memes can fulfil several purposes and connote numerous meanings at once, representing the metamodernist state in which cultural representations are malleable, complex, and contingent on context (Shifman, 2014).

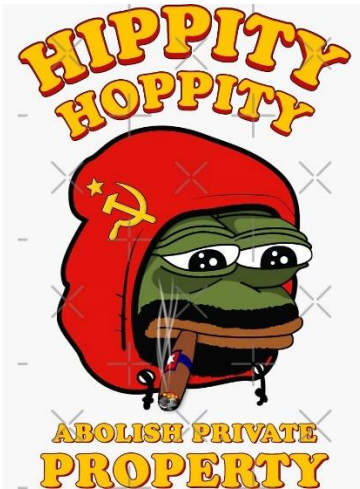


Image example: Pepe the Frog meme

A sophisticated framework for comprehending how memes interact and critique late capitalism's systems is provided by metamodernism. Metamodernist memes, in contrast to postmodernism's solely satirical posture, frequently convey a sincere desire for change while acknowledging the intricacies and contradictions of the capitalist system (Jameson, 1991; Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). Memes criticising consumerism or economic inequality are a good example of this, but they also reveal the user's own involvement in the very systems they are criticising (Shifman, 2014).

Memes that expose the ridiculousness of corporate culture, for instance, frequently veer between ridiculing corporate avarice and really expressing a desire for a life that is more meaningful (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). The metamodernist conflict between critique and complicity, resistance and surrender, is reflected in this oscillation. Thus, metamodernist memes interact with late capitalism in a critical and introspective manner rather than just rejecting it (Storm, 2021).

One way to explain the metamodernist memes' oscillation between sincerity and irony is as a coping mechanism against the contradictions of late capitalism. Memes that represent this oscillation provide people with a means of navigating the intricacies of modern society, where distinctions between support and criticism are frequently hazy (Storm, 2021). Because of this dual function, memes, depending on how they are utilised and understood, can both be products of and a critique of capitalism processes (Shifman, 2014).



Image example: Woman Yelling At Cat meme.

For example, the "Late Capitalism" meme genre often mixes pictures of wealth and luxury with images of destitution and hopelessness. This contrast represents the user's own tumultuous connection with consumer culture while also serving as a critique of the injustices present in late capitalism. The metamodernist sensibility that permeates much of today's digital culture is embodied in the oscillation between these two poles, critique and participation (Jameson, 1991) (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010)

A convincing framework for comprehending the intricate function of memes in late capitalism is offered by metamodernism. Metamodernist memes, with their embrace of sarcasm and earnestness, reflect the complexities and paradoxes of existence in the digital age and provide a sophisticated critique of current socio-economic situations (Storm, 2021) (Shifman, 2014). This erratic behaviour is a reflection of the various ways people interact with and deal with the problems posed by late capitalism rather than a restriction. Memes capture the potential and tensions of our period, serving as both a mirror and a catalyst for cultural change when viewed through this lens (Vermeulen and Van Den Akker, 2010) (Jameson, 1991).

6. Hauntology

As we continue to examine the consequences of late capitalism, one issue comes up again and time again. It casts doubt on the notion of development that we typically associate

with contemporary socioeconomic structures. In his critical examination of the "end of history" narrative, Jacques Derrida argues that the past is not as lost as we would believe. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida brings up hauntology, which makes us think about how old ideologies and broken promises—like Marxism—are still part of our world today (Derrida, 2006). These ghosts don't show us a clear way forward. But they mess with the idea that capitalism is the final, unchangeable state. This makes us rethink what we know about time. It might give us new ideas beyond the endless cycle of buying and consuming that defines late capitalism.

Before we talk more about hauntology, we should first look at what Francis Fukuyama says in *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama thinks that liberal democracy, with its focus on rights, markets, and democracy, is the best form of government. For him, it's not just a temporary win but the end of all ideological fights. He believes history follows a straight path with the ultimate objective being liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). According to this theory, all societies will eventually adopt this ideal system of governance.

Derrida, though, disagrees. In *Spectres of Marx*, he dissects Fukuyama's idyllic tale. According to Derrida, Fukuyama cherry-picks his evidence. He downplays the disputes and issues that arise in free democracies. Fukuyama exaggerates their perfection (Derrida, 2006). Furthermore, according to Derrida, Fukuyama misunderstands the ideas of philosophers like Hegel and Marx. He adapts their concepts to support his thesis. However, Derrida mostly disagrees with Fukuyama's interpretation of history. According to Fukuyama, history follows a predetermined path that ends with liberal democracy. He states, "We can say that the dialogue has reached a final and definitive conclusion if human societies over the centuries evolve towards or converge on a single form of socio-political organisation like liberal democracy, if there do not appear to be viable alternatives to liberal democracy, and if people living in liberal democracies express no radical discontent with their lives." It would compel the historicist philosopher to acknowledge the assertions of finality and superiority made by liberal democracy. (Fukuyama, 1992, p. 215).

Derrida, however, views it differently. He brings up the idea of an "event" — that is, a world-changing moment; e.g., *tôi* in terms of cause-and-effect or events from May 1991 when Soviet Union dissolved. It shows then that history is not as simple as Fukuyama describes (Derrida 2006). Derrida goes on to look further into hauntology, the idea of the irretrievable reproduction and subsequent effect of unreconcilable issues with history. This is particularly relevant in the age of late capitalism. There is a belief that Capitalism is the end of history, but this is almost clearly impossible since older ideologies such as Marxism still have their impacts to our reality. History, in the words of Derrida (2006) isn't an easy story with a clear finishing line — it's still going on and all those past conflicts remain as unresolved. As we think about memes in a late capitalist world, hauntology becomes increasingly important. Hence, if history remains a constant struggle or the vestiges of old thought continue to endure memes represent — that too. Memes, particularly through the culture of our current digital world function as a means to express these persistent effects that capitalism hands down — in many ways: critiquing and supporting contemporary capitalist structures. Such as Memes for "Late Stage Capitalism" These often contrast images of abundance in the midst of austerity, foregrounding our ongoing inequality. This ironic and humorous ghost in the memes could be grokked as a form of hauntology from digital life, where critiques screamed before now flutter across to caution today (Shifman 2014)..

Also, these memes show that the story of a successful, complete capitalist system isn't so secure. They prove that old ideas and critiques are still relevant. They disrupt the idea that we're on a straight path toward a capitalist "end of history." These memes are like digital ghosts. They haunt the present and remind us of capitalism's unresolved contradictions (Davis, 2022).

Derrida's idea of hauntology helps us understand the role of memes in late capitalism. By accepting both the critique and the complicity in these digital artifacts, we can see how memes express historical specters. They offer a place where we can acknowledge and contest the unresolved tensions of the past. This ongoing digital conversation shows that

history isn't finished. It's a living process. It's constantly influenced by unresolved issues from the past (Derrida, 2006).

7. Mememes of late capitalism and reflections

Before we look at the reflections let's look at some mememes of late capitalism first.

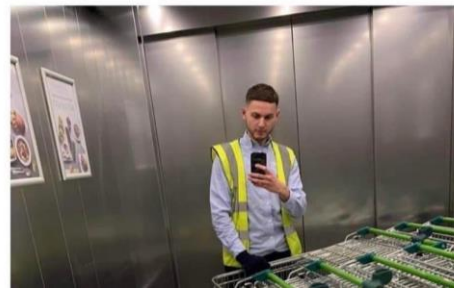


Mememe 1: Facebook



Mememe 3: Instagram

4 years ago I was doing trollies at Sainsburys on a Monday night. I left, worked hard and got a degree from the University of Sheffield. Now I'm doing trollies at Waitrose on a Friday night. Never give up 🍌💯🛒



Mememe 2: Facebook

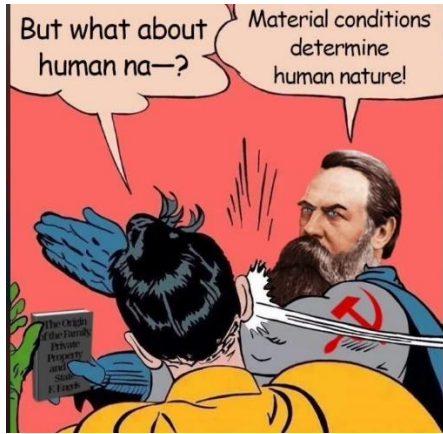
OceanGate co-founder is organizing a trip to a 663-feet deep "unexplored" sinkhole in the Bahamas



kaya @parivoli

Time for the annual billionaire sacrifice to the sea gods

Mememe 4: Instagram



Meme 5: Reddit



Meme 6: Reddit

Posted in another group to show how ::safe:: their kids are at school.



Meme 6: Reddit



Meme 7: Reddit



Meme 8: Reddit

These images expose the sheer lunacy, double standards or even sick comedy that

results in from living under late capitalism. But the opening image captioned with "British cutlery company releasing square-tipped knives that can't stab people" also works as an indictment of how capitalism invents solutions to problems it has in some way created or magnified. The nonfunctional knife thus becomes a symbol for the useless innovation and detachment from practical reality of consumer products. The young man in the second image, celebrating his graduation from one low-wage job to another hits on that sucker punch: nobody ever moves up —that is a lie. The photos of safety advisories and commentary on billionaires literally investing their own fat asses serve as just one more sign that an ever increasing number are becoming aware of the contradictions at work in capitalist structures, where things; even urgent issues like security and socio-economic disparity are transformed into meme material. These images depict how memes act as a means by which our feelings of disillusionment, and irony typical to the context of contemporary digital culture (and late capitalism) can be articulated/attested.

Now to reflect, we accept it or not memes are part of our culture and it is better exploring them with the collective and popular aspects of digital media today. They spread quickly, going from obscurity to viral sensation in a matter of hours or days, yet have the same concision as traditional propaganda posters that tell us everything we need to know with an image and few words. In the final moments of capitalism, memes have become their own antithesis — both an exercise in critique of capitalist structure and a means to further reinforce said structures. Over two parts —we are going to look at whether memes form part of an authentic critique of capitalism on the verge of its termination or if they constitute nothing more than another mechanism in Late Capitalism's arsenal: rebellion-wrapped-in-a-bow wherein complicity is just as much present. Employing the theoretical frameworks of Late Capitalism, Metamodernism and Hauntology — this chapter will offer a more nuanced insight into memes in contemporary digital culture.

7.1 Memes as a critique of capitalism

The closest thing to a social ideology one can detect is the kind of dark-flavoured post-Postmodernism that memes dating back at least two years put out under "Late Stage Capitalism" – if you place tacit broad jokiness through a Leninist self-deception filter. The memes use the sharp edge of juxtaposition to create stark images of wealth and excess with those suffering poverty, exploitation, or environmental squalor — revealing contradictions in late capitalism that remain unresolved. One could look upon such memes as a kind of digital guerrilla warfare; an allusion to the feelings expressed by critic-theorists like Fredric Jameson, who contends that with late capitalism everything has been commoditized and culture more or less is indistinguishable from business (Jameson 1991)

Basically, memes in this sense work as an outlet for resentment towards the status quo. As a kind of cultural criticism, they are characterized by humor and sometimes satire or irony within the limits of capitalism as well. These memes seek to expose the inherent contradictions in capitalism (as an example, how can people exist?) like this) and chip away at its ideological foundation. By doing so, they also adhere to the tradition of critical theory itself in striving to lay bare and undermine capitalism's support mechanisms.

The ascendancy of metamodernism in the cultural discourse explains why memes about capitalism often feel both ironic and heartfelt. Metamodernism, as articulated by Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010), is a cultural phenomenon that blends aspects of irony and sincerity, often in a cyclical fashion. While it may include elements of cynicism, metamodernism rarely gets lost in it, instead opting to oscillate between these emotions. Thus, memes that are critical of capitalism reflect this broader cultural trend: a society that recognizes the dysfunctions within the system and actively seeks new ideas. This speaks to a metamodern sentiment, where the criticism of capitalism is not an act of

cynicism or resignation, but rather one of genuine curiosity and the pursuit of alternative possibilities. This perspective implies a deep understanding of the challenges inherent in working within a capitalist framework, yet maintains a belief that change is possible (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010; Gibbons, 2017).

The also still very capitalist nature of our lives that hauntology critiques more broadly could in this sense be seen as a kind of 'philosophical meme', possessing the ability to reproduce and spread across contemporary culture. Hauntology theorizes that the present is haunted by previous otherworldly divisions and futures we have not succeeded at realizing (Derrida, 2006). This is in contrast to the assumption that advancement occurs along an inexorable forward path. In an era of late capitalism, the recycling of old critiques — particularly via memes that draw upon Marxian theory—remind us we are still waiting for some experience to “get better”. The world of digital, constructed by endless figures 1 and 0 is generating the "phantoms" hunting down our current reality: Is capitalism really a last stage of human development effort? Memes serve to bring these old ideas back into the conversation in a way that's both comical and utterly devastating. Instead of simply making fun or even reproducing capitalism, these are turning it into something non-serious — the object of a joke and some more distance reflection than usual.

7.2 Memes as a weapon of Capitalism

Although they seem as subversive, the contention can either be read that indeed memes are intertwined with system, simultaneously critiquing and reinforcing it. This is in keeping with the idea that capitalism can adapt everything to itself, and turn even its loudest criticism into a commodity. Memes, although initially something subversive in

nature, are quickly absorbed into the forces of capital to once again serve as nothing but content within a digital economy that specializes in turning culture into commodity.

Memes get around the internet quickly because of how memes are intended to circulate, bottom-line, all while playing into an economic logic (See Hassan Pentagon Memes 2020). Instagram, Twitter or Facebook make money by retaining users on their platforms and—among other things—memes are a clickbait attractor serving them likes and shares. So, in this case perhaps a means to be co-opted and another currency meme that ultimately overpasses mental socialism generating profit for the very system it attempts to critique. This alignment with a commodification interest diminishes the power of memes as an act of defiance, turning them into variables fueling capitalist production.

In addition, the rapprochement in metamodernism between irony and sincerity as response to capitalism can itself be interpreted a complicity. By accepting contradiction metamodernism allows for critique and complicity to mutually coexist within in the same cultural artifact. Despite the earnest call for a revolution in meme form, there exists an ironic detachment which severs any potential seriousness from it. This duality allows capitalism to eat its potential enemies, turning critique into another fashion for sale that scares no one except those whose merchandise shelves are empty (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010).

Derrida writes of a hauntology — the idea that our past continues to haunt us in the present, evoking ‘ghosts’ which remind us of promises unfulfilled and lost futures (2006). But this type of haunt is pretty impotent, and generally ineffective in bringing about genuine change. Instead they might provide cover for the idea that we are not allowed to have an alternative, chaining us forever in a cycle of repetition and no change. From this perspective, memes can be understood as just another dimension of the spectacle that is late capitalism, one in which it seems like all voices are critical ones but the criticism comes from within—in other words mimetic consumption and exchange sustaining a system inside out. Thus, memes might be viewed as one of the latest rounds in a process through which dissent is appropriated and even revolutionary thought incorporated back into existing social structures— no longer threatening but recuperative: rather than changing reality by turning an object upside-down it merely functions to reproduce it

(Derrida 1978).

8 Conclusion

Within the currents of late capitalism memes operate as a complex and layered phenomenon that resist but also complicate the borders of capital. Instead memes are mediators in the contradictions of late capitalism, part and parcel to serve as cultural artifacts through which we navigate those imbalances. They serve as critique mobiles, containing the lingering broken promises and unsettled contradictions of capitalist progress. Such a duality, allowing memes to be both instrumental for critique against mainstream culture as well as tool of power reinforcing it, is indeed representative of the larger spheres in late capitalism.

In the text addressing postmodernity, David Harvey reveals that cultural forms such as memes are oriented within capitalist financial formations. He contends that under the conditions of postmodernity, as a simple mirror-image reflection of economic fact (Harvey 1989, for example) culture is also one ground on which these realities become matters both negotiated and contested. From this perspective, memes are a cultural practice that shows the internal contradictions of capitalism itself; it is both resistant to and reflective of capitalist logic. They take an interpretation of the dissatisfaction and irony that epitomizes a lot of present-day digital culture, which provide them space to signal within this system. This is consistent with Fredric Jameson's theory of the cultural logic of late capitalism in which all culture, even seemingly counter-culture artifacts are encapsulated within a capitalist framework (Jameson 1991).

That said, what memes 'do' for us in late capitalism is not bound to their ability as social commentary. And despite the social power of memes, so few people know that in fact this

exactly how capitalism functions as a depersonalizing master-servant relationship between data-collecting firms and individuals on any one or number of platforms created to mine every last dignity out their human experience (sell our own selves back to us for life-altering capital warren buffet says because he can) The concept of surveillance capitalism by Shoshana Zuboff has been introduced as a neologism(4) to reveal how digital platforms such as social media have used user-generated content, even memes do the work for them while they pillage your data and sell it off in targeted advertising etc (Zuboff 2019). Memes, despite their subversiveness in word and image, are here a big part of what keeps the world — capitalist structures that is. By doing so, they become some thrilling excrementalist version of the labor theory's exact spectre — a product in later-capitalism even resistance is fascistically sterilized and sold back as subjection.

This dual functionality of memes—as something lived but also as an amplifier for the reproduction of capitalist social relations—is important in getting a fuller understanding on what they mean to culture today, and whether or not this mega-image macro is speaking truth to power. As Jason Ananda Josephson Storm explains in regards to metamodernism, our current times are characterized by the blend of irony and sincerity, with cultural practices bouncing back between these two extremes creating a double movement narrative that adds another level of reality (Storm 2021). Instead, memes are reflexive expressions of this shifting ground between critique and complicity that define the broader dynamics of late capitalism in which they operate.

Additionally, memes feature prominently in the creation and transmission of a shared cultural story. Francis Fukuyama argues that the ideological horizon of an era is flat, where liberal democracy and capitalism have won its contest against socialism—not as a result any process of degeneration but rather through their triumph at "the end of history." Memes are expressions of both disillusionment — but also the sense that doing things differently is possible. By invoking the ghosts of past ideologies, they review the perceived finality of capitalism as Derrida's 'hauntology' (Derrida 2006) suggests. Memes, in this sense, are digital specters that critique the "end of history" and always remind us by resurrecting visions for alternative worlds.

But whether memes can be harnessed to drive cultural transformation hinges on how they are defined, created and deployed within the larger context of culture and economy. Art critic and author Ben Davis describes the difficulty of rising above engaging with memes as just another form of fun or diversion to embrace their transformative power for common good, saying: (Ben Davis, 2022) And that means a more thoughtful plumbing of the cultural and ideological importance of memes, too an enhanced understanding of how they are turned into fodder for capitalist machinations.

My final thought is that researching cultural and structural change of social practices as it may be reflected by memes in late capitalism holds promise for future scholarly work. Memes are more than transient bits of digital culture — they inhabit a real cultural and class politics whether we like it or not, reflecting the realities of our contemporary social fields. Through a critical examination of memes in the context of late capitalism, we can elucidate their possibility as cultural agents and impotence under them defending for example with relative ease become incorporated into capitalist logic leaving no form unrecuperated. Very simply put, this dual recognition of memes as reflective and constitutive in equal measure is integral to negotiating the contradictions thrown into sharper relief by digital media in a late-capitalist era.

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