

# SEMIOVERS

## POUR UNE SÉMIOTIQUE DES MONDES VIRTUELS ET NUMÉRIQUES

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## UGLY AND OLD: SIX KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF MEMES<sup>(1)</sup>

GABRIELE MARINO<sup>(2)</sup>

**Abstract:** The article provides a concise overview of internet memes in the respect of being among the most prominent sociosemiotic phenomena of the last two decades, highlighting their importance for textual and socio-cultural dynamics. The text then focuses on some of their fundamental characteristics in relation to their nature as collective and serial practices, both from an aesthetic standpoint and in terms of the logic that drives them and their evolution through various internet paradigms. Memes are discussed in terms of ugliness, beauty, momentum, fragmentation, comparison and retrieval. The article concludes by addressing the widespread metabolization of the memetic logic in the contemporary media ecology, taking TikTok, where one can find no proper memes but many memetic phenomena, as a textbook example.

**Keywords:** internet memes, memiotics, semiotics, social networks, virality.

### 1. Introduction: Memiotics in a nutshell

Mememes are nothing but the latest reformulation of the human need to create new cultural assets from old ones. Semioticians address this phenomenon in a variety of fashions: neo-folkloric practices (Jakobson), dialogism (Bakhtin), bricolage (Lévi-Strauss), inter (Kristeva) and transtextuality (Genette), replica practices (Dusi and Spaziante). A meme is never a single object (token), but is always part of a series, a local genre

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(2) Università di Torino.

(type). Memes are collective and, generally, anonymous (though we can increasingly identify notable exceptions, i.e. auteur memes).

Memes are regarded as the quintessential viral content, but viral phenomena and memes do not necessarily overlap completely: a media fragment that goes viral is copied and shared and may not generate memes (though that is rare) while a media fragment that is technically a meme, for instance a top-bottom text image macro (the classic format emerged in 2007, e.g. *Advice Animals*) or a label meme (the new classic emerged as of 2017, e.g. *Distracted Boyfriend*), may not go viral. For instance, I can create a meme about semiotics and post it to a Facebook group of fellow semioticians where that meme is destined to linger and die.

Memes participate in the viral logic because of their “meta-” nature, i.e. as they discuss, comment and actually make a parody of viral phenomena. Memes do not speak directly about something, but rather about the collective obsession with that something. The perfect meme to visualize such a feature is *Batman Slapping Robin*, meticulously studied by the philosopher Simon Evnine (2023), symbolizing the punishment for any catchphrase, buzzword, viral fad, etc. we’ve seen *ad nauseam*. Memes represent a kind of sandbox for studying virality dynamics, allowing us to observe them in action on a smaller scale. Discourses such as fake news, conspiracy theories, hate speech etc. have to be viral to be effective and they typically make use of memes to communicate and spread.

Memes are based on some kind of mistake (linguistic, visual, behavioral; something incorrect, inappropriate, out of context) that, when identified in the larger unit from which the meme is extracted (a meme is always a part of a whole), draws the focus to itself (in marketing this is called engagement; following Roland Barthes, semioticians would call it *punctum*). In this sense, a meme is like a magnifying glass and works like a caricature, emphasizing and reinforcing only certain elements.

Memes are powerful because they are economic (Jacques Geninasca would say) and dismantlable (Umberto Eco would say), i.e. they are made of limited elements but they are rich in adaptability (like proverbs, idioms, quips, cartoon strips, haikus). Memes are based on a template which, like mathematical formula, includes fixed and changeable parts, to the extent that it is not wrong to say that a meme does not *have* but rather *is* such formula, i.e. the organizational logic that ensures

its recognizability and legibility (following Barthes, semioticians would talk of the *studium* of the meme). This formula can be semantic (and iconic) or syntactic (and structural), static (a figure) or dynamic (a situation), syntagmatic (based on the knowledge of this figure) or paradigmatic (based on the recognition of a structure of possible actions), rhematic (adding something new based on a known element) or thematic (building its own discursive context). That is, the formula can consist of a fixed element whose recognition is derived from encyclopedic knowledge (referential), or it can be a simple structure of narrative operators (semioticians call them Actants) and serve as an allegory for a whole class of situations and stories.

This is the difference between a Chuck Norris or Kim Jong Un meme, which only works if the character is recognized, and label memes like *Women Yelling at a Cat, Is This a Pigeon?*, or *Bart Hits Homer with a Chair*, or also the aforementioned *Distracted Boyfriend*, which can represent, regardless the recognition of the original source and context, a potentially infinite number of situations: in which a subject (the boyfriend) is distracted by something (the girl walking by) to the detriment of something else (the girlfriend); in which a subject (a screaming woman) reproaches another subject (a cat with a defiant look in front of a salad bowl); in which a subject (a guy with glasses) misunderstands something (the butterfly mistaken for a pigeon); or in which a subject (Bart) uses something (the chair) to take action against another subject (Homer).

We have all the evidence to assert that memes are among the most significant sociosemiotic phenomena of the past 20 years (with semioticians having studied them for no more than 10 years). Today, if we were to consider culture and the way it articulates, creates, regenerates, and disseminates textuality, it would be impossible not to take into account the internet and, specifically, social networks. Consequently, it would be impossible not to think about the so-called dynamics of virality, on one hand, and memes, on the other. In the following paragraphs, I intend to focus on some key characteristics of memes that, in my view, make them such a rich and fertile collective practice of meaning-making and textual production<sup>(3)</sup>.

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(3) Peverini, Marino, Cannizzaro, Danesi, Wiggins, Bartezzaghi, Cingolani, López-Cano, Jost, Wegener have dealt with memes semiotically. Due to space limits I will not address

## 2. Ugliness of Memes

Memes are ugly. Rooted in unintentional humor, out-of-place elements, errors and repetition, they could hardly be otherwise. This ugliness is not always accidental (striking colors, glitter, Comic Sans font, deformations due to JPG compression, gratuitous vulgarity or, conversely, hearts, stars, kittens etc.), but often intentional: memes propose an aesthetics of programmatic ugliness. We could say that “normie” memes are unintentionally ugly, while “autist” memes are deliberately so. Nick Douglas (2014) speaks of an “internet ugly”, a form of ugliness that is inherent to the internet. I want to focus on two main trajectories within this memetic ugliness, which I would associate with the extramemetic or perhaps prememetic traditions of art brut and kitsch, respectively<sup>(4)</sup>.

The first path is characterized by lo-fi (low fidelity) aesthetics, which can be described as crude, rough, dirty or sloppy. It is well represented by drawings made with Microsoft Paint, one of the most popular and influential computer drawing programs (Davison 2014). The dynamics of the Internet structurally favor the consumption of low-resolution images, as journalist and blogger Massimo Mantellini (2018) clearly explains, and memes have made a virtue of this necessity. The distorted *Rage Faces* and *Rage Comics* that emerged on 4chan were created with Paint. But also newer memes like the *Wojak* (a bald, wrinkled man with grayish-white skin and a melancholic expression, created in 2009 and spread since 2013) and its variants (*NPC*, Non Playable Character).

The so-called deep fried memes are rough and dirty, as they are damaged and worn. These images have been reworked with graphic filters (solarization, posterization, pixelation, color inversion, exaggeration of contrast) so many times that their legibility has been impaired, their texture altered or they have been disfigured (typically with an effect of eerie glow given to their look). Extremely hot or cold primary colors

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individual publications of these authors. For the same reason I reduced bibliography in general to the minimum. In footnotes I explain the main semiotic terms to the advantage of the reader fond of memes but not semiotics. To visualize all the mentioned memes I invite the reader to look up in the reference website *Know Your Meme* ([knowyourmeme.com](http://knowyourmeme.com)). I wish to thank: Ludovic Chatenet and Gianmarco Giuliani.

(4) I could use the term camp, which is deliberate kitsch. At the same time, however, kitsch has been legitimized and rehabilitated as such (and not in its transformation into camp), and those who create kitsch memes do so intentionally and continue to use the term.



predominate, with a generally acid effect paired with the often maddening sarcasm of the content, which focuses on the reuse of formats or images whose excessive proliferation exhausted their vitality. Fried memes can be considered a sub-articulation of the dank memes, literally “wet” memes, while the term actually addresses dry puns, i.e. punchlines that are funny precisely because they are *not* funny. They are low quality memes, but in a less material and more stylistic sense: they are in fact deliberately banal or forced, as they are based on the rework of old memes judged to be exhausted (like oil after infinite frying).

As regards the second path of ugliness, the kitsch of memes is linked to another aesthetics, that of vaporwave, a name given to computer products that were announced with great emphasis but never produced – a promise of technological future that was never fulfilled. The vaporwave aesthetics, which emerged as a mini-genre of electronic music, has generated an original subcultural imagery based, as the etymology suggests, on a mixture of nostalgia for the naïve modernism of the 1980s (technically a form of retrofuturism, an interest in a vision of the future conceived in the past) and its reinvention (the main proponents of the trend did not see the 1980s)<sup>(5)</sup>. As regards both the sonic and the visual dimension, the vaporwave aesthetics employs signature techniques such as fuzziness and off-register which are nothing but a variation of the patina that characterizes hauntology, a form of aesthetics based on the idea of the absent presence of the past in the present and closely linked to vaporwave<sup>(6)</sup>. Visually, vaporwave has a distinct fondness for artifacts of digital modernism (e.g. the elemental 3D graphics of *Meme Man*), Orientalism (e.g. the cosmetic use of Japanese kanji characters), and surrealist juxtaposition: the head of a Roman statue placed on a black-and-pink checkerboard floor, paired with a desktop background showing Manhattan, still with the Twin Towers standing, at sunset<sup>(7)</sup>.

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(5) We are talking about a nostalgia that Eco referred to as “prospective”. It is typical of those who do not look back on their own biographical history (which is retrospective nostalgia), but rather imagine what it would have been like to live in a moment that they did not directly experience.

(6) Hauntology is the English term that translates the French *hantologie*. It was coined by Jacques Derrida as a play on words between *hanter*, which means to haunt, and *ontologie*, ontology.

(7) I described here the cover image of the album *Floral Shoppe* by Vektroid/Macintosh Plus (alias Ramona Andra Xavier), a manifesto of the very first vaporwave, released in 2011.

Between lo-fi aesthetics and vaporwave (incidentally, these are also related genres in musical terms), there is a small niche that could be fleetingly spotted between 2019 and 2020: memes that display the watermark, the branding of stock image site, for example Shutterstock, from which the image used originates, and which usually contain the site's logo and a geometric pattern designed to disturb the eye and make the image – a free preview – unsuitable for professional purposes. These memes not only present themselves as linguistic products, as enunciates, but also refer to the act of their production, the enunciation (an enunciation that does not remain hidden, but whose traces are shown: an enunciated enunciation), and thus tell us about their creation, about themselves<sup>(8)</sup>. The watermark serves as a marker of a discourse that is partly self-reflexive and meta-linguistic. These memes speak to us not only through what they show in figures, but also through what they make us perceive plastically<sup>(9)</sup>. While normal memes remove this patina and only offer a result, watermark memes, also relying on the same images but quoted so ironically, let us sense an entire process as they show they were *made up*: that they are a meme. The watermark implies that the image was downloaded for free, and this poverty of means ultimately affects the image itself. In an age where memes are so prevalent and visually ubiquitous, this small adaptation, again making a virtue out of necessity, becomes a way to create a small, idiosyncratic identity space: by getting stained, memes ironize

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(8) Enunciation is a theoretical field whose entry into semiotics is due to Greimas' reformulation of linguists Benveniste's and Jakobson's theories. Put very simply, it is the formal apparatus that the utterance logically presupposes so as to exist as such. It is the means that enables the transition from the virtuality of language, understood as an abstract and social system (*langue*, for Saussure), to the concrete linguistic production (*parole*) of the individual speaker, and it is the way in which both the producer and the consumer of the text are inscribed in the text as simulacra, as linguistic images (respectively called the Enunciator and the Enunciatee). Enunciation comprises the semiotic strategies with which it is possible to counter a narrative of the type "He, there, then" with a present dialog of the type "I, here, now". This linguistic, anthropomorphic, deictic conception of enunciation is not the only one that exists; there is a collective, impersonal conception of enunciation that focuses not on dialogism but on thirdness.

(9) With the term "plastic semiotics" (originally, wrongly translated from French into English as the "semiotics of the plastic arts") we refer to a dimension of textual analysis that does not take into account the mimetic data, that is, does not consider the text as a representation of something (in which, therefore, figures from the phenomenal world are recognizable), but the organization of sensory matter as such, in itself and for itself, articulable in the eidetic (related to shapes and contours), chromatic (colors and brightness) and topological (spatial arrangement of elements) dimensions.

themselves, change themselves and, through their otherness, also change the perception of the other memes by reclaiming themselves. According to Seong-Young Her, these memes have a self-recontextualizing function and can be attributed to the post-ironic type<sup>(10)</sup>.

### 3. Beauty of Memes

Mememes are beautiful. There are “beautiful” mememes because they are conceptually sophisticated (i.e. the meta-mememes that thematize other mememes or themselves) and from the point of view of their material execution (i.e. complex mememes, for example, those that present effects of *mise en abyme*)<sup>(11)</sup>, and finally because they are artistic (for example, those based on the reworking of artworks). There are mememes that address the issue of beauty by discussing it through their mememe-ness: the *Golden Ratio* shows the almost mathematical order behind the chaos of the brawls in the Ukrainian parliament in December 2015; the *Manchester Masterpiece* is neither beautiful nor ugly, but rather speaks of being the beautiful, unintentionally epic photograph of an ugly scene, a theater of usual tiresome drunkenness which occurred during the turn of 2016. There are beautiful mememes, and then there are masterpieces.

On November 9, 2020, the Twitter/X account @beach\_fox, which usually publishes commissioned drawings or fan art-style sketches, posted an image with the following caption:

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(10) Personal communication, April 10, 2020. Her (2016), the founder of The Philosopher’s Meme, identified “traditionalist, neo-traditionalist, proto-ironic, pre-ironic, ironic, meta-ironic, post-ironic” mememes. The post-ironic mememe is complex, undermines the classic structure of the mememe, but retains its narrative capacity: it does not look like a mememe, but works like a mememe and retains its playful function. “To fully appreciate post-ironic mememes”, says Her (*cit.*), “The viewer requires a broad knowledge of the memetic lexicon, especially regarding ironic mememes. [...] A simple rule of thumb for the identification of post-ironic mememes is whether the humor is in what is being left undone or unsaid; this makes them more complex than other mememes, as well as resistant to normification”.

(11) *Mise en abyme*, literally “placed into the abyss”, refers to cases of narrative encapsulation or “story within a story” (Genette speaks of metadiegetic narrative) that is recursive and self-referential, where the subject of the second story is the same as the first, thus serving as its self-representation or explanation. A classic example is the play within Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (a story focused on the killing of a king), which involves the killing of a king. To describe visual encapsulation, terms such as the Droste effect are used, named after a Dutch cocoa brand whose packaging featured an image of a nurse holding a tray with a cup and a box of Droste cocoa.

A collection of common glyphs of the poorly understood Memeorite civilization of the Second Silicon Age. Memeorite glyphs possess multiple conflicting interpretations and a complexity of meaning impossible to capture in a few short words. These are rough translations only.

The image consists of nine vertical panels which contain the hyper-stylized and black-and-white version of as much famous memes. The author probably used a graphics tablet and the drawings are in vector format. A few straight and curved lines (and some dots) transform the memes into minimalist arabesques that rival modernist avant-garde masterpieces such as Kandinsky's *Trente*, a rigorously composed mosaic of 30 figures in austere black and white created in 1937 (and now on display at the Centre Pompidou in Paris). @beach\_fox gives each image a title, which is not the name by which the meme is commonly known, but a kind of literary reworking of the allegorical value of each image. The abstraction that animates these creations is admirable, but esoteric: only the most experienced connoisseurs of meme culture manage to decipher the glyphs at a glance (only the initiated, that is, into the culture of memeorites). This triggers a small memetic treasure hunt on Twitter and, eventually, the creator himself reveals the correspondences. Here's the full prospectus (@beach\_fox's suggested caption on the left, the meme's "public" name on the right):

- Duality of man = *Virgin/Chad*
- Death accepted blithely = *Ralph in danger*
- Unwise desire = *Distracted boyfriend*
- Not to be spoken / A curse, cast = *Loss*
- Explaining to the uncaring = *Me explaining to my mom*
- Rage to the unrepentant = *Women yelling at a cat*
- Easy choice, Difficult decision = *Daily struggle/Two buttons*
- Scholarly ignorance = *Is this a pigeon?*
- Rejection and acceptance = *Drakeposting*

The images are stripped down to the maximum and the templates are reduced to the minimum: the memes are emphasized in their essential

components. By eliminating the features of the characters depicted, the humor conveyed by the memes is eliminated. Moving from the superficial level of Substances to the deepness of Forms, only the visual structures (the Plastic formants) and the underlying narrative functions remain. As for the pairing of images and titles by @beach\_fox: the former emphasize, albeit in a sibylline way, the syntactic positions, i.e. the Actantial roles that animate the micro-stories told by the memes; the latter focus on that subarticulation of the Theme at the center of the text that Greimassian semioticians define as Motif or Discursive configuration. All these operations have at the same time the character of an analysis and a theoretical proposal, because by revealing the functioning of memes, they show a deep understanding of their semiotic nature.

On November 10, another nine memes, coming from the “First Silicon Age”, are published, including *Sad Keanu*, *Change my Mind*, *This is Fine*. On the 13th, another five, even older: we find the *Dancing Baby*, *All Your Base Are Belong to Us*, the *Hamster Dance*. After a long silence, a draft of nine more memeorites is published on July 2, 2023, but they seem particularly difficult to decipher. The work of @beach\_fox has – fortunately – *not* gone viral but has achieved cult status among many meme connoisseurs. It is an example of an extraordinarily brilliant and beautiful meta-linguistic reflection on the meme form<sup>(12)</sup>.

#### 4. Memes as Momentum

On October 19, 2015, the music video for Drake’s *Hotline Bling* was released on Apple Music. On October 26 it was also uploaded on YouTube. The video features the rapper and some dancers in a minimalist, geometric setting of monochrome backdrops, walls and stairs illuminated by soft neon lights. It opens and closes with a passageway through a call center where girls in blue jeans and pink shirts are busily and empathetically entertaining callers. In the lyrics of the song, the rapper accuses a girl of having changed, as she no longer calls him late at night like in the good old days. The track’s title refers to Drake

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(12) I owe the discovery of the glyphs to Giulia Bini, now a researcher at the University of Milan, who has extensively engaged with memes for teaching mathematics.

realizing that when the notification went “bling bling” his own personal hotline with the girl was about to start (justifying the video’s framing, which obviously alludes to a call center offering adult services). Drake dances in his signature way: that is, oddly, alternating between smooth movements and sudden twitches, while he makes exaggerated facial expressions.

This video gave rise to one of the most famous memes, starting at the end of October and intensifying at the beginning of the following year. Since around 2007, “shitposting” has been defined as the compulsive publication of stupid, nonsensical or simply intrusive content on the internet, and for this reason the meme derived from Drake’s video went down in history as *Drakeposting*. It consists of a double panel made up of four quadrants: top left is an image of Drake against a yellow background, wearing an orange puffer jacket, head tilted down to the left, with the face and the gesture of the right hand signaling he is walking away from something in disgust. At the bottom left is another image of Drake, with the same background and outfit, the face from the front, with an expression – the eyes are closed in a smile – and hand gesture expressing satisfaction. The two quadrants at the top and bottom right are blank.

The meme proposes, in a particularly synthetic way, a comparison between something you do not like and something you do like, a Yes versus a No. Even those unfamiliar with Drake can clearly understand the meaning of the structure of images and empty spaces: meaning derives from difference, and this construction only makes sense if one attempts to give context to this juxtaposition of facial expressions; the two empty quadrants must therefore harbor a text that is compatible with this contrast. The first face does not signify “disgust” per se, but because it is opposed to the other face to which we assign the meaning of “appreciation”, and vice versa. The meaning of this stereotypical image configuration is reinforced by its plastic components: the negative value we associate with the tilted head and the positive value associated not only with the upright head, but also with the frontal position of the face. Semioticians refer to systems of oppositions of this kind as Semi-symbolic<sup>(13)</sup>, where the opposition of meaning is not be-

(13) Plastic semiotics represents a special case of semi-symbolism.

tween individual elements but entire categories of meaning; in this case phoric categories (euphoric vs. dysphoric) and spatial categories (low vs. high, laterality vs. frontality). The meaning of the meme is immediate, while the meaning of the semiotic construction behind it, albeit simple in itself, is complex and sophisticated and has an almost investigative character.

Drake's first expression, the disgusted one, is found in the video at 01:21 seconds and is not difficult to recognize, even if it only lasts a moment. The second expression, the satisfied one, is found in the video right before it, at 01:18, and lasts much shorter than the other, literally a fraction of a second. But Drake is a popular and controversial figure, his songs and videos are scrutinized with microscopes and x-rays by fans and non-fans alike, and that split second did not go unnoticed.

## **5. Memes as Fragmentation**

Drake's facial expression which is the focus of the meme, its *punctum*, is a detail on entry and a fragment on exit. As Omar Calabrese explains in "The Neo-Baroque Age" (1987), an esthetic style that proposed a rejection of the totality and integrity of the work of art emerged between the late seventies and the early eighties of the twentieth century, and unfolded according two different strategies. The detail is a deliberate cutting of a text by a subject in order to emphasize a particular component or aspect that is capable of illuminating the interpretation of the work in a new way. The fragment does not involve the choice of a subject, it is given as such and does not necessarily allow the operation of reconnection to the whole to which the element belonged, thus generating a potentially new autonomous whole. If the aesthetics of detail is associated with a preference for high resolution and zoom, the aesthetics of fragment relies on low resolution and associates with a preference for mosaics, TV zapping and the blob.

Eduardo Grillo (2016, p. 4) notes that this "autonomization of the fragment is precisely what Eco meant when he spoke of "dismantlability" in relation to texts – from the *Divine Comedy* to *Hamlet* and *Casablanca* – that are defined as cult phenomena and whose circulation within a

culture is primarily fragmentary and often spurious. “Texts that are complex enough, Grillo adds, are susceptible to being ‘dissected’ and enjoyed by the audience, even if the original work is ignored” (*ibid.*): this is an eminently postmodernist mode of cultural metabolization, Calabrese explains, in which “the details of systems or their fragmentation become autonomous facts with their own valorization, literally ‘losing sight’ of the general frames of reference” (Calabrese 1987, p. 125). Greimas warned, parodying Derrida, that “there is no salvation outside the text”, and we can affirm that the memetic world succeeds in freeing us from the intertext, while feeding on and compulsively repropounding quotations; but not from serial logic. Still with Grillo (*ibid.* and *ivi*, p. 5):

The aesthetics of fragmentation and of dismantlability are the attempt – the first systematic, the second more occasional and marginal – to explain the ubiquity of intertextual logic at all times, but also, especially in Calabrese, to explain the emergence of a widespread and generalized principle of seriality. [...] This would outline an extensive memetic field in which individual narrative fragments wage a war to replicate themselves and conquer a central position in the collective imagination.

To define what is a “cultural product” in the present days, sociologist Giovanni Boccia-Artieri (2022, § 3) suggests memes as an example, adding that users, especially those who are “new” to these practices, can read them in two ways: “they can take them as simple commentary elements, regardless of the source” or recognize them “as quotations”.

The person who first created the *Drakeposting* template edited out a detail but offered a fragment to all subsequent memers.

## 6. Memes as Comparison

In 2017, another meme format similar in concept to *Drakeposting*, known as *Expanding Brain*, went viral: a sequence of four different images of ever bigger and shinier brains (so, we infer, ever more powerful) as the view moves from the first at the top to the last at the bottom. Each brain must be accompanied by a text, which, to match the visual



progression, must also exhibit some kind of “expansion”, typically related to the complexity or sophistication of the knowledge on display. For example, in a meta-meme from a semiotic perspective using *Expanding Brain*, from the caption at the top to the caption at the bottom, we might find the following definitions: Viral Content, Internet Meme, Playful and Satirical Transformative and Imitative Hypertextuality, Formulaic and Dialectical Signification.

The idea of comparison, including the associated judgment value, is one of the most important narrative in memes. In order to represent a particular situation economically and thus potentially effectively, memes invoke, in one way or another, the idea of a relationship of some kind and degree between two subjects or states. Incidentally, a prototype of this type of meme was celebrated by many as one of the first proto-memes in history, published in the satirical magazine “Judge” in 1921 and “discovered” in 2018: “How you think you look when a flashlight is taken” (the image shows an impeccably dressed and groomed gentleman) is compared to “How you really look” (the image shows a subject dressed exactly like the first, but disheveled and with a haggard expression).

In this sense, we can think of macro-genres such as *Reaction videos*, popular since at least 2006, which show a person’s reaction to watching a viral video or, more generally, an audiovisual content that can cause astonishment; memes of the *Before/After* type (difficult to date precisely, but we can assume they emerged around the mid-2000s, when generalist social networks such as Facebook exploded); or *Expectation/Reality*, a format that has been widespread since around 2010 and shows images, but also videos, where the comparison is made precisely between the hopeful expectation and the sad reality.

The idea of comparison, which is almost always structured around the two opposing notions of a possible Axiology (ideal/real, before/after, simple/complex etc.), can be found in many successful memes. In this respect, the *Political Compass*, the quadrant of identity values constructed by crossing the Left/Right (abscissa) and Authoritarian/Libertarian (ordinate) axes, which has been around since 2001 and became a meme in the early 2010s, is a perfect meta-meme. The *Netflix Adaptation* meme, popular since 2018, plays with the idea of the

progressive degradation of a reference model by juxtaposing three images corresponding to the respective steps of what semioticians call Intersemiotic translation or Transmutation (in fact, the adaptation from one medium, e.g. comics, to another, e.g. cinema); the transition is from the original (manga) to its first adaptation in cartoon form (anime) and finally to its final debased live-action version on the streaming platform (Netflix).

The *Distracted Boyfriend* also stages the conflict that arises from a comparison and the decisions that follow: taken in 2015 by Spanish photographer Antonio Guillem and uploaded to Shutterstock, the photo, in itself an expressive caricature of a photo romance, shows a man in shirt who, while walking hand in hand with his supposed girlfriend (in a light blue dress), turns his head to ostentatiously whistle at a woman (in a red dress) he has just come across to. In 2017, two parodies of this Plastic and Actantial configuration (identical to the one in the Camay ad analyzed in Eco 1968) went viral: the boy becomes Phil Collins, seduced by pop music to the detriment of progressive rock, and today's Youth, drawn to the sirens of socialism as opposed to the safe haven of capitalism.

The comparison can be real or remain at the stage of pure virtuality. This idea is perfectly thematized by memes where the comparison is established but in fact remains an empty position, as in *Nobody vs. Me* (also *No one* or *Literally nobody vs. I*), which turns a purely presentational meme like *(Me) When* dialectical. Even if they outline the same fundamental narrative core, *Nobody vs. Me* and *(Me) When* suggest a different Sanction: in the first case, precisely because the action is explicitly "unsolicited" by anyone, it automatically acquires a nuance of gratuitousness which intensifies its status and thus enhances the comic effect. Similar mechanisms can also be found in memes such as *X Be Like* (where *X* refers to the role or state to be represented)<sup>(14)</sup> and *POV*<sup>(15)</sup>.

(14) For a linguistic typology of meme labels, see Fiorentino (2019).

(15) The case of *POV* is interesting because it marks a significant shift in meaning which can even feed back from the pragmatic level to the semantic. *POV* stands for Point Of View and is a genre of audiovisual content on the internet in the first-person perspective (subjective shot; the viewer takes the point of view of the camera, i.e. of a character), which is particularly associated with pornography. In recent video memes associated with the caption *POV* and

If, as we know, polarization is one of the mechanisms that activates online virality, the suggestion of an A vs. B type of comparison represents an ideal trigger. In January 2019, a Facebook post by a user who offered his own assessment of the classic Nutella and the new hazelnut spread made from Pan di Stelle cookies went viral (73,000 likes, 21,000 comments, 36,000 shares), using the rhetorical device of the simile (the new cream is compared to a seductive lover, while Nutella is the soothing wife “you always come home to”)<sup>(16)</sup>.

## 7. Memes as Retrieval

Memes are not only based on the reuse of pre-existing material, but also on its retrieval: they are based on the recovery of elements that are even very distant from the new context to which they are applied and adapted, especially at the temporal level – forgotten, dormant elements that surprisingly reappear at the center of the semiotic production of a particular community.

On May 21, 1994: Quentin Tarantino’s second feature film, *Pulp Fiction*, premieres at the Cannes Film Festival. In one of the movie’s many iconic scenes, gangster Vincent Vega (John Travolta) wanders confusedly through the apartment of his boss Marcellus Wallace, trying to figure out where the voice of his companion Mia (Uma Thurman), whom he is supposed to entertain and keep an eye on that evening, is coming from. Things are going to go wrong, but at least for a while they turn out well. On November 17, 2012: a user posts an animated GIF of the scene on the image archive site Imgur, which was founded in 2009 and soon became the official gallery for memes made on Reddit. Later, on November 6, 2015: also on Imgur, a user posts the animated GIF of Vega/Travolta’s cut-out body against the backdrop of a supermarket aisle full of toys with the caption: “MRW [My Reaction When] I ask my daughter what she wants for Christmas and she says, ‘A doll’”. Vega/Travolta, who is no longer himself, though he still is, is confused because he does not understand, does

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thus associated with this genre, this configuration is completely overturned and transformed, de facto, into a *Me (When)*.

(16) Enrico Gobbi, “Nutella vs Crema di pan di stelle”, [facebook.com/enricogobbi91](https://www.facebook.com/enricogobbi91), January 24, 2019.

not know what to make of it, does not know what to do. Within ten days, the post is viewed 2.8 million times. On November 7: another user, still on Imgur, posts instructions for anyone to create their own *Confused Travolta*. He uploads a cropped GIF of Travolta's character in front of a green screen, along with the necessary instructions and a warning: "This guide requires you to have Sony Vegas Pro and a working knowledge of Youtube, Imgurs video to gif tool, and Google".

On the one hand, creating a *Confused* meme requires certain technical skills, to this end semi-automated tools are soon being developed to simply turn an image into the "confusing" scenario in which Travolta is supposed to be moving (even if the scenario is not confusing at all: we are forcibly suggesting the interpretation that it is); on the other hand, this practice unleashes the creativity of content creators, reaching heights of particularly sophisticated virtuosity. For instance, Travolta's body is impeccably replaced by that of the singer of the band A-ha in the famous video of the 1985 hit *Take on Me*, which mixes live-action images and animation. Becoming *Take on MeMe*.

The archeological, historical and nostalgic impulse of memes is widespread. One of the very first memes from the late nineties, *All Your Base Are Belong To Us*, is based on a caption from a video game released almost ten years earlier. The *Facepalm*, one of the internet's classics since 2007, is based on an episode of Star Trek that aired seventeen years earlier. *Sellotape*, from 2014, recreates a moment from a movie starring Jim Carrey six years earlier. *Is This a Pigeon?*, a meme from 2011 (which saw a viral resurgence in 2018 when the use of label memes exploded), uses an image from an anime from the early nineties. The meme which visualizes the creeping increase in fear in the first months of the pandemic (*Laughing at corona memes like*) dates from March 2020 and draws on photos by Kanye West from 2015. Italian prime YouTuber YoTobi (Karim Musa) philologically reconstructs the long road that led to one of his dances becoming one of the most frequently used stickers by colleagues and other content creators<sup>(17)</sup>. In the summer of 2023, French singer Jain's track *Makeba*, originally released in 2015, went viral on TikTok thanks to platform trends.

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(17) Yotobi, *Quella volta che ho ballato per il focus* – The Late Show con Karim Musa | S2 Ep.2, 29, Sept. 29, 2016.

In the world of memes, just like accessing a music streaming platform where Beethoven can be found next to Rick Astley (music critic Simon Reynolds, the theorist of the widespread cultural tendency referred to as “retromania”, speaks of an “iPod shuffle effect”), we experience a “temporal flatland” that, while fragmented and syncretic, homogenizes everything to the present, the here and now. Calabrese (*ivi*, p. 190) would comment: “Everything is perfectly synchronized. The ‘past’ no longer exists, except as a form of discourse”.

## **8. Conclusion: After Memes**

Today memes mark a significant transition in the mechanisms of meaning-making in online communication, where semantics takes a back seat to pragmatics, the referential function to the phatic, and the playful to the illocutionary. In other words, the gesture in itself is more important than what it is supposed to mean (Leone 2017 refers to this as an “aesthetic drift”); the fact of being part of a discursive trend is more important than the transmission of any kind of message or new information; and the act of manipulating the material is more important than a more or less precise communicative intention (e.g. serious vs. ironic; the perlocution is “non-linear”, Jan Blommaert would say). We will tentatively refer to this shift towards semantic blurring and widespread ambiguity as postirony, a fertile notion to be explored in the next future.

Today everything seems to be a meme. In the sense that, for some years now, everything seems to be designed to be one (already in 2012 Patrick Davison, a specialist in the field, spoke of a “world made meme”). And indeed, it can become one, and often does. We always have a fresh meme *du jour* to enjoy. It can be a meme that is trivial in form and silly in content, or one of those memes that seem increasingly complex and indecipherable even to the shrewdest millennials. A meme can be crude or poetic, low or high-brow, coming from a distant past or about the latest hot phenomenon. Some memes are quickly forgotten, others remain for a long time, perhaps forever. Meme is synonymous with ephemeral and at the same time some consider them as a “new epic”.

But when something is everywhere, it is nowhere: if something is anything, it is nothing. Memes have multiplied to the extent that they have disappeared, we no longer perceive them, they no longer exist. Long live the memes. They have exploded and left us a culture steeped in their dust. They already are reborn: they have spawned an entire microcosm called TikTok, based on the imitative, appropriative and “challenging” logic of trends which started off, in the now distant 2018, with lip-syncing and dancing.

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