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## Review of 'Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image'

### ARTICLE INFORMATION

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### ABSTRACT

Review of: Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (eds.), *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, Amsterdam, NL: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021, 367 pp., ISBN 9789492302762

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One of the indubitable strengths of the "Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image"<sup>1</sup> is that it doesn't offer an answer to what a meme is. In a way, it isn't even interested in stabilising or fixing the understanding of memes: instead, many of the contributions assembled in it pull at, disorganise and hybridise established definitions and ways of thinking the operations of Internet memes. In the Introduction,

editors Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw posit that while a time might come in which memes have become obsolete cultural products, their decision to engage with them is led by a conviction that “*for us now*, [they] represent a critical moment when the instrumentarium of a global media spectacle is looped and becomes a self-consuming excess”.<sup>2</sup>

Elaborating their concerns in oftentimes more modest terms, many of the contributions that follow do indeed treat memes as mediatic products that provide access to a specific dimension of the present. These discussions are imbued with a varying degree of urgency and humour, and probe out different ways of articulating how memes are involved in the formation and negotiation of the parameters of a fragmentary, unequal and contradictory present. The various chapters deal with contexts as different as the political deployment of memes in anti-government protests in Hong Kong (Caspar Chan), the English-speaking alt-right (Andy King) and in opposition to the Erdoğan regime in Turkey (Sarp Özer); they are invoked as a means to comprehend the online propagation and operative logic of dichotomous semiotic pairings (Åke Gafvelin), to tease out the workings of abstraction across multiple scales (Geoffrey Hondroudakis) or to address a present-day “post-digital” condition (Scott Wark).

A compelling feature of the “Critical Meme Reader” is that alongside its definitional heterodoxy, it holds at bay homogenising approaches to the operations of memes. An initial reading of the introduction might find the sparsity of engagement with some of the bolder propositions sketched out in it disappointing. Equally, the text frequently oscillates between barely compatible conceptions of memes’ workings. For example, while in one part of the text the editors claim that memes can be seen to work as “medial interfaces between asignifying and signifying semiotic systems”,<sup>3</sup>

elsewhere they write that memes “*reflect* the socio-technical milieu in which they insert themselves”.<sup>4</sup> However, this claim follows a discussion putting forward a much more generative and recursive logic to memes than the one suggested by the figure of “reflection”. This conceptual inconsistency of the introduction notwithstanding, what builds a peculiar strength of the Reader is the stubborn refusal of a unifying paradigm that would attempt to condense or bring together the contributions under a single framework. In what follows I will hence pull out some connective threads that the texts share with each other in an attempt to shed light on the methodological, political and theoretical approaches that they have in common, but also, significantly, the multiple ways in which they stand at odds with each other.

The twenty-six contributions to the Reader are collected in five main sections that indicate the broad organising themes of the book: “Memetic Subjectivities and Communities”, “The Work of Art in the Age of Memetic Production”, “From Peak to Post Meme”, “Meme Warfare” and “Meme Magic: Spectres and Demons”. While most of the contributions take the form of brief, richly illustrated essays written in the genre of academic texts, the Reader also harbours several more experimental and differently conversational contributions. Such are, for example, Max Horwich’s interview with Scoobert Doobert or Laurence Scherz’s poetry babies. For the latter, the encounter between “Netflix poetry” and Instagram memes serves as a fertile situation that prompts a production process – involving techniques such as cut and paste, “weeding” and montage – that allow her to construct “poetry babies [...] filled with internet slang”.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Scherz strips words of their visual memetic context to approach the word as “an unstable montage of meanings”,<sup>6</sup> instances of a visual engagement and appropriation of memetic potentiality can be found in

Luther Blissett's "Meme Tarot" or The Trans Bears' essay "An Ambiguous Utopia".

Methodologically, we could distinguish between two main ways in which the contributions treat memes. On the one hand, there are a cluster of academic essays that offer a focused discussion of specific memes, their operations, the formation of memetic genres, or of the social media environments in which they proliferate, and in doing so challenge preconceptions and established definitions of memes. As a sidenote, a potentially curious observation can be made here in respect to the subversion of something of the order of a "meme theory canon": it is mostly Limor Shifman's characterisation of memes as formulated in her 2014 work *Memes in Digital Culture*<sup>7</sup> that is called into question, reworked or expanded, whereas, with few exceptions, Richard Dawkins' arguably more dubious Neo-Darwinist take is rarely scrutinised: instead, it is oftentimes unconditionally celebrated for its homology between genes and memes.<sup>8</sup> I will come back to a discussion of the ways in which these theoretical connections are elaborated further below.

Another group of texts deploy memes as a vehicle for the elaboration of philosophical, psychoanalytic and media theoretical concepts, often eschewing a detailed engagement with memes in the process of making these propositions. There are of course crossovers and overlaps between these different conceptual and methodological approaches to memes, but in order to launch a discussion of the specific propositions *vis-à-vis* memes found in the Reader, I find it helpful to keep in mind this provisional distinction as it can serve to shed light on the overlapping concerns and stakes that the engagement with memes can entail. It also arguably supports an understanding of the multi-scalar character of memes' operative mode in media, culture, and theoretical production alike.

## What memes are not

As indicated above, many of the texts in the "Critical Meme Reader" are committed to elaborating anew or transfiguring "inherited" characteristics and descriptions of Internet memes. In doing so, they implicitly challenge the very assumption of something such as a lasting "inheritance" when it comes to these scraps of digital culture. Instead, the contributions can be seen to partake in the formulation of a much more hetero-generative (rather than genetic) conception of their processes of semiotic articulation.

An inventory of their forays could look like the following:

### *Not all memes are images*

If memes are commonly understood to propagate in the domain of visibility, operating as images that are shared and transformed by users online, Crystal Abidin and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye's text on audio memes proposes to attend to another dimension of memes, namely sound. Focusing on audio memes on TikTok, they argue that by virtue of some of its central technical features – such as the "use this sound" or "duet" options – the platform privileges sound over visibility. An engagement with sound as an organising principle and driving template on TikTok,<sup>9</sup> as well as with two distinct case studies, leads them to put forward two interrelated propositions: that the growing centrality of sound can lead us to conception of an "aural turn" in memes, as well as that TikTok as a social media platform is itself meme-fied and functions as a "meta-meme".<sup>10</sup>

Other memes examined in the Reader, whose workings cannot be accounted for in strictly visual terms, include Sabrina Ward-Kimola's engagement with TikTok

dances; Anirban K. Baishya's discussion of the circulation of the Blue Whale Challenge in India; Andy King's examination of the attempted appropriation of the "OK" hand gesture by the alt-right which resonates with Sarp Özer's assertion that the controversial "howling wolf gesture" (used in Turkey by ultra-nationalist and Islamist groups) "can be considered both a symbol and a meme".<sup>11</sup>

### *Memes aren't necessarily remixed*

As with Abidin and Kaye, Sabrina Ward-Kimola's discussion of the imitative dancing body also starts from an engagement with practices of online participation on TikTok, but by focusing on the circulation of dances and the formation of an "imitative body"<sup>12</sup> on the platform. Scrutinising the way in which TikTok predetermines acts of remixing by users, she argues that a distinction should be made between "memetic" and "mimetic" operations, whereby it is the latter process of imitating the Other<sup>13</sup> what more accurately describes both the character of TikTok dancing videos, as well as the formation of "imitation publics" (a term she borrows from Zulli and Zulli<sup>14</sup>). Veering away from Shifman's definition of memes, Ward-Kimola argues that the platform's architecture "attempts to automate the memetic process"<sup>15</sup> so that "[t]here is *no reuptake, no mixing*; inscribed with a watermark, the mimetic TikTok is maintained as an impermeable copy both in form and potential bodily uptake".<sup>16</sup>

### *Memes don't have to be viral*

İdil Galip's essay brings together an engagement with Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on carnival and carnivalesque folk humour with a reading of the way in which grotesque memes on Instagram are involved in the generation of "festive laughter": "[o]n the Internet [...],

an incessant carnival rages on, unstoppable and full to the brim with vulgar marketplace language, grotesque performances, bodily debasement, political parody, and laughter for laughter's sake".<sup>17</sup> Galip's account does differentiate between the medieval carnival that interests Bakhtin<sup>18</sup> from what she describes as "digital carnival" because the former occupies a delimited space and time in the annual calendar when power relations can be parodied and subverted whilst the latter unfurls over a less structured time. This carnival still happens within certain constraints, yet within those imposed not by ecclesiastical power but corporate-owned digital infrastructure.<sup>19</sup> What medieval and digital carnivals nevertheless arguably share is their intertextuality, grotesque aesthetic, and the capacity to subvert social norms while generating an ambivalent "communion of laughter".<sup>20</sup> An intriguing moment in Galip's account is an observation about the workings of grotesque Instagram memes *vis-à-vis* the category of *viral* Internet memes. Rather than citing and overlaying an original meme in a way that maintains its legibility and recognisability as such, grotesque memes defamiliarize the format of viral memes, "interrupt[ing] understandable, palatable, viral meme logic and creat[ing] an affective communion".<sup>21</sup> Her analysis is compelling not only because of the productive way in which she utilises Bakhtin's writings to gain understanding of the workings of festive laughter on the Internet, but also because it allows us to formulate interesting questions around the role of humour in the formation of collective subjectivities, as well as different ways of conceiving the construction of continuity and rupture online.

### *Memes aren't always humorous*

Many of the memes discussed closely by various contributors to the Reader work as jokes or encompass humour as constitutive element, which oftentimes

functions as, in the words of Scoobert Doobert, a “Trojan horse for genuinely affecting moments of open-hearted poignancy and philosophical inquiry”<sup>22</sup> or for political parody and critique. For instance, as Özer’s account of memetic warfare on Turkish social media makes clear, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while himself “strategically mak[ing] use of memetic engineering”, has turned out to be particularly vulnerable to jokes and ridicule.<sup>23</sup> The Reader also harbours accounts of the deployment of memes that don’t necessarily attempt to be humorous but rather appeal to digital publics through repeated mobilisation of different kinds of affect. Such are some of the memes discussed by Aarushi Bapna and Ajitesh Lokhande in their analysis of visual tactics of the Indian alt-right, which invoke Hindu-nationalist belonging<sup>24</sup>; Stephanie Boulding writing about a viral challenge on social media, where users were prompted to change their avatars in support for Chen Guangchen, China’s politically prosecuted “barefoot lawyer”<sup>25</sup>; or Andy King’s very useful account of the rationale and organising methods behind the culture-jamming tactics of English-speaking alt-right groups online. In her investigation of these tactics, King scrutinises concerted efforts to appropriate the LGBTQIA+ flag or how Pepe the Frog accidentally became a mascot of the right, besides the already mentioned attempt to hijack the OK hand gesture.<sup>26</sup>

*Memes may also have an author*

The overview of the main ways in which texts in the Reader challenge various preconceptions about memes wouldn’t be complete without taking note of a final significant point of contestation: namely that of authorship. The power of memes as part of popular digital culture is often considered to stem from the anonymous and dispersed character of their creation – meaning that considerations of copyright, originality

and authorship are seen to be not only irrelevant but also part of what memes actively reject or might come to utilise for subversive uses. As Saeeda Saeed recounts in her story of the success of satirical memes on Saudi Arabian social media, they tend to be amongst the content subjected to less censorship precisely due to the impossibility of attributing them to a single author.<sup>27</sup>

Conversely, in their essay *Clusterduck*<sup>28</sup> recapitulate an encounter with an entirely different type of digital item, which "shattered [their] preconceptions about memes".<sup>29</sup> The specificity of these images, according to the authors, resides not only in the attention paid to fabricating "polished" and "refined" visuals, but, more importantly, in the insistence on the attribution of individual authorship to their creators, dubbed "OC [original content] meme makers".<sup>30</sup> While a more thorough engagement with the aesthetic characteristics of the memes under discussion is curiously missing from the essay, the importance of attribution and originality in this context is nevertheless noteworthy. A similar authorial presence – this time based in a clear pedagogical approach to meme-making and dissemination – can also be sensed in Anahita Neghabat's description of her own intersectional feminist Instagram account @ibiza\_austrian\_memes. Albeit careful to highlight the capacity of laughter to produce collectivities, the way in which she approaches her meme-making reveals a strong authorial and curatorial perspective. This is so because, when producing and sharing humorous memes on Instagram, Neghabat is concerned with making politically progressive content as accessible as possible. Considering the thought that she puts into contextualizing her humorous interventions – for instance when she provides her image macros with accompanying captions providing historical background to contemporary controversies, from her perspective

memes have the capacity to work as “accessible, easily comprehensible educational material”.<sup>31</sup>

### What do memes do?

The preceding outline indicated ways in which some of the approaches to memes in the Reader push against and challenge established definitions of their workings. While the manner in which their propositions were here synthesised was often in the negative (as in: *not* necessarily visual, *not* always humorous, *not* necessarily the result of remixing), many of these essays carry a clear notion of what memes do and what potential they bear for acting in the world. It will have become evident that the motif of memes as tools for intervention in aesthetic and political regimes, as well as means for subverting power relations, is a recurring one. Another persistent theme is that of the *tactical* deployment of memes from actors at opposing ends of the political spectrum, while a further shared notion can be found in the understanding that by virtue of their capacity to (humorously) address online users and prompt an affective response, memes are often engaged in the creation of communities of laughers<sup>32</sup> – but also in forms of differentiation and exclusion.

How else can we conceptualise memes' workings, role, and position in digital culture? This text will proceed by outlining some further theoretical conjunctions, in which memetic principles are approached, in order to access different dimensions of present-day media-political environments.

### *Format and Context*

Limor Shifman defines memes as a “*group* of digital items sharing common characteristics [and] created with *awareness* of each other”,<sup>33</sup> which brings to the fore the question of how by virtue of the references

that memes articulate to one another (formally and on the level of content) one can conceive of a shared mediatic context which they operate within, but also elaborate and construct in different ways. Yet the "awareness" of which Shifman writes is one that arguably pertains not solely to memes of the same group but is also open to processes constituting a wider technical, aesthetic, and political environment. The issue of the parameters and relevant forces of the "context" within which memes intervene and which they generate hence becomes relevant.

Two contributions in the Reader approach the question of context directly, if arguably driven by different concerns. Shedding light on the way in which Pepe the Frog – a character that is commonly (yet controversially and not without resistance) considered to be part of the alt-right's memetic inventory – has been adopted as a mascot by the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests in Hong Kong, Caspar Chan elaborates the process of appropriation and semiotic transformation of Pepe. He highlights the need to consider memes as signs, and thus approaches them contextually, and writes that "a meme's ability to be entextualised from its original context entails the possibility of its [sic] subsequently being appropriated in another."<sup>34</sup> Chan's main claim in the essay is that the success of this appropriation (and consequent recontextualization and investment with new meanings) is enabled by an *identification* with the meme and the fact that new "qualities are projected onto him by the protestors".<sup>35</sup>

The operation of recontextualization is of importance for Martin Hanßen's analysis as well, but in his account the issue is considered not in terms of identification with a meme and its role for the production of shared meaning within a group, but rather as part of an examination of the dynamic relationship between

format and signification. He undertakes this analysis through a detailed reading of a series of memes produced in response to the recent restoration of the Altarpiece in Ghent's St Bavo's cathedral, which target in particular the facial features of the Lamb of God – the central element of the middle panel of the twelve-part altarpiece's lower register, "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb" (1432) by Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Hanßen considers the visual strategies of memes on social media which in various ways jokingly elaborate the said face of the lamb as being "disturbingly humanoid": by comparing the restored head to its previous unrestored version; by juxtaposing it next to Kyle Jenner's face; or by simply substituting it with that of the comic character Shaun the Sheep and captioning it in a humorous manner. The author interprets these strategies in terms of the workings of "comparative vision", which focuses on the formal similarities between the lamb's face and other images, as well as, importantly, by examining the procedure of "reformatting". In the context of that particular set of memes, this strategy involves the cropping of the large lower central panel of the Altarpiece to the dimensions of a close-up portrait, which results in the loss of the "very complex reference system of the original painting"<sup>36</sup> and the complete modification of its visual impact up to the point that the "the lamb's head looks daffy and silly as well as 'poorly executed' if considered simply as an attempt at a mimetic depiction of a sheep".<sup>37</sup> The format of the portrait – which, as Hanßen writes, always invokes an expectation of face-like features in viewers – allows the extraction of the lamb's head from its previous set of signifiers (for instance, the association of the lamb with Jesus in the original painting) and its recontextualization into a new cluster of images, where it can be laughingly appreciated as "shockingly humanoid" among other examples of the "failed restoration" meme genre.<sup>38</sup>

Hanßen's discussion thus enables an understanding of formatting and reformatting as visual strategies that actively reconfigure not only the way in which individual images are perceived and come to be invested with heterogenous meanings, "foreign" to their original significations or the intention of their makers, but also of how formats can be deployed as means of conjoining, modifying, and producing novel serial contexts.

### *Excess and Debris*

One of the recurring ways in which contributors to the Reader come to conceptualise memes is in terms of excess *vis-à-vis* circulation. For instance, in his discussion of non-playable character (NPC) memes such as Wojak or Chad, Anthony Glyn Burton argues that these images are not completely digestible to the "homophilic formatting and data capture" of platform capitalism because, while iterating archetypal figures and stereotypical behaviours, they still retain the capacity of articulating "the presence of an other".<sup>39</sup> Recognisable memetic formats are thereby exceeded, while the "agential relationality" of users, on par with an experience of an "outside" evoked by these images, surpass the procedure of circulation which remains all that the platform can register and quantify.<sup>40</sup> Drawing on Gilbert Simondon, Burton concludes that the function of NPC memes is to "name a presence that exists on the outside, and in this naming lies the potential for individuation against homophilic machines".<sup>41</sup>

In his essay, Anirban K. Baishya also aligns the workings of something, which while not strictly a "meme" arguably operates according to a "memetic principle" with that of excess or surplus. He scrutinises the dissemination of the Blue Whale Challenge in India, which according to him, is a phenomenon becoming

"real" precisely by virtue of its circulation.<sup>42</sup> The term he chooses to name the affective potentiality of the challenge is that of "memetic terror", which for Baishya stems from those unknowable, irrational spaces generated by new media technologies. However, it remains in excess to what has been intended by the digital infrastructure,<sup>43</sup> its affective power giving rise to an "infrastructural uncanny": "[t]he very thing that connects us also terrorises us".<sup>44</sup>

Finally, while Burton's and Bayshia's engagements with the exuberance of memes highlight their affective dimensions, for Scott Wark the "irrecuperable excesses"<sup>45</sup> of meme cultures can serve to provide an entry point into *thinking* and theorising a new media condition. In his essay Wark starts from Florian Cramer's discussion of a contemporary "post-digital" situation. However, he explicitly puts aside an engagement with the aesthetic dimension of this situation – which Cramer defines as an embrace of the old to contest "digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness"<sup>46</sup> – and instead prefers to use the term to access "a concrete condition of thinking media today".<sup>47</sup> Memes for Wark present an alternative route into "get[ting] at the shape of the present" – not through an analysis of "large-scale forces structuring it", but rather "by sifting through its debris."<sup>48</sup> The composition of memes as debris is determined by virtue of their ubiquity, indeterminacy, opaqueness and tendency to become obsolete. Drawing on Friedrich Kittler to assert that media not only determine our situation, but also constitute the conditions of possibility of theorising itself,<sup>49</sup> in his reading of the "Distracted Angel of History" meme<sup>50</sup> Wark undertakes precisely such an attempt at thinking through the debris of post-digital media condition: "[i]n excess and as they circulate, what internet memes manifest is a condition of being overwhelmed by media [...] whilst also, and necessarily, thinking this condition."<sup>51</sup>

### *Abstraction and Mediation*

Another theoretically intriguing proposition in the Reader can be found in Geoffrey Hondroudakis' contribution, which discusses the operation of memes *vis-à-vis* several interrelated sets of questions, pertaining to memetic ecologies, scales and abstraction. Hondroudakis' claim is that memes – which are themselves multi-layered due both to the workings of "recursive self-parody" and the "layers of *circulation*" surrounding them – can be understood as a process of mediation between "signifying content and impersonal scales".<sup>52</sup> The different scales that memes in circulation interface include that of sub/personal registers, communities, infrastructures, platforms, networks: "[m]eme culture is a process of mediation latticing the gulf between the scales of affect and identity, information, and social system".<sup>53</sup> While we might be compelled to pause and enquire about the actuality of such a "gulf" between scales (questioning if, where and how it presents itself), Hondroudakis himself points out that his concern is less with outlining the parameters of different scalar registers (and hence presumably of the abysses separating them), but rather with the "principles of mediation"<sup>54</sup> between the registers. Drawing on Alfred Sohn-Rethel's writings<sup>55</sup> – which formulate abstraction as an actual force in the world and a condition for commodity exchange – Hondroudakis asserts that "memes operate as *real abstractions*".<sup>56</sup> This correlation allows him to tackle the principle of memetic circulation as an abstractive one that mediates across scales, while simultaneously acknowledging the materiality of this process and the incommensurability of scales to one another.<sup>57</sup>

### *Artificiality and Genes*

The chosen format of this review was to propose a set of recurring themes as principles for setting up possible

conversations that span across the different sections delineated by the Reader's editors, at times going against the grain of the concerns as they are explicitly elaborated by its individual contributions; to foreground an open-ended exploration of the potentiality of concepts with varying degrees of in/determinacy, and to indicate ways in which the different discussions assembled in the book foreclose the possibility of territorialisation within a unifying meme theory cannon. This configuration is not impartial but is rather driven by the wish to understand the interrelation between memes' multiple, artificial and serial character, on the one hand, and their deployment in the constitution of media environments, in processes of differentiation and mediation across scales, on the other.

Thus, it is with hesitation that I turn to the last thematic cluster extracted from the Reader: that of the conjunction between genes and memes, figuring prominently in several of its texts. For a problem presents itself to me particularly acutely now: how to write *for* something, and how to learn to compose that something from theories and concepts whose productivity in the present cannot be easily discarded?

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Indeed, the spectre of Richard Dawkins and his formulation of memes as the "new replicators", functioning by means of imitation and challenging the "gene as the sole basis of our ideas about evolution",<sup>59</sup> is difficult to dispel. Apart from Grant Bollmer, who launches a critique of Dawkins on the basis of his binary opposition between "rational" science and "irrational" culture, capable only of mindless repetition and imitation,<sup>60</sup> those contributors who do engage – directly or not – with Dawkins' theory of the meme, do so unquestioningly. Despite a conceptualisation that privileges the human brain as the central workshop for the production and propagation of memes; despite

Dawkins' depiction of memes as *units* carrying an essence (albeit capable of association and forming memetic complexes or pools)<sup>61</sup>; and despite the strange dichotomy between selfishness and altruism<sup>62</sup>, which remains embroiled in all-too human and unimaginative conceptions of selfhood, it seems that, at least for some of the texts in the Reader, the allure of his account resides in a somewhat cartoonish rendition of an analogy between genes and memes.<sup>63</sup>

For instance, in his contribution Ivan Knapp produces a chain of equivalences whereby "the group is like the dream, which is itself like the meme which is in turn, like the gene"<sup>64</sup> in order to offer a psychoanalytic reading of the group as a psychic object, whose symptomatic product is the meme. While only fleetingly referring to Dawkins, the correspondence that Knapp posits between genes and memes is more pronounced, leaving less space for differentiation and nuances, than the way it's originally elaborated in "The Selfish Gene". It simultaneously erases the specificity of memes – which come in vastly different forms, genres and aesthetic modalities – while unproblematically adopting the Neo-Darwinist underpinnings of Dawkins' conception. Bar any engagement with actual memes or social groups, the discussion remains oddly totalising, with some brief references to the alt-right's "pathological"<sup>65</sup> memetic production.

Knapp's gloomy account, bar some of its normalising charge, resonates with certain moments from Stephanie Boulding's essay in the Reader. In it, she articulates a correspondence between organic networks (forests, symbiotic fungi) and the World Wide Web as a way to counter the fragmentation, splintering and (cyber)deforestation encountered in both types of environments. She writes: "An understanding of the mycorrhizal network again proves instructive. Memetic transfer of ideas over our psychic substrate parallels

memetic transfer of genes by the network".<sup>66</sup> The propositional and playful tone of the essay notwithstanding, many of the claims and underlying assumptions in it are articulated in a manner that leaves them curiously unavailable for repurposing or reappraisal. What is the parallel between technical and ecological networks productive of, and what does it leave unaccounted? If the romanticisation of nature seems to be implicitly rejected in the text,<sup>67</sup> then what alternative conception of nature is the author committed to? What exactly are we meant to take from the appreciation of the complexity of the mycorrhizal network, if we don't want to treat it as yet another metaphor of interconnectedness? How is the practice of memetic translation as a form of "intercontinental communication"<sup>68</sup> imagined to counter the loss of forests by wildfires, the scorching of mycelial networks and fragmentation on the Web?

In their contribution, which takes the form of an illustrated sci-fi story, the Trans Bears continue where Boulding's account comes to a halt. The prologue to their tale also posits a homology between genes and memes: they write that the latter are "tiny bits of cultural DNA" and even argue that it is precisely this conception that would allow us to imagine the use of memes for changing the status quo.<sup>69</sup> Their "ambiguous utopia" outlines a future in which the Earth's climate has reached a breaking point, but "we" have managed to learn to adapt and thrive amidst its ruins. The tale also prominently features organic networks – yet not as a narrative vehicle that would account for nature's ambiguity and artificiality, but rather to chart an ultimate fantasy of fusion and undifferentiation: the protagonists develop "an adapter to plug into mycelium and root networks", which allows them to produce "memetic code in symbiosis with the natural world" and to finally realise that "natural and cultural DNA is one and the same thing, and Earth is

the greatest memer of all".<sup>70</sup>

What is the appeal of the meme-gene coupling? A sympathetic reading might interpret its persistence in relation to a concern with environmental damage and attempts to propose new ways of conceiving human agency and creativity as part of an entangled web of relations that results in a form of naturalisation. However, we might also be compelled to cross this reading with one that draws on Guattari (instead of Dawkins) in order to grasp the interrelation between social, environmental and mental ecologies. It would necessarily cast doubt on the tenability of the production of equivalences as a means of understanding and intervening in the pressures to which these ecologies are undoubtedly subjected<sup>71</sup> and instead experiment with ways of accounting for the singularity of enunciations, without erasing their specificity or produced character. From this perspective, humour as a particular modality of articulation becomes one amongst many conditions that can be engaged in the production of "new micropolitical and microsocial practices, new solidarities, a new gentleness, together with new aesthetic and new analytic practices"<sup>72</sup>, while memes – be they humorous or not – could invite us "to accept the absurd and accept that it's artificial [because] then anything is possible".<sup>73</sup>

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## Notes

1. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel de Zeeuw, eds., *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021). ↩
2. Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 16. ↩
3. Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 10. ↩
4. Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 16; emphasis mine. ↩
5. Scherz in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 105. ↩
6. Boon 2010, 155 in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*. ↩
7. See: Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England: MIT Press, 2014). ↩
8. Richard Dawkins, 'Memes: The New Replicators', in *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189–201. ↩
9. Abidin and Kaye in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 61. ↩
10. Abidin and Kaye in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 62. ↩
11. Özer in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 237. ↩
12. Ward-Kimola in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 40. ↩
13. Ward Kimola in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 41. ↩
14. Diana Zulli and David James Zulli, 'Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on the TikTok Platform', *New Media & Society*, 26 December 2020, 1–19. ↩

15. Ward-Kimola in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 46. ↩
16. Ward-Kimola in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 42; emphasis mine. ↩
17. Galip in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 29. ↩
18. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). ↩
19. Galip in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 29; 31. ↩
20. Galip in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 30. ↩
21. Galip in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 34. ↩
22. Horwich in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 79. ↩
23. Özer in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 241; 243. ↩
24. See Bapna and Lokhande in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 198f. ↩
25. Boulding: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 265. ↩
26. By spreading rumours that it actually stands for “white power” as part of the alt-right’s efforts to trick mainstream media and feminists on social media. See: King in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 221–24; 226–27. ↩
27. Saeed in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 147. ↩
28. A collective comprising of Silvia dal Rosso, Francesca del Bono, Aria Mag and Noel Nicolaus. ↩
29. Clusterduck in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 89. ↩
30. Clusterduck in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 90. ↩
31. Neghabat in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 135. ↩
32. I borrow this term from: Henri Bergson, *Laughter. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (N/A: Temple of Earth Publishing, 1900). ↩
33. Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 41; emphasis mine. ↩

34. Chan in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 291. ↩
35. Chan in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 294; *emphasis mine*. ↩
36. Hanßen in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 123. ↩
37. Hanßen in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 124. ↩
38. Hanßen in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 123–26. ↩
39. Burton in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 19. *It is interesting to take note of the divergent ways in which Burton and Hanßen conceptualise the workings of formats.* ↩
40. Burton in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 20–25. ↩
41. Burton in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 25. ↩
42. Baishya in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 248. ↩
43. Baishya in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 250. ↩
44. Baishya in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 251; *For a very similar claim, yet elaborated in relation to the circulation of 'fake news', see also: Jonathan Gray, Liliana Bounegru, and Tommaso Venturini, "Fake News" as Infrastructural Uncanny', New Media & Society 22, no. 2 (2020): 317–41.* ↩
45. Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 174. ↩
46. Cramer 2014, 14, cited in Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 166. ↩
47. Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 166. ↩
48. Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 172. ↩
49. Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 168. ↩
50. *A variation of the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme, whereby the "boyfriend" in the triad is substituted by a cropped image of Paul Klee's Angelus Novus.*

- For an "explanation" of the joke, see: Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 171. ↩*
51. *Wark in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 172. ↩*
52. *Hondroudakis in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 188. ↩*
53. *Hondroudakis in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 188. ↩*
54. *Hondroudakis in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 191. ↩*
55. *Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978). ↩*
56. *Hondroudakis in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image, 194. ↩*
57. *Hondroudakis in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 195. ↩*
58. *Gilles Deleuze ends his book on structuralism on this note, which I would like to reformulate as a question in this context. See: Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?', in Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953 – 1974, Foreign Agents (Los Angeles / New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 192. ↩*
59. *Dawkins, 'Memes: The New Replicators', 191. ↩*
60. *Bollmer in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image, 154–55. ↩*
61. *Dawkins, 'Memes: The New Replicators', 196–97. ↩*
62. *Dawkins, 200–201. ↩*
63. *See Matthew Fuller, Media Ecologies (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005), 109–65; Tiziana Terranova, Network Cultures. Politics for the Information Age (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 98–130. for two compellingly nuanced engagements with Dawkins' complicated legacy in computational culture and meme theory. ↩*
64. *Knapp in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image, 333. ↩*

65. Knapp in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 332. ↩
66. Boulding in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 264.  
↩
67. Boulding in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 263.  
↩
68. Boulding in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 267.  
↩
69. The Trans Bears in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 272. ↩
70. The Trans Bears in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, 282. ↩
71. On the production of equivalence as capitalist strategy, see: Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London/Oxford/New York/New Delhi/Sidney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 29; 65. ↩
72. Guattari, 51. ↩
73. Horwich in: Arkenbout, Wilson, and de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader. Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 88. ↩

➤ **ISSUE NINE, REVIEW**

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