

Building Structural Frameworks to Contextually Examine Postmodernist Meme Culture - A Memetonormative Analysis

Before beginning any analysis of this scope it is important to note that despite the simple nature of the internet meme conceptually (simply an idea shared, edited and reshared over the internet) it is this very simplicity that belies its complexity - the looseness of this definition means that the primary shared quality of memes is their idiosyncrasy, and any attempt to make broad continuous statements about memes and meme culture without acknowledging this will be unable to gain a true understanding of the nature of memes. Here I talk only of memes in the general case, and exceptions to the rule are proliferant. Therefore, consider this work not as an exacting analysis but a conceptual map under which meme categories and their relationships may be examined.

The vastness of the Internet makes the examination of ideas and their memetic diaspora within it a unique challenge. Therefore, the modelling of a structure to represent the relationships amongst memes in a general sense relative to both the nature of the content and the time of their production may serve to elucidate the complex problems of memetonormative analysis. If disparate categories can be reconciled (conceptually if not qualitatively) then subtle yet important realities may at once become clear. Let us initially turn our attention to Fig. 1.

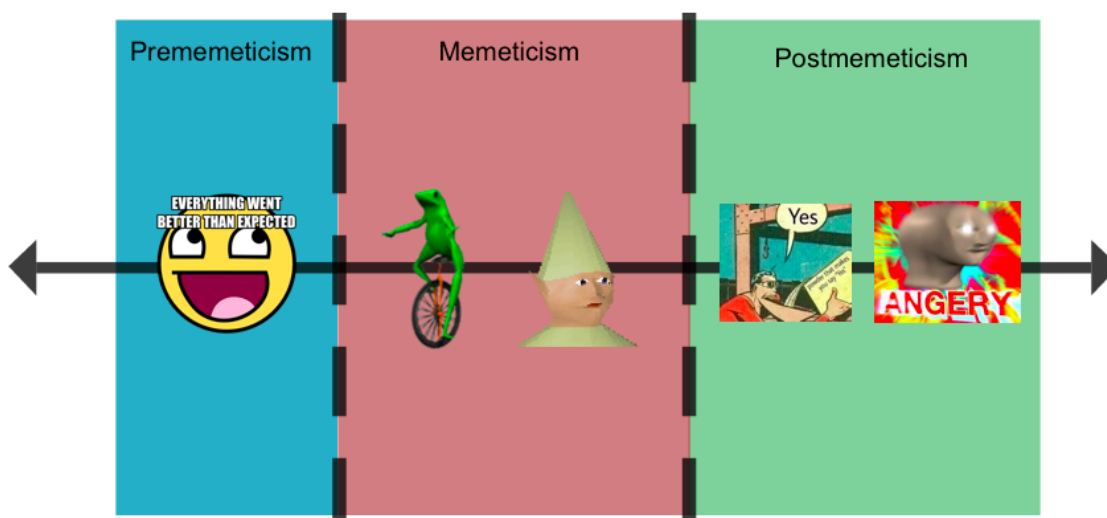
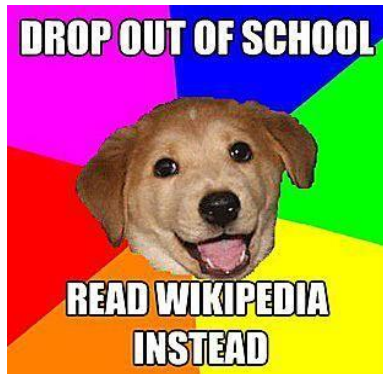


Fig. 1 - A simple uniaxial meme spectrum.

This axis represents both the age of a meme and its conceptual difficulty, which paired will allow for the evolution of memes over time to be easily charted. While this is naturally a spectrum, three broad categories become clear; prememeticism, memeticism and postmemeticism.



Prememeticism - This category can be seen to cover early Internet phenomena, including LOLcats and social commentary memes such as Advice Animals (and most other memes utilising the memetic idiom of the Impact font, top and bottom - see Fig. 2). While a substantial number of memes existed in this period the lack of breadth and of deeper social commentary such as political opinion (partially attributable to the brevity of the format, allowing for only two lines of large font text, and the pigeonholing into fixed emotive framings typically seen with macro images). It would not be until later that a more sophisticated memetic idiom was developed, reflecting to some extent the way in which the

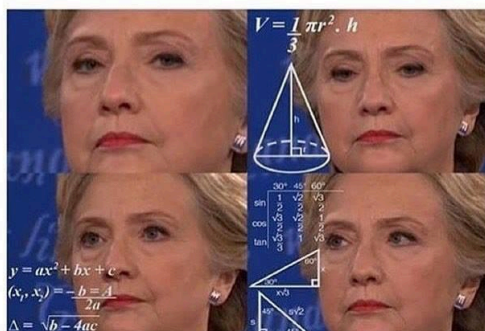
Internet became a defining presence in modern life.

Fig. 2 - A typical example of an early Advice Animal. Note the low word count (only 7 words) and the simple, clear-cut message, paired with a reusable macro.

Memeticism - The most ubiquitous, yet possibly most important, feature of memeticist memes is their format - an image on a white background, with small black text above the image. The radical impacts of this small yet significant change may not be immediately clear but they are substantial. The downsizing of the text, the change from black to white text colour, the choice of a low-impact font and most importantly the movement of the text off the face of the image have two main impacts. Firstly, there is more space for text, allowing for more complex humour to be created. Secondly, the image is no longer obscured by large, high-contrast words, meaning that more subtle images can now be used as meme content. (The less common, obsolete meme format of the Demotivational Poster may be viewed both qualitatively and temporally as a

mediating stage of development between the two formats).

When you're trying to figure out how you lost a rigged election but you accidentally deleted the email with the full details of the plan



Communities such as r/me_irl and r/dankmemes were formed which shared and proliferated memes utilising these formats - r/dankmemes can be seen further to the right of the spectrum than r/me_irl due to its edgier, less politically correct content. While a full analysis of the memetic trends of these communities and others is beyond the scope of this work, the importance of the memetic development stage cannot be underestimated. Crucially, memes could now move beyond expression of simple, clear cut ideas through crude macros, into the realm of examining and critiquing events in the cultural zeitgeist (2016 Presidential Election memes are an excellent example, see Fig. 3) and handling more complex emotions and ideas.

Fig. 3 - This is not a very complex meme but the escalation in complexity from prememeticism is clear; this level of social commentary would be impossible in a

prememeticist meme.

Postmemeticism - While the concept of memes that move beyond the realm of memeticist memes into the realm of self-referentialism is a unified one, an important distinction must still be made between the two important subcategories of postmemeticist thought - antimemeticism and true postmemeticism. Antimemeticism (see Fig. 4) is concerned with the manipulation of meme formats, satirising the memes by subverting expectations of humour with absurd ideas which are often self-referential. It seeks to pervert the expectations of traditional memetic constructs by providing humour with no relation to the original expectations associated with the format. True postmemeticism goes a step further, seeking to eliminate traditional memetic humour entirely, rather than simply vitiating it. Communities such as r/SurrealMemes and r/NukedMemes (see Fig. 5) are a separate entity from antimemetic communities in that there is no expectation of humour from the memes presented therein; while this may initially seem to be at cross-purposes to the intention of memes these memes can't still make statements on a larger scale. In terms of format these memes, postmemeticist memes especially, often eschew superfluous text, or where it is included warp the language and words to obscure any overt suggestions of insight. More about these memes will soon become clear as we continue our analysis.

Fig. 4 - The anti-meme on the left here creates humour by subverting the format, ignoring the punchline-style convention typically associated with this meme format and creating bathos.



Fig. 5 - This is a surreal meme. The humour structure of the meme is removed entirely.

Many broad concepts will now be clear as pertain to these meme subcategories. However, this is simply the groundwork, a preliminary understanding necessary for higher-order meme consideration to be possible. The different meme subcategories and their unique properties must be understood, as must their interrelations and evolutionary relationships, for deeper examination and comparisons with postmodernist ethics to be possible. Consider the following biaxial meme spectrum (Fig. 6):

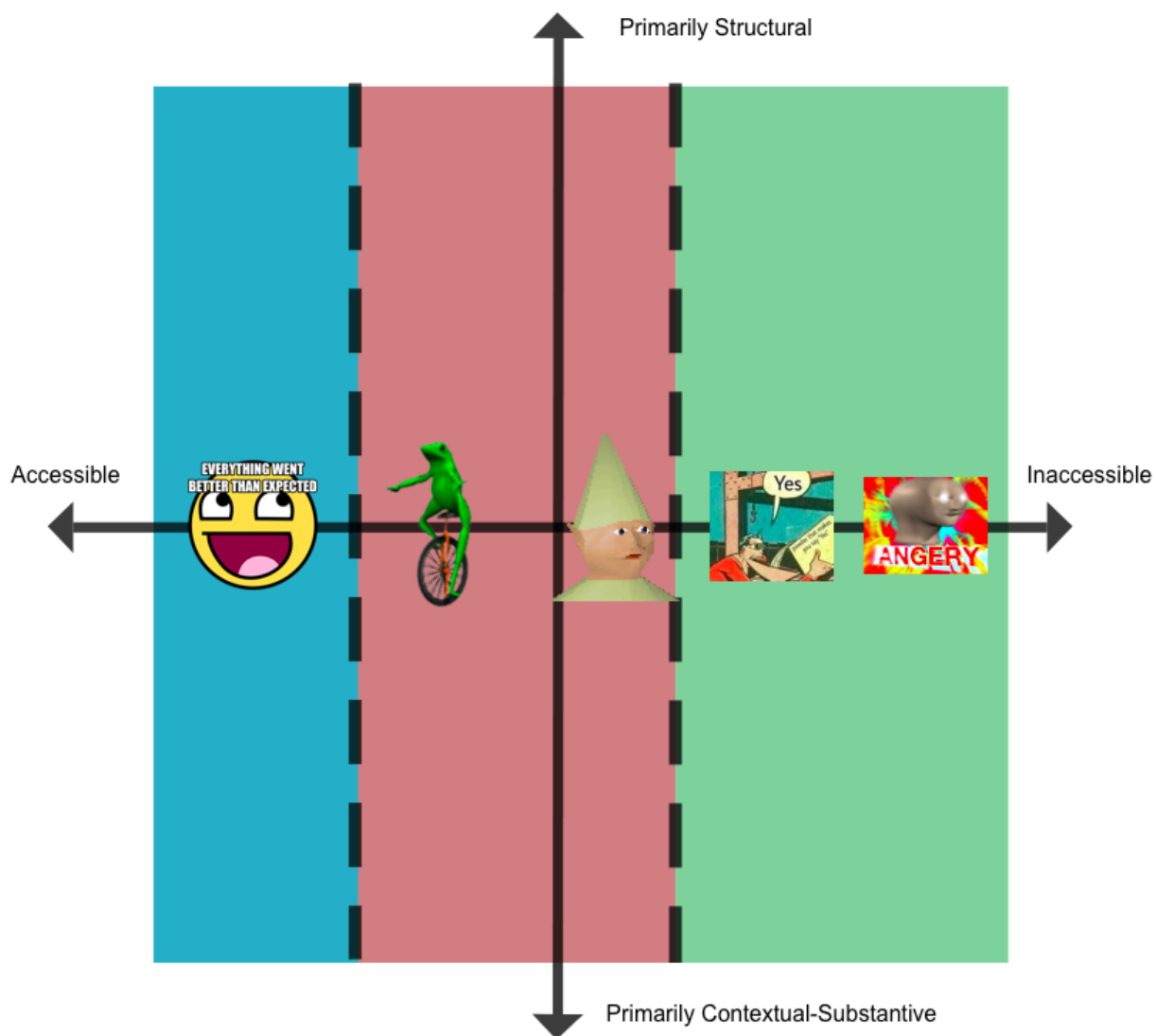


Fig. 6 - A more comprehensive biaxial meme spectrum.

The meme spectrum shown in Fig. 6 provides for a more substantive analysis of memes and their underlying ideas beyond the simple temporally and culturally related evolutions in meme culture depicted on the horizontal axis. We may now turn our attention to the structural-contextual dichotomy in meme culture, inherent in these two factors of great importance both present to varying degrees in all memes.

Structure can be viewed to some extent in all memes, a fact which can be attributed to the nature of the internet meme as an idea which is created, shared, edited and reshared. The presence of a structure, a frame of reference within which a discrete meme category or format may be perceived to exist, allows for the meme format to develop as an entity, providing a set of

rules that effectually define a meme. Structure can complement content, and when used correctly can allow memes to be fused and overlapped in such a way that the humour of both the pieces of source material can be perceived in the product. This overlapping behaviour can be seen especially in memeticist memes (see Fig. 7), and the effect in the general case is that a unified body of source material is created upon which new memes can build, along with a number of highly stable formats that are adaptable to new meme material (see Fig. 8). However, if structure forms an important part to some degree of all memetic content, it can be said that it is even more important in both pre and postmemeticist content. In prememeticist content heavy-handed formatting, in the form of image macros, predominated the early meme scene; while this did lead to memes such as that seen in Fig. 2, where little real humorous content is visible due to the oppressive nature of the format, the existence of these highly saturated core formats was the perfect building block for later diversification of meme content. Postmemeticist content also relies heavily on structure, as the typically content-focused part of a meme from where the humour is derived is subverted, and replaced, typically with a redirection to the meme format itself, in order to emphasize the self-parody on which postmemeticist memes centre, or to an absurd suggestion or realisation.

Fig. 7 - Here, the “inability to talk to short people” meme and the “that damned smile” meme have been blended. The structural expectations of both memes are supplied, allowing humour to be derived from both simultaneously.



Fig. 8 - The “sir, you’ve been in a coma” format, where the conspicuous absence of a given object or idea is highlighted through the man’s ignorance, is generic and adaptable, factors leading to its substantial use across many memeticist meme communities.

Naturally content can be seen in the vast majority of memes - new content is viewed as fundamental to meme creation, and content that is seen to have become stale or overused becomes unpopular in favour of new content, a primary factor and driving force in the continuous, spontaneous development of memes. Even memes with no links to existing structures or formats can still be successful, provided they contain humorous content (as appropriate for the memeto-temporal sphere they inhabit). Additionally, content can allow memes to engage with contemporary and socially relevant issues, making contextually relevant content a key factor in many memes. The ability to see content and structure as factors that are present in almost all memes, in varying relative proportion, is key to full appreciation of the factors that make successful memes successful and a comprehensive relative analysis of meme communities and periods. Consider Fig. 9:

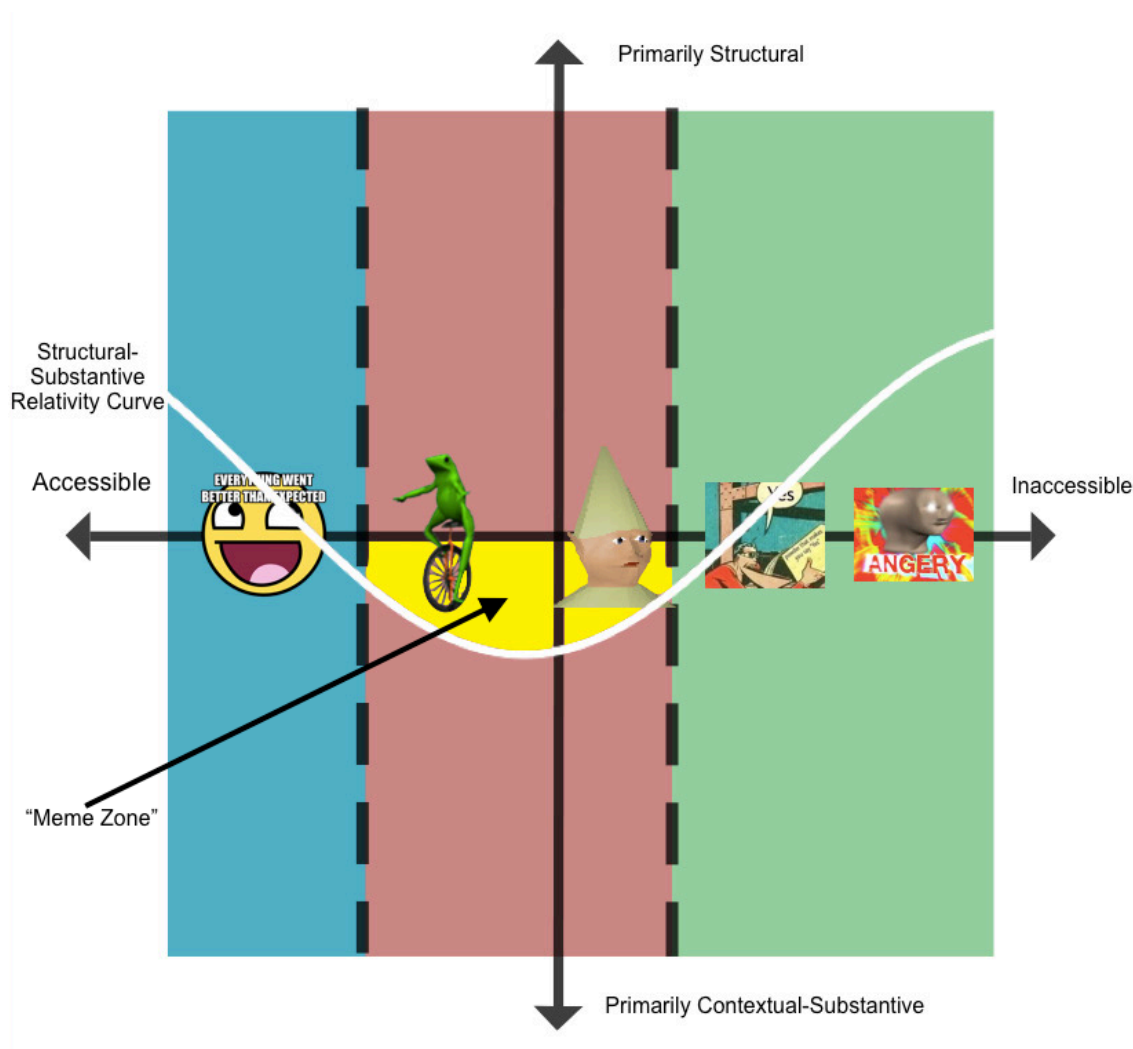


Fig. 9 - A fully marked meme spectrum, showing the structural-substantive relativity curve.

On this spectrum has been graphed a memetonormative structural-substantive relativity curve, representing what I believe is the approximate relative frequency, in the general case, that structural elements appear in memetic images, versus substantive elements. Many of these factors have already been considered, so the logic behind this decision is surely clear, but a few facts remain to be noted. The zone beneath the axis in the memeticist segment of the curve has been marked the “meme zone.” This is simply a representation of the general reason why memeticist memes have been so successful, and continue to enjoy not only strong popularity but substantial meme creation within memeticist communities (factors which can be seen to feed each other in the maintenance of a strong audience and an evolving dynamic); the general memeticist meme has an excellent balance between content and structure, with enough content for the meme itself to be unique and amusing even to viewers who have seen similar memes and enough structure that the meme is not just an amusing image but also has enough scope to allow both change and interrelation with other memes. Contrastingly, as seen, both pre and postmemeticist memes have a substantially greater relative structuralist focus - the former because of its primitive nature, and the latter because of its derivation of humour from the systematic disruption of content in more traditional memes. This crucial realisation leads us to our last important spectrum diagram, depicted below in Fig. 10.

Fig. 10 - By wrapping the spectrum around a cylinder we can see the relationship between pre- and postmemeticism.



This cylindrical mapping of the curve makes clear the key similarity of prememeticist and postmemeticist memes; a heavy reliance on structure. With the place of postmemeticism in the memetic spectrum, and the reasons for that placement, having been deobfuscated, a rigorous treatment of postmodernist themes in late-stage memetic content can now begin.

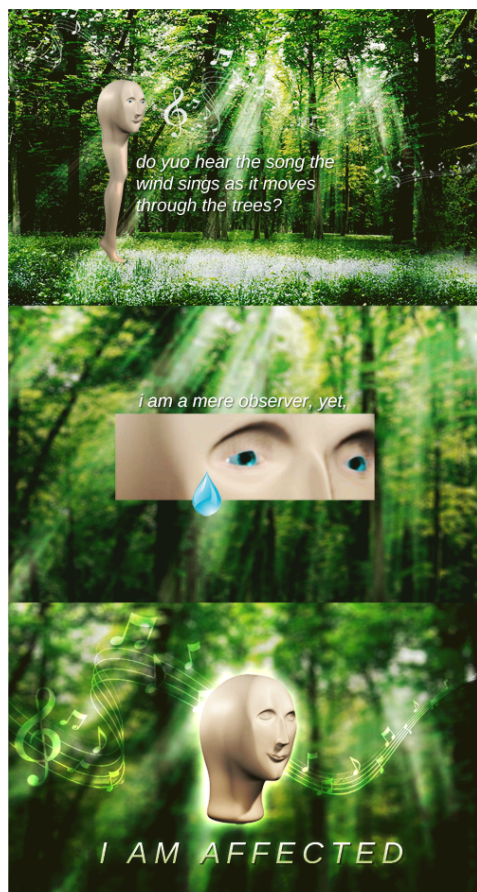
Postmodernism is a 20th century cultural movement which is typically associated with distrust of traditional ideas such as traditional objective notions of morality, ethics and religion. In his 1979 book “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on

Knowledge,” the Postmodern thinker Jean-François Lyotard argues that Postmodernism is typified by “an incredulity toward metanarratives;” that is to say, the cultural values and mores which were built upon culturally relevant narratives (such as the broad scope of the Western

canon). Postmodernist philosophers saw these metanarratives to embody an oppressive totalization through their reliance on what Lyotard referred to as some kind of “transcendent and universal truth.” Following on from Modernist philosophies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which were overtly critical of societal change which was highly relevant in that social context, Postmodernism has a more laissez-faire moral attitude, and more greatly acknowledges the sovereignty of the self.

Memetic growth as shown on the meme spectrum above can be seen to have a similar teleological metanarrative to that of Western culture, in a broad sense; the growth of a dense creative canon in the Western world was naturally followed by cultural movements seeking to question the value and usefulness of such constructs, and offering new perspectives. Postmodernist texts question traditionally held views of the manner in which a text should be structured, deliberately rejecting conventions such as objectivity of narration and linear construction. They are often deeply fragmented and may be self-referential. New art forms such as performance art were introduced in the 20th century with the breakdown in the boundaries between high and low culture postmodernism introduced, and as such postmemetic content may be viewed not only as an evolution from earlier, more objective meme formats but also as a form of postmodernist artwork. Postmodernism has, to some degree, removed pretensions about artistic merit, placing the tools to create meaningful artwork into the hands of the masses, by legitimising memes as a form of art.

Fig. 11 - A surrealist meme. The character of “meme man” is clearly visible in the last frame.



An important concept to consider which is deeply meaningful for analysis of progressive memetic culture is that of “post-irony.” The twin concepts of postmodernist irony, in which content is portrayed under the viewer’s assumption that it is to be considered a farce, and the reactionary movement of New Sincerity, in which excessive irony and hollow self-reflection are countered with genuinity, are fused; the result is post-irony, a state in which the boundary between irony and sincerity is blurred. Post-ironic ideas can be seen in surrealist memes, which continually redefine themselves and their nature, subverting easy identification and deciphering. On the one hand, surrealist memes are absurd in nature. The memes have no clear meaning, and range from ridiculous scenarios to memes which are themselves indecipherable enigmas. However, these memes clearly incorporate elements of modern society, repurposing images and ideas which are most definitely real (hence the use of the term surrealism) and adapting them, often

in surprising and unexpected ways. The status quo is redefined constantly, and the few common factors which can be identified between memes (factors which are constantly being repressed by surreal meme communities such that they do not override surrealist content, merely supplement it) are incredibly generic, simply warped representations of emotions or concepts used in these memes to replace their real-world counterparts (for instance “meme man” (a poorly rendered 3D model of a disembodied human head - (see Fig. 11)) is used to represent a generic character and a wanderer through time and space, whose nature changes to fit any scene and plot which may be called for). To those accustomed to memes which make clear statements (return to Fig. 3) these memes may be uncomfortable; the surrealist nature of the memes make it difficult to tell where legitimate suggestions begin and concepts twisted to remove all prior meaning end. Ultimately, nothing approaching certitude can be gathered from these memes; as shown on the cylindrical meme spectrum they are more similar to prememeticist memes, in that what meaning they do provide they provide not through directly discussive statements but through blurred ideas, which are strong in terms of their impact in that particular area (for instance a surreal meme which discusses love, which would probably use highly stereotypical love related imagery to emphasize that) but which cannot move beyond that, restricted by the strong surrealist structure upon which all surreal memes are based. This memetic imprisonment can be compared directly to primitive, unevolved prememeticist memes, unable to make social critique beyond broad statements. Surreal memes are a failed attempt to analyse culture - while they seek to engage in satire and irony with the intent of highlighting core failures of modern culture, they descend too deep into self-referential parody - their post-ironic tendencies make it impossible to tell where parody ends and ideas begin. Surreal memes are a reflection of a reflection, losing what made memetic content meaningful in the first place - while they seek to abstract themselves to a distant point of reference, in order to look down and comment upon culture as a whole, as opposed to specific issues, they have removed themselves so far from the very culture they seek to critique that their commentary is farcical and any meaning they may once have had is lost.



Fig. 12 - A short greentext story.

While discussing post-irony it is worth referring, however tangentially, to the flourishing online communities of 4chan and its diaspora (e.g. 8chan - a host of similar imageboard type sites exist). Here, the fact that users can remain anonymous at will, and in fact (without posting personal details) will have no way to verify their identity, means that all content is viewed through a post-ironic frame of reference; it is often unclear as to whether given stories

are true or false, and absurdity is a common feature of “greentext” stories commonly posted on the forum. The profligate content, often describing sex and masturbation scenes (often homosexual and/or scenes of sexual discovery) and scenes of violence, are often outlandish and may be clearly untrue, and the boundaries between reality and absurdity are blurred.

Fig. 13 - This is a nuked meme, an extreme in the transformation of traditional meme culture.

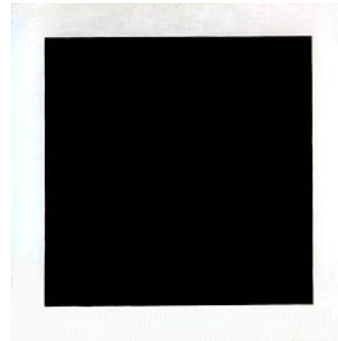


Fig. 14 - "Black Square" - Kazimir Malevich, oil on canvas. Here structure predominates, and what speaks is not the content but the conspicuous lack thereof.

In Fig. 13 a "nuked meme" is shown, another facet of postmemeticism, in which bright, strong colours and simple motifs lifted from other meme content are placed together with no sense of relative meaning (a further distortion of the genre of deep fried memes - this meme might be better considered as a more extreme deep fried meme) - the letter emoji symbols fail to make meaningful words and the words that are present lack any context. The meme is a pastiche of aspects of memeticist culture (visible through the emoji usage) and prememeticist culture (the salient point of the minion as subject). This meme can be seen to reflect the ultimate triumph of structure over content - it is only necessary to view a single nuked meme to understand the concept which they are trying to suggest (degeneration of meme images into near-illegible collages of found parts), although nuked memes possess the self-referentiality, in this regard, that is common to postmodernist works - without the existence of a body of work of nuked meme content, a framework within which to understand the memes, the humour would not be possible. While this nuked meme (and others) can be examined to understand the nature of nuked memes, the true nature of the meme is that the humour derived from them is not derived from the observance of a single, illogical image but through the viewing of the whole body of work as a single unified object working towards presenting a single idea. This can be compared to minimalist art, such as Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square" (Fig. 14). The artist considered the work as "pure feeling" - a consideration of what the essence of art was - although another minimalist artist, Alexander Rodchenko, considered his minimalist works to be a disassembly of the principles of prior art. In the same way, these two divergent but grand creative visions are expressed through a body of different pieces which speak as a unified whole through their shared characteristics - it is often the case, as here, that the artist himself will provide further commentary to enlighten observers as to their creative goal. Nuked memes could be attempting to do either of the above; either crystallising disconnected memetic concepts into a sort of collage or criticising the absurdity of common memetic structures (such as the ubiquitous B emoji). Given the group mentality and the distributed creation process common to all memes, the latter is more likely.

Just as in art, where each progressive artistic movement is not only spurred by the perceived mistakes of the previous generation but inspires the next generation through its own perceived mistakes, it is only natural that memes that seek to react to this sort of memetic content will be created, a trend which can be seen in wholesome memes, another offshoot from memeticist tradition but surely spurred to action by the creation of postmodernist meme content (while individual memes which could be referred to as “wholesome” have existed since the prememeticist Advice Animal format “Actual Advice Mallard,” the new wave of wholesome meme content started as recently as late 2015 (Fig. 15). It is analogous to the reactive movement of New Sincerity, responding to the excessively ironic and self-reflective content created by postmodernist thinkers by creating legitimate content which is freed from the chains of excessive irony and cynicism and can be taken at face value - as put by author and social critic David Foster Wallace in his 1993 essay “E Pluribus Unam - Television and U.S. Fiction” “the next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles... real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval.” Given the strong tradition in memetic culture, from prememeticism to the present day, of memes which view the meme-maker as an emotionally flawed and damaged object, incapable of being repaired (consider the community of r/me_irl, where memeticist categories such as text message edit memes and stock photo edit memes strongly represent a disconnect between the unnamed meme-maker and the rest of society due to their perceived anti-social nature), perhaps wholesome memes go further in subverting not only the new generation of absurdist ironic memes but the backbone of memetic culture, following what radio host Jesse Thorn described as the maxim of New Sincerity - “Be More Awesome,” and what he described as a lifestyle of “Maximum Fun.” While the critical might consider wholesome memes to be a naïve memetic construct, viewing traditional meme content as more applicable to the real world (arguably the reason memes were created in the first place - as a reaction to, and a

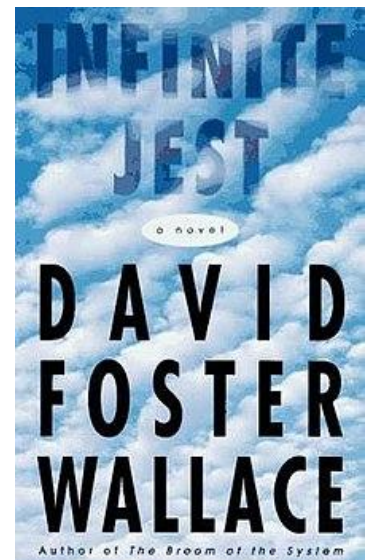
content type appropriate in the age of, the creation of the Internet), there can be no surprise that meme content as radical as that visible in postmemeticism would attract a vigorous countermovement.

When bae says we need to work on our relationship



Fig. 15 - A typical wholesome meme. It is based off and subverts more traditional memes by editing the Pepe head.

Fig. 16 - Although New Sincerity eschews irony, it is still able to engage in sophisticated social commentary, as shown



in the inimitable *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace.

In conclusion, it is only appropriate to refer once again to the title of this work, and the fact that it claims to be a “memetonormative analysis;” it is my belief that it is impossible for any work analysing the cultural phenomenon that is memeticism to go beyond this remit in its critique, and that any work claiming to do so is either examining individual pieces so closely that no broad statements about meme culture can be made, or attempting to examine so many pieces of culture that the focus becomes the listing of individual memes and not the establishment of their common themes and structural similarities. Any discussion of meme categories or movements must be seen to be considering the general case, as has been done here. The meme spectrum, while a primitive tool, still serves to effectively elucidate some of the complex relationships between the multitudinous meme categories by categorising them, and thus allows for an escalation in the sophistication of analysis that can be carried out. I would invite others, mindful of these principles, to attempt their own analysis of contemporary meme culture through the posit of a counter-critique. A single further fact remains to be considered. Is an essay whose primary subject matter is memes also, by definition, a meme? Is it possible to write about memes in a purely serious sense? If memeticist content is ironic, is this essay, as an examination of memes, postmemetic, & therefore postironic? If so, is it possible to distinguish legitimate intellectual criticism from a sophisticated, intellectually advanced postmodernist meme structure, to tell where one ends & the other begins? Such consideration shall be left as an exercise for the reader.

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