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The Biggest Meme. *Harlem Shake* Ten Years After

Abstract: This chapter reconstructs the history of the biggest meme in history, Harlem Shake, ten years after its viral explosion, and proposes a semiotic analysis of it. Today's hyper- and post-social (as well as hyper- and post-memetic) media world is the result of phenomena of this kind. Challenges, parodies, dances and lip-syncs that emerged in the viral content cultures and spread beyond all expectations thanks to the ecologies of social media have given rise to a whole new platform, TikTok, which embodies the affirmation of a new paradigm in communication and content production. In an era of increasingly rapid consumption of images, videos and more generally what semiotics defines as texts, to go back to Harlem Shake, the Big Bang of a new way of conceiving textuality as practice can help us better understand fragments of the present and anticipate where we are heading in the near future.

Keywords: viral phenomenon, internet challenge, internet meme, Harlem Shake, semiotics

I started looking into what we now simply call memes exactly ten years ago, in 2013. It was the year of the Harlem Shake, and perhaps not much more needs to be added to explain the reason for this interest that arose then and continues to this day¹.

Presently, ten years later, the scenario we live in is the result of phenomena like the Harlem Shake, and yet at the same time it is incredibly different simply because there were no cases like the Harlem Shake before. Ten years ago, this was not foreseeable. Today it even seems banal to say: We live in a post-meme era. In a double sense, this age is inconceivable without the existence of something like memes and it is also an age in which memes, that are everywhere and everything (since everything can be made into a meme), have paradoxically dissolved, faded and thus technically disappeared. Memes are dead, long live the memes. They have exploded, and their dust, like space dust, forms much of the building material of what we create online today. Memes, their logic, their style, constitute the wallpaper of our digital environments. We are so deeply immersed

¹ For a recent, concise summary of my semiotic approach to online virality and internet memes, see Marino (2022). For a different and complementary take on *Harlem Shake*, involving a wider methodological reflection on meme research (historiography, textual analysis, quantitative vs. quality approach, etc.), see Pailler and Schafer (2023).

in them, and have been for so long, that we no longer notice them. This phenomenon of semantic slabbering (the “everything is a meme”, but also “nothing is a meme anymore”) has its origins in a phase that can be dated to the peak of mainstream social media like Facebook, roughly between 2007 and 2017. In 2007, the classic format of the top-bottom text or image macro was born, thanks to Advice Animals like the Advice Dog. In 2017, however, the “label” format of memes was established, thanks to the success of Distracted Boyfriend and similar images. Memes would always maintain a template, they would always thrive on the ability of users to appropriate them by personalising a more general allegory, but at the same time they became increasingly free and elastic. The following year, 2018, saw the emergence of TikTok, a platform that embraces the formats and trends (challenges, parodies, lip-syncing, etc.) popularised thanks to cases like the Harlem Shake. TikTok is the epitome of a new media universe and media model that we can confidently call post-social media, as it is hyper-social media². In an age of ever-growing fast-paced consumption of images, videos and, more generally, what semiotics defines as texts, a look back at Harlem Shake, heralding the Big Bang of a new way of conceiving textuality as practice (rather than a static object)³, can help us better understand fragments of the present and anticipate where we are heading in the near future.

1 A Song Without Music Video

2 February 2012

The young New York electronic musician Baauer (real name Harry Bauer Rodriguez, born 1989) uploaded a track entitled “Harlem Shake” to his Soundcloud channel. In April of the same year, the track was included by Rustie (Russell Whyte, producer from Glasgow, born 1983, signed to the renowned Warp Records label and head of the Lucky Me label) into a mix for the BBC Radio One programme and reached the ears of Diplo (Thomas Wesley Pentz, a producer from Los Angeles, born 1978, and one of the most influential figures in the electronic scene of the last 20 years, moving between underground and mainstream), who decided in May to release the song on the Soundcloud page of Jeffree’s (a subsidiary of his main label Mad Decent). “Harlem Shake” is the first Baauer-produced track to be released in digital format in the official discography. In June, the track was made available for purchase on major online music stores (iTunes, Beatport). In August, it was up-

² See the first Italian book on TikTok, Marino and Surace (2023).

³ For the semiotic notion of “text”, see Marrone (2014).

loaded on Mad Decent's YouTube channel in the form of an audio track with a still image. The music video was commissioned to Belgian director Maxime Quoilin (trusted by many Black and urban artists and the author of some of Baauer's publicity photos). It was shot later that June (according to some behind-the-scenes images posted on Instagram)⁴ but was discarded by the record label and never officially released (the video was eventually uploaded on YouTube, by accounts not affiliated with either the musician or the record company, in 2013)⁵. There are three protagonists in this video (and occasionally Baauer himself appears): A girl and a little boy (wearing a T-shirt with a photo of the rapper Puff Daddy) who first dance separately and then together on the streets of Harlem, and a motorcyclist performing daredevil stunts in traffic on a big motorbike. The footage is rich in slow-motion and acceleration effects; the images are synchronised with the progression of the song (at one point, for example, a roar can be heard – I will return to this detail – and the images show a man opening and closing his mouth). “Harlem Shake” received positive reviews, e.g., from Pitchfork, the website that rode and steered the Anglophone hipster taste of the 2000s (indie, folktronica, hip hop, etc.).

Harlem Shake lasts three minutes and 16 seconds and belongs to the subgenre of electro and bass music called trap: A very different trap from the one that would be very popular in the next few years and would become a real media and cultural phenomenon, as is the case for example in Italy. Trap emerged in the early 2000s as a subgenre of one of the stylistic offshoots of Southern hip hop (crunk) and was characterised by a hard and dark timbre, by an edgy, mechanical rhythm provided by a drum machine (usually the historic Roland TR-808), the use of sub-basses, synthesiser layers and electronic effects (sirens, video game samples, voices with strong ethnic connotation, etc.), and combinations of complex hi-hat figurations. Harmonically and melodically, the song is elementary. It is a series of 14 notes occupying two bars in a loop; they are all F, with an E-flat in the twelfth and an E in the thirteenth position. A complete riff loop is exhausted after four repetitions of the series, i.e., after eight bars. The structure is modular, with the three sections Intro (A, 8 bars), Riff (B, 16 bars, i.e. two riff cycles) and Intermezzo (C, 16 bars) according to the scheme A-B-A₁-B-C-A-B-A₁-B; where A₁ is to be understood as a reprise of the intro with variation (the 14 notes are all F) and C as an “empty section” divided into two subsections (in the first the 14-note loop does not appear; in the second the notes appear as in A₁, but with a less pronounced rhythmic pattern). Rhythmically, timbrally, and sonically, however, the track is very rich. This is thanks to the hi-hat figurations (triplets typical of trap) and snare drum passages

⁴ Post dated 27 June 2012, from Quoilin's account: https://www.instagram.com/p/MXAlWhop_P/.

⁵ <https://youtu.be/j-ToIS-LOGY> and <https://youtu.be/vuuLm78eTqA>.

(borrowed from ragga), the variety of vocal (“Con los terroristas!” taken from *Los Terroristas* by Héctor “El Father”, 2006⁶, and “Do the harlem shake!”, taken from *Miller Time* by Plastic Little, 2003) and other kinds of samples (a roar), as well as the use of spatialisation effects (approaching and receding, layering, stereo distribution, echo).

“Harlem Shake” begins with a sample that shouts “Con los terroristas!” from afar, announcing the intro (A), which is characterised by a driving rhythm. This is followed by the drop, which introduces the main riff with the sample “Do the harlem shake!” (B)⁷. The motif (the 14 notes), expounded by a synth line reminiscent of the Dutch house sound, is simultaneously robotic and playful, a kind of lullaby, giving the impression of someone “pressing the same button”, in a “rubbery”, “greasy”, “sticky” way; listeners describe it as “hypnotic” and “addictive”. The riff exposition closes with the roar of a lion (modified to sound like a burp). The song’s intro and first riff cycle are the foundation upon which the Harlem Shake meme develops.

2 Perfecting the Format

30 January 2013

Youtuber Filthy_Frank (then with 13,000 subscribers to the DizastaMusic channel; today the channel has more than a million subscribers) uploaded one of his mini-shows of crazy and extreme comedy sketches filmed in student flats and on the streets of New York. *Filthy Compilation #6 – Smell My Fingers* begins with a scene in which four dressed-up and masked people dance merrily to the notes of “Harlem Shake”⁸. It lasts 18 seconds. In terms of YouTube’s video genres, we can speak of both a fan video and a reaction video. The Youtuber uses a song written by others and films himself reacting to hearing it (one of the four characters is himself, also known as Pink Guy because of his jumpsuit). This is the first, primitive version of the Harlem Shake meme. On 2 February, at the request of many users, the Youtuber uploaded a longer version of this first video segment, the “full version” (“Do the Harlem Shake”, duration 35 seconds)⁹. In this longer video, while the song’s intro plays (not in the environment, but cut as an audio track over the

6 In truth, the sample in Baauer’s *Harlem Shake* comes from Philadelphyinz’s *Moombahton Loops and Samples* (2011), who in turn had sampled the same vocal fragment from the 2006 track.

7 The drop is a form of stop-and-go codified in dance music: A pause that concludes an introductory section at the peak of its crescendo and introduces the subsequent exposition of the hook or leading riff, characterised by a prominent bass line (it is also referred to as a bass drop).

8 <https://youtu.be/GeO3yCpLt0Q>.

9 <https://youtu.be/8vjSSAMNWw>.

images), the four characters, following the beat, replicate what is known in internet lingo as the “Stormtrooper dance” (a pelvic gesture representing a mechanical enactment of a sexual act), derived from a *Star Wars* animated GIF which went viral around 2004. After the drop with the chant “Do the harlem shake!”, the characters wildly wiggle their arms and shoulders in an octopus-like manner (this is perhaps a mockery of the movements of the original Harlem Shake, a hip hop dance popular in the 1980s). Then, separated by four jump cuts (abrupt montage cuts), the four scenes that follow are presented: The protagonists do the Stormtrooper move again, three of them do a lap dance around Pink Guy (this action is repeated for two scenes), and then they all start shaking again. The video ends abruptly, shortly after the start of the second round of the riff.

The Youtuber community is very active, cohesive, and attentive. Soon remakes, imitations, parodies and videos inspired by Filthy_Frank were uploaded. One of them, The Harlem Shake v1, was already being uploaded on the channel of Australian youtubers TheSunnyCoast-Skate on 2 February¹⁰; the video shows some important variations compared to the original, which are systematically taken up by all subsequent videos and thus become a model. This is the case with the video by PHL_On_ NAN (now Jackson Foltz) entitled “The Harlem Shake v2”¹¹, uploaded on 3 February and explicitly indebted to its predecessor (not only for the title, which refers to a “version one”, but also for the final inscription, which reads “Thank you TSCS [TheSunnyCoast-Skate] fo’ tha idea”). This video reached 300,000 views in 24 hours and is the definitive catalyst for Harlem Shake as a viral phenomenon.

In both v1 and v2, which both last 30 seconds, we see a setting not too different from Filthy_Frank’s (a messy room inhabited by young students), but with completely different directorial solutions. Both v1 and v2 are shot in high definition and with a wide angle, while Filthy_Frank proposes a poorly filmed claustrophobic cowboy shot. Let us focus on v2. During the intro of “Harlem Shake”, a character fully clad in a helmet shakes himself in sync with the music, while the other five guys lie there indifferent and motionless, minding their own business on their mobile phones, computers, video games and electric guitars. When the drop comes, a jump cut – the only one in the video – shows all the characters going wild (three of them are now shirtless and two of them are simulating sexual acts), standing still in their positions and each repeating a single action. The video ends with a very short slow motion that corresponds to the roar/burp sample that closes the first shot of the riff.

¹⁰ <http://youtu.be/384IUU43bfQ>.

¹¹ <http://youtu.be/W52rnrwG9p0>.

In the Australian video, v1, the formula is still imperfect, there are still some mistakes: One of the guys giggles; the slow motion is not at the end of the video and overlaps with the roar, but is overlaid by a simple snare drum passage; the dance of the character with the helmet is still the pelvic movement of the Stormtrooper (while in v2 this connection to *Star Wars* and its fandom is lost to make way for a less connoted, freer and also less vulgar dance). We find a strange residue of diegetic sound (recorded live as ambient noise) that serves as a kind of micro-intro and gives the video an interesting reality effect. At the beginning of the action, the masked character holds an iPhone in his hand and drops it on the desk (we see and hear this gesture). However, this frame is immediately contradicted. When the music kicks in, it is not the sound coming from the device but the “Harlem Shake” song synchronised with the images.

Only a few days after v2 was uploaded, YouTube was already full of videos showing the format in action not only at home in front of the webcam, but also in workplaces and public places invaded by flash mobs (sudden gatherings organised by a group of people without the passers-by or those who are normally in these spaces noticing). The “office version” uploaded on 6 February as “Harlem Shake v3” and filmed in a large open space is very famous¹². Making a Harlem Shake video was quick to become a contagious trend, joined by ordinary people and celebrities of all kinds, as well as artists, politicians, media, brands and institutions.

Harlem Shake became contagious thanks to the endorsement from influencers (Ashton 2013): first of all, the insiders (the “internet” or “web personalities”) and the public figures who talk about it and engage with it; in our case, an extremely heterogeneous list that includes, among others, TV host Jimmy Fallon, the animated series *The Simpsons*, the TV series *Glee*, the Miami Heat basketball team, a Norwegian army squadron, fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni (her version is wacky), and so on. In February, about 4,000 videos were uploaded per day, by 15 February the total reached more than 40,000, and by 24 March they generated a total of one billion views. At the same time, the music track “Harlem Shake” climbed the charts in the US and UK. Unexpectedly, this fad helped to give the Arab Spring movement a voice in the West and reach a wide audience that otherwise might not have been reached so quickly and effectively: “Young people in countries like Egypt and Tunisia are turning the ‘Harlem Shake’ into a political tool and dancing *en masse* to protest against their governments” (Williams 2013).

¹² The video, which addressed the original Filhty_Frank’s and v1 and v2 versions, has been deleted (this was the original link: <http://youtu.be/0IJoKuTlvuM>) and the channel it was uploaded to (named hiirawn) has been stripped of all content. One can find the “office version” of *Harlem Shake* on other YouTube channels.

3 From Song to Video

The introduction of “Harlem Shake” has the function of an opening curtain, revealing the stage for what will be the beating heart of the musical text. The vocal sample “Con los terroristas!” introduces the first section where, what we will later discover to be the hook or riff, is offered to us as bait, only audible below the rhythm, which beats dry and woody in 4/4 time at 140 bpm¹³. This riff is like a layer that announces itself beat by beat, rising more and more, gaining definition, increasing in volume, losing the initial echo that made it seem distant and gaining spatial proximity. Accompanying this march, this emergence, is a whirlwind of effects (like “centrifuges”) that give the impression of increasing speed (thanks also to the use of a snare drum that draws the ghost notes of a breakbeat, the broken rhythm of English electronic music), in a euphoric crescendo that, likewise to the moment of leaping into a dive, creates a point of maximum tension that requires a suspension, an apnoea, a hiccup. It is the breakdown of the drop (“Do the harlem shake!”) that turns on the bullseye light on the track’s stage and explodes its main theme.

The intro is a contrivance in the sense that it contrives, sets the listener’s expectations, and suggests to them that something is going to happen, that they should prepare for something. Through the intro, the music provides the listener with a programme from which they would derive a series of possible actions, starting from the “sensorimotor synchronisation (of the ‘model dancer’) with the rhythm of the unity of the song under consideration” (Marconi 2007, 105).

The music invites the listener to dance, it invites the listener to reach the goal, to overcome moments of waiting and abrupt interruptions to enjoy the theme in its full development. The piece invites the listener to create a plastic rhyme between its own tonal forms and their own movements¹⁴. The music wants to be staged, enacted, embodied. The intro is also a contrivance which sets the agogic components, creates a tension whose result can only be the release of the drop and which the listener cannot help but want to reach. The memes of Harlem Shake focus precisely on this part of the song, so rich in somatic, motor and spatial cues, and take them over, try to dub them, make them not soundtracks but “visual tracks”, in a process of mickey mousing¹⁵. The music

¹³ For the narratological concept of “bait”, I refer to Genette (1972).

¹⁴ For the concept of “plastic rhyme”, I refer to Floch (1986) and Groupe µ (1992).

¹⁵ “Mickey mousing” is an audiovisual technique, pioneered by Disney studios at the time of the first sound cartoons (hence the name), in which the images would “dub” the music, i.e., in which the images, made after the music, would follow the course of the soundtrack.

is like the screenplay to a movie, and is completed by ‘the cast’ – the crowd on the dance-floor. Styles like jungle and trance are full of behavioural cues encoded in the music – breakdowns, drum builds, bass drops, climaxes – all of which trigger certain mass responses: ritualised gestures of abandon, like hands shooting up in the air at the entrance of a certain kind of riff or noise. The music sounds diminished in the absence of such tableaux of crowd frenzy (Reynolds 2011, 325; the text is dated 2001).

The music of Harlem Shake is the soundtrack to what we see when we watch the video. But it is not understood as background and atmospheric filler, rather as a homologue in another expressive substance, another manifestation of the same form. The music calls to be translated, moving from pure sound to movement and image. It is an intersemiotic translation, transmutation or transduction that is possible because it is based on a “meta” level that allows “the same thing” to be said in different languages¹⁶.

The memes of the Harlem Shake participate in the modularity of the song by adapting a formula of certain fixed elements and other free elements that must be completed for the text to make sense. The construction model of the Harlem Shake videos teases the listener’s agency and challenges their skills in a competition to create a version that stays within the boundaries of the formula but stretches it as far as possible, resulting in the funniest, most extravagant, most spectacular, most exaggerated version. It should be noted that some participants in Harlem Shake flash mobs have faced the legal consequences of their actions (e.g., breaking into museums, invading private property, etc.).

The two post-Filthy_Frank videos, and especially the third one mentioned, v2, propose an audiovisually much better designed and above all structurally sharper model. We can discern a proper “formulaic breakdown” that is scrupulously followed by all Harlem Shake memes (see also Fig. 1):

[14 seconds of (build-up music) played as (one person passively dances while others linger around them motionless)] then an instant video cut to [14 seconds of (bombastic dance music) played as (many people dance aggressively)] then [2 seconds of (a slurring sound) and (slow-motion video of the aggressive dancing)] (Constine 2013).

The formula is so effective that smartphone apps were created to allow the semi-automatic recording and editing of Harlem Shake memes.

The Harlem Shake model, perfected version after version and still the largest memetic phenomenon to spread spontaneously and at grassroots level, outlines a

¹⁶ For the concept of “intersemiotic translation”, I refer to Jakobson (1959). Post-Greimassian semiotics would define such “meta” levels as “figural” (Greimas and Courtés 1986, 91–93; entry written by Zilberberg); Danesi and Sebeok [2000, 196] would speak of “metaform”.

story, albeit schematic, and identifies precise, if abstract, roles. There is a Subject, anonymised by a kind of mask, who initially dances alone during the intro, a kind of avant-gardist, like the *Dickbauchtanzer* who opened the processions of Bacchus (or the insidious Trickster of mythology). Ignored at first by those around them, this Hero manages to infect everyone else, convincing them to follow the dance, to share the same experience together, if only for a moment, each in their own idiosyncratic way. The Harlem Shake meme is a perfect sociosemiotic object, self-reflexive and metadiscursive, as it speaks about itself and the world it belongs to: It tells the story, schematic and complex, of every phenomenon we have learned to call viral.

SECONDS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30-43	
ELEMENTS OF THE SONG	"Con los terroristas!" The following 14 note-loop, repeated for 4 times (2 cycles), at 140 bpm, progressively gaining spatial proximity F - F - F - F - F - F - F - F - F - F - F - F - E flat - E - F 														"And do the Harlem Shake!" <i>Drop</i>	Riff (the 14 notes in loop, 4 times)										"Con los terroristas!"		"Roocar/Buury" (slurring sound) <i>Drop</i>		Riff	
SECTIONS OF THE SONG	Section A: Building intro														Section B: Hook																
SOUNDCLOUD GRAPH																															
ELEMENTS OF THE VIDEO	The guy with the helmet shakily dances to the music; the other people in the shot stand still														<i>Jump cut</i>	All the people in the shot crazily dance to the music										<i>Slow motion</i>					
YOUTUBE SCREENSHOTS (from v1)																															
YOUTUBE SCREENSHOTS (from v2)																															
SECONDS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30-43	

Fig. 1: The Harlem Shake meme formula; visualisation by the author.

4 Before and After Harlem Shake

The success of Harlem Shake is anticipated by some notable precedents of memetic remakes of a musical text. Notably, these include *Crank That* by Soulja Boy and, of course, *Gangnam Style* by Psy. The difference is that compared to Harlem Shake, these two are examples of semiotic texts that have been constructed to become memes. Soulja Boy is an internet personality, i.e., an artist who has made a name for himself thanks to the success he has achieved through content shared online. His *Crank That*, which has been shared on various off and online channels since spring 2007, is not just a music video, but a proper tutorial on how to dance the signature “Soulja Boy Dance” shown in it (the expression “crank dat”, i.e., “move that thing [the butt] around”, is a slang request to dance that went viral in the online hip hop community in 2006). In the video, groups of children, elderly people (hanging out on park benches) and a beefy record company executive all watch spellbound as the dance moves on computer or mobile phone screens. Shortly after it was published online, hundreds of videos manipulating, parodying or in some way imitating the original were uploaded. Wikipedia reports the opinion of some music journalists that *Crank That* was the biggest dance craze since *Macarena* (1996).

The video of *Gangnam Style*, which was released on 15 July 2012, after Harlem Shake, but actually became a meme much earlier in August of the same year, is a masterpiece of what I would call “textual marketing”, where all the elements contribute to the creation of a memorable product. The portrayal of the character Psy is so distinct and caricatured that he resembles a cartoon character rather than a real singer (the video itself thematises this idea by inserting a screen at the end reminiscent of arcade games). *Gangnam Style* creates a microcosm of memes of various kinds (captioned images, animated GIFs, videos) and becomes a fragment of common media culture, a part of our encyclopaedia. The phrase that the singer says over and over again to mark the end of the verses and introduce the hook or riff (“Oppa Gangnam Style”) becomes the basis for an infinite number of remakes (along the lines of “Oppa X Style”, which echoes the snowclone par excellence, “Keep Calm and X”)¹⁷. Those who do not know *Gangnam Style* probably do not read newspapers, watch TV or have a Facebook account. On 21 December 2012, *Gangnam Style* became the first YouTube video to reach a billion views. Harlem

17 The phrase, addressed to a “sexy lady”, means “Your boyfriend [*Oppa* literally means “brother”, but in slang it means “boyfriend”] has the typical style of Gangnam [one of Seoul’s wealthiest neighbourhoods]”. Linguists call “snowclone” a formula that can be resemantised *ad libitum*, from the trope (based upon a wrong cliché): “If Eskimos have 50 words for ‘snow’, X must have N words for Y”.

Shake took less time, but also had to rely on a critical mass consisting of a swarm of aggregated content.

Unlike *Crank That* and *Gangnam Style*, Harlem Shake (the meme) was created from scratch, both as a self-produced and released music track and as a video released as a simple reaction to other content. With *Crank That* and *Gangnam Style*, “Harlem Shake” (the song) shares a similar position in the phylogenetic development of the genre to which it belongs, i.e., they all emerged at a particularly opportune moment for their eventual reception as an element within the genre. A moment of increasing popularisation of what social discourse defines as emergent phenomena, a popularisation that the tracks participate in and catalyse, eventually embodying for a long time the manifestations par excellence of their respective contexts.

In particular, *Crank* fits the model of success of internet hip hop (among a growing audience that is not just African-American), *Gangnam* fits the emerging Korean wave driven by K-pop, and Harlem fits the dubstep-brostep-trap continuum. In the latter case, it should be noted that, in those years, dubstep was being embraced as a fad or zeitgeist (if there is a difference between these two things) by musicians as diverse as Britney Spears, Rihanna, Madonna, Justin Bieber, Korn, Muse, Wu Tang Clan and Cypress Hill that have nothing to do with the culture in which dubstep was born and to which it would relate. In 2011, Nokia’s official ringtone, chosen through a competition and produced by Italian Alessandro Sizzi, was a remix of the company’s traditional theme in a brostep key, i.e., in the American dubstep “with muscles in plain sight” fashion. Trap slowly nibbles away at dubstep, which dissolves, frays or becomes something else (singer-songwriter James Blake came out of this background) until it essentially replaces it as the reference genre at the centre of the semisphere of electronic music.

Pink Guy had already released videos in which he danced in his own way to *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* by brostep posterboy Skrillex (DANCING TO SKRILLEX, 13 May 2012) and to *Gangnam Style* (GANGNAM STYLE – PINK GUY, 6 September 2012, here the horse dance merges with the Stormtrooper move), and in which he explained to New Yorkers HOW TO DUBSTEP (23 January 2013) to the notes of *Kill Humans* by Dubsidia (2011). In 2017, he released his only album, *Pink Season*, an anthology of songs created over the years, featuring the manifesto *Meme Machine* (“I am a fucking meme machine”), which circulated from 2015. In 2017, George Miller, Filthy_Frank/Pink Guy’s real name, a Japanese born in 1992 who moved in the United States in 2011, stopped being a YouTuber and began pursuing the career of “serious” electronic pop musician under the name Joji.

The brevity of the Harlem Shake video meme made it particularly popular on Vine, an app developed in 2013 (before it was even launched, it was bought by Twitter) based on creating very short videos, lasting only six seconds, with a tight edit-

ing style particularly suited to conveying comedic content. Vine closed in 2017 and in 2019 was dismantled once and for all. Meanwhile, in 2018, building on the experiences of Snapchat as well as Vine, TikTok was born from the fusion of Douyin and Musical.ly, with a strong initial focus on lip-syncing and choreographed dancing video challenges. At the ten-year mark (2013–2023), a handover seems to be taking place: If the celebration videos posted on YouTube do not exceed hundreds of views, the Harlem Shake videos on TikTok reach hundreds of thousands. At the same time, a “new Harlem Shake” seems to have emerged in the Summer of 2023: *Benjamin’s Deli* by JRitt. The producer seems to have produced only this track, which is commonly referred to as a “TikTok remix” and is more specifically a mashup between Puff Daddy’s 1997 *It’s All About The Benjamins* (itself a hip-hop track, featuring Lil’ Kim, sampling Love Unlimited’s *I Did It for Love* [1976], and The Jackson 5’s *It’s Great to Be Here* [1971]) and Ice Spice’s *Deli* (2023). The track almost certainly appeared as a TikTok soundtrack in August 2023 and was uploaded to Spotify in December. While the versions available on the audio streaming platform last a couple of minutes, the excerpt that went viral on the social media app lasts only about eight seconds and is used in video snippets that show the exact same before-and-after dynamic of the original Harlem Shake, including a contrast between a solitary and a collective action, or between two different dance configurations¹⁸.

5 Internet Challenges

Memes are constitutively challenging. The point of appropriating a template and recreating a meme is to adapt it to a context that is different from the original one, to make it talk about oneself and one’s community, to interpret it as freely as possible while still respecting its grids and rules. Harlem Shake flash mobs are not proper challenges, but the point of participating in them is precisely the implicit challenge to remake that specific audio-visual narrative in a creative fashion. We may consider online communities committed in the creation of memes to be part of a category proposed by sociolinguists: “community of practice”, a community based not on geographical nor sociodemographic affinities, but rather on “stylistic practices”, the proficient mastering of which is the aim of the very community.

¹⁸ A notable example is this cut uploaded on the torbahead TikTok account on 22 November 2023: https://www.tiktok.com/@torbahead/video/7304282677706902790?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7187160956525397510. The Spotify page of artist JRitt is: <https://open.spotify.com/intl-it/artist/4qwxLDyAkymBMn2QfQn3ZV>.

Internet challenges are based on the idea of performing a difficult action (often because it is a dangerous action) with the aim of filming it and sharing it online. They have shaped the content shared on social networks such as YouTube and Facebook, particularly between the mid-2000s and the mid-2010s. The oldest ones seem to date back to 2005, namely, the Cinnamon Challenge which involved eating a spoonful of powdered cinnamon (the risk was to choke) and the Happy Slap Challenge which consisted of slapping complete strangers in the street. Both resulted in injuries and even deaths (so much so that a specific law was approved in France in 2007 against the latter). In 2010, it was the turn of planking (lying face down motionless at the most inappropriate times and places), a challenge for which Banks (2011) proposed the category of “performative internet meme”, and in 2014 it was the turn of the sellotape (wrapping one’s own face with duct tape, as Jim Carrey does in a scene from the 2008 film *Yes Man*). We may also go back to a time before social media, and even before the internet as a domestic mass medium. In 1996, an Associated Press article (Walker 1996) celebrated the competitive nature of American football player Payton Manning addressing the Saltine Challenge (eating six crackers in one minute).

Apart from their collective efficacy and viral appeal, challenges are interesting to the semiotician for the way in which they construct the sense of the practice, even when it is misrepresented or misunderstood. Let us think of the famous Ice Bucket Challenge from 2014, which involved pouring a bucket of iced water over oneself to promote the research on ALS: It was misunderstood by many as a simple insane action to be filmed, with no activist nor ethical implication. Other interesting cases are the digital urban legends, such as the Blue Whale Challenge from 2016 (a 50-day path that is supposed to end in the suicide of those who carry it out; a truly dark parody of the very concept of challenge), the Tide Pod Challenge from 2018 (for which one has to ingest a detergent capsule) or the Boat Jumping Challenge from 2023 (for which one has to throw themselves off a boat at high speed), which have been unexpectedly disseminated, discussed, and disapproved of to the point of moral panic by the general media, which have always been unprepared to handle the rhetorics of the internet, with the risk of creating a copycat trend of phenomena that basically did not exist (except in the form of textual narratives, as is the case with creepypasta, i.e., digital horror stories).

Challenges are increasingly discussed, as they are taken to extremes by many content creators who have launched ever elaborate or risky challenges (this is the case with Italian Youtubers TheBorderline and New York-based Kai Cenat, who made headlines in June and August 2023, respectively). At the same time, they are one of the most important macrogenres of the memetic world. On the one hand, they testify to the definitive transfer of the textual and visual logic of memes (especially the idea of imitation with personalisation) to the audio-visual domain

and, upstream, IRL-In Real Life (with all this entails in terms of the representation of the body, the involvement in situated space, the performance of identity, etc.). On the other hand, they form the bridge between traditional “boomer” social networks (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) and TikTok, an environment that we may define as hyper-social, if not post-social, based on – as suggested by Zulli and Zulli (2020) – the extension of the logic of memes to the level of the platform infrastructure and the creation of “imitation publics”: A group of people whose digital connection is constituted by the shared ritual of imitation and replication of content.

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