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A semiotic analysis of the canonical image macro meme

Abstract: This article proposes a semiotic reading of the most widely recognized internet image macro memes (termed "canonical image macro memes" or CIMMs) and analyzes these memes as individual texts. It demonstrates that memes possess their own language, or system of signs, and form their own literature. By delineating the extent to which the visual and verbal components are customizeable image macro memes, this article strives to understand the language of CIMMs, and the processes and limitations by which meaning is generated. Understanding each meme as a text, this analysis demonstrates that the first-order semiological system of memes is informed and underpinned by a discrete, highly specific second-order semiological system, which guides the way in which a meme user will read memetic texts both individually and in relation to one another, and which must be analyzed as a phenomenon unto itself. The increasingly complex interreferentiality found within the growing corpus of memetic texts engenders sets of memes which only acquire signification when read together; a consideration of such memes demonstrates the codification of a metalanguage, or mythology, of memes, which allows us to understand better how memes have begun to consolidate their own canon.

Keywords: memes; internet; digital networks; intertextuality; first- and second-order semiological systems

1 Introduction

Everyone who uses the Internet has probably, if only fleetingly, encountered a meme.[1] Memes (a word which here will exclusively refer to Internet memes) were first conceptualized by Richard Dawkins in his work *The Selfish Gene* (1989 [1976]: 192), and have since evolved into numerous and disparate forms, encompassing

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everything from the early use of emoji to denote levity in internet "flame wars" (Davison 2012: 124), to the infamous KONY 2012 viral video (Cauterucci 2016), to contemporary memes with their own dedicated pages such as @nocontextlouis-theroux on Instagram, which are so specific to a given audience that they render themselves obscure to everyone else.

Memes have come to occupy a dominant position in digital communication and have even begun to seep into the non-digital world. Their development, beginning roughly in the early 2000s after the advent of Facebook, has seen memes advance from a relatively limited number of set image macros to a genre of communication that is multimodal and multigeneric, which has, at this point, acquired its own canon. Academic scholarship interrogating memes as a mode of communication has progressed greatly in the past decade: Davison noted in 2012 that the study of memes was "lacking a rigorous descriptive vocabulary" (2012: 120), but since then, works published by Milner (2016) and Shifman (2013) have done much to redress this academic gap, and research carried out by prominent scholars of digital culture such as Borenstein (2022), Grundlingh (2017), and McCulloch (2019) has begun to interrogate individual memes as forms of cultural production in their own right. Even so, the scholarship can barely keep abreast of the rapidly changing, richly symbolic "folk culture" of the Internet (Marwick 2013: 12).

Most scholarship imagines memes in terms of network theory, positing memes as markers for those who form part of a specific community and those who do not. This tendency stems in part from Dawkins' definition of memes, which uses an explicitly scientific lexicon (with "memes" deliberately echoing "genes") to posit memes in a distinctly biological realm. In *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman talks about memes as a language only insofar as their correct or incorrect usage singles out as somebody who is or is not "in the know" (Shifman 2013: 173). Ryan Milner has done more to understand memes as a sign system, coining the term "meme literacy" (thereby demonstrating that memes have their own language and metalanguage) and suggesting that one needs to understand certain subcultural standards in order to appreciate memes. However, Milner's work still focuses on "*memetics* as a set of social practices, instead of focusing exclusively on *memes* as individual *texts*" (Milner 2016: 3, my emphasis). As such, meme scholarship largely understands the phenomenon of memes through language's sociological function, focusing on how memes position their user in relation to other meme users, rather than investigating how these texts function in their language, or interrogating the corpus of memes as a discrete literature.

Therefore, a consideration of memes as texts, or tissues of significations, forges new ground in both meme studies and semiotic studies. Using the most widely recognized and proliferated image macro memes, which I will call canonical image macro memes, or CIMMs, I will elucidate the processes by which meme texts

signification is acquired and codified. Understanding that each text is informed by a language unique to memes, which is itself comprised of multiple processes of signification, I will delineate a broad grammar of the language of memes and elucidate the hitherto unspoken conditions and limitations of signification for both the visual and the verbal components of CIMMs. Building on scholarship by Cannizzaro (2016), Dondero (2020), Marino (2015), Milner (2016), Shifman (2013), and others, I will analyze the development of a discrete metalanguage of memes and the formation of a meme literature. In doing so, I will show that both meme scholarship and semiotic scholarship benefit from this approach to memes. An analysis of the meaning-making processes of individual CIMMs and their mutual interaction will allow us to better understand what makes memes so compelling in the digital age, and how they have come to acquire such significance in our day-to-day communication.

2 What is a canonical image macro meme (CIMM)?

The image macro meme, comprised of an image and a pithy superimposed phrase, will be recognizable to almost all meme users and viewers, especially considering that a great number of the earliest examples of memes were of this type, e.g., Socially Awkward Penguin, Success Kid, etc. The type of image macro meme that I propose to analyze will be the most widely proliferated, recognizable, and remixable (that is to say, customizable) image macro memes:[2] those which acquire canonical status in the field of image macros, such as the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme (see Figure 1), the

Figure 1: Example of "Distracted Boyfriend" meme. Source: Matt. 2018. 2meirl4meirl. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1463796-distracted-boyfriend (accessed 8 January 2024).

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2 I have defined remix in this essay as per Lessig's (2008) theory of read/write culture.
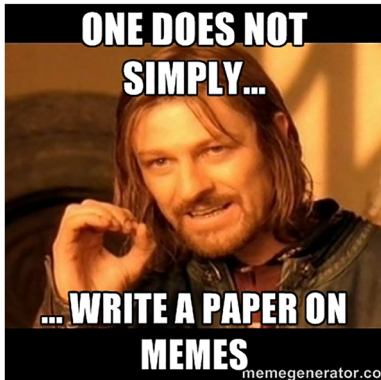
Figure 2: Example of "One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor" meme. Source: Evanesca. 2014. One does not simply … write a paper on memes. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/585812-one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor (accessed 8 January 2024).

"One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor" meme (see Figure 2), the "Spiderman Pointing at Spiderman" meme (see Figure 3), and the "Is This a Pigeon?" meme (see Figure 4). I will refer to these types of memes as canonical image macro memes, or CIMMs. Canonical image macro memes are "evolutions of the 'Stock Character Macro'" (Shifman 2013: 112) and include subsects such as object labelling memes ("Distracted Boyfriend" and "Spiderman Pointing at Spiderman" memes) and exploitables ("One Does Not Simply," "Is This a Pigeon" memes).

Figure 3: Example of "Spiderman Pointing at Spiderman" meme. Source: Xxdamemerpogepic___xX. 2022. Which to choose? *imgflip.com*. https://imgflip.com/i/5rp5w5 (accessed 8 January 2024).

Figure 4: Example of "Is This a Pigeon" meme. Source: Y F. 2019. Memes are image macros. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1374978-is-this-a-pigeon (accessed 8 January 2024).

Each CIMM is made up of two complementary elements: the visual component, which I will argue is digested first, and its corresponding verbal component. Both aspects of the image macro meme can be remixed, but never to the extent that the original template is obscured or mutated beyond recognition. Each CIMM follows its own specific formula. The verbal component and the visual component of a CIMM work in tandem to create the meme's ultimate signification, which becomes increasingly entrenched the more the CIMM template is remixed and the further the meme is proliferated. The immediately digestible image aspect of the image macro meme is that which primes the meme user to understand a given CIMM in a certain way. The verbal component of the image macro meme elucidates the specificities of that particular remix. Thus, the original CIMM and subsequent remixed memes are comprised of multiple overlapping significations. As we will see, a CIMM's eventually canonized meaning will become so codified that the original image of a CIMM will become shorthand for a complex emotional landscape; an understanding of each CIMM's highly specific emotional charge will be largely automated for a literate meme user. Let us first understand how the original CIMM acquires its canonical meaning, in which all further remixes are rooted.

2.1 How a CIMM acquires its canonized meaning – first- and second-order signification

CIMMs are comprised of both image and word – both elements are necessary to the meme in order that it communicate. The visual component and the verbal component of a CIMM cannot be hierarchized, as both elements are equally important.

Nevertheless, it is the image that is digested first by the meme user, priming the user to understand the meme in a specific way. I follow Gottfried Lessing's distinction between the arts of time (literature) and the arts of space (plastic and visual) and argue that spatial art is able to make a more instantaneous impression upon its audience than the temporal (Lessing 1874 [1766]). The visual component of a CIMM informs its verbal component and furnishes the emotional landscape by which a CIMM will continue to be read.

Early semioticians such as Roland Barthes and Émile Benveniste held that while images were able to powerfully communicate meaning, they were not in possession of their own metalanguage. Benveniste referred to images' lack of metalanguage as "liberty" (Benveniste 1974), and Barthes posited that the meaning-making of images could be reduced to "a message without code" (Barthes 1977: 36). Subsequent semiotic schools opposed Barthes and Benveniste on this point: the Greimasian school posited instead that "an image can … interpret another image without necessitating recourse to the system of verbal language" (Dondero 2020: 9), and Groupe μ maintained that the conception of a universal visual *langue* might be possible. Recently, Maria Giulia Dondero's developments to the theory of the "uttered enunciation," building on work by Louis Marin and Jacques Fontanille, have enriched and clarified the field of visual semiotics, facilitating a more rigorous interpretive model for reading images and allowing for the tentative proposition of a visual metalanguage contingent upon enunciation (Dondero 2020).

The development of plastic and visual semiotics beyond the formulations of denotation and connotation first proposed by Barthes in "Myth Today" (Barthes 2009 [1957]: 138) and Benveniste allows for a significantly more thorough reading of the images in memes. But most CIMMs do not require a sophisticated analytical approach to understand their meaning, as the image component is often chosen for its accessibility and its capacity for emotional communication – to borrow Dondero's (2020) language, those where the "forces" [gestures, movement] in the "forms" are strongly evidenced and easily discernible. The prevalence of stock photos, cartoons, and snapshots from reality TV in most CIMM templates demonstrates that the most apt images for remix are easily "accessible" through obvious displays of emotion or discernible body language and gesture, which "many semioticians and linguistics … consider to be a more fundamental form of communication than vocal language" (Danesi 2004: 53). It is in the relationship between "*a simulacrum of the ideal gaze*" (Dondero 2020: 3), the embodied viewer, and the figures within the image where we see that the mechanisms for meaning-making in memes diverge from other visual images. A more clearly articulated visual semiotics will allow us to undertake a more nuanced reading of a CIMM's image macro, but it will only be useful and relevant until the point at which a CIMM's meaning becomes consolidated. Where a visual semiotic reading of an image interrogates the relationship between these three

agents and maintains the tension between them, a semiotic reading of memes must understand that once the emotional landscape has been discerned from the figurative image, the figures – or signs – are no longer of much concern.

Though each individual CIMM template signifies something unique, the overarching pattern is that every CIMM template is only resonant – and therefore humorous – in that it has the capacity to connote a meaning beyond what it is actually capable of denoting, which makes it especially rich for remix. The humor in a successful CIMM remix is achieved by altering the original meme so as to accentuate all the more its salient point. In order to better understand the initial process of reading and inferring meaning from a CIMM, let us consider and interpret the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme (Figure 5).

The visual component of this meme shows a simple and easily legible scene: the Girlfriend looks at the Boyfriend with disbelief as he ogles the Girl in Red. This latter figure, though occupying a key role in the action depicted in this image, merely functions as a catalyst for the interaction between the Boyfriend and the Girlfriend. Her blurred-out face and her telling position with her back to the couple indicate the insignificance of her own emotions and her obliviousness to the scene playing out behind her. The image component of the meme, in which all interactions between the figures are read by the meme user, signifies the "turning of one's head": distraction from long-term happiness (staid and steady like the Girlfriend in blue) by the thrill of the new (fleeting and pleasing to the eye like the Girl in Red). The image macro captures the gesture with clear directionality and legible (to the point of farcical) body language. In this way, the meme's visual component depicts a situation that most people are likely to understand, and one with which the image will, over time, become inextricably linked.

Figure 5: The original image macro template for the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme. Source: Don. 2017. "Distracted Boyfriend" meme. *Know Your Meme*. Original photo from iStockPhoto, "Disloyal man with his girlfriend looking at another girl." https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/disloyal-man-with-his-girlfriend-looking-at-another-girl-gm493656728–77018851 and https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend (accessed 8 January 2024).

In all situations of remix, the Distracted Boyfriend has the opportunity to achieve healthy contentment by the option offered by his Girlfriend, the woman in blue. However, he is always tempted by the option furnished by the Girl in Red, who is always representative of the easier option, a kind of temporary joy unlike the sustained happiness offered by the Girlfriend. Thus, the distinctive image macro for the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme comes to signify the subject being led astray from long-term satisfaction by the thrill of the short-term solution. Remixed "Distracted Boyfriend" memes will have to ensure that this specific connotation is appropriate to the situation represented in the remix. The emotions that the meme user is meant to understand from the image in all cases of the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme are indignation on behalf of the overlooked Girlfriend, and admonishment (but simultaneously wry understanding) for the Boyfriend, whose head has been turned by the Girl in Red. More often than not, the remixed meme will invite the meme user to occupy the position and assume the role of the Distracted Boyfriend – as such, this particular CIMM takes on something of a confessional function in the internet landscape.

With CIMMs, unlike with other visual images, the positionality of the assumed viewer is dynamic. The image macro of a CIMM only invites a meme user to behold the image insofar as its appropriate emotions are gleaned; at this point, the meme user is invited into the image to inhabit it emotionally. As such, the figurative image of a CIMM can be understood as not the locus but the conduit of meaning. If a CIMM image template undergoes two simultaneous readings, as seen in the case of the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme, then meme users will not empathize with the denotational aspect of the meme (i.e., a meme user will not empathize with the Girlfriend per se) but rather with the connotational aspect (i.e., with the Girlfriend's outrage). Memes may seem realistic, but they are not meant to be read mimetically. Rather, the recognizable figures in the first-order semiological system come to be synechdocal for the emotions or reactions that they demonstrate. It is these emotions or reactions that are then applied in - situations of remix.

2.2 Signification and remix – image

To become a CIMM, the original image template must provide ample potential for remix (Figure 6). For that to happen, the image component on its own must have an adequate signification on its own that allows for its application onto various hypothetical scenarios, to be furnished by the CIMM's verbal component. It is only in this

Figure 6: The original image macro template for the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme. Source: Don. 2017. "Distracted Boyfriend" meme. *Know Your Meme*. Original photo from iStockPhoto, "Disloyal man with his girlfriend looking at another girl." https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/disloyal-man-with-his-girlfriend-looking-at-another-girl-gm493656728–77018851 and https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend (accessed 8 January 2024).

case that an image macro meme will attain canonical status. A successful CIMM (one which attains the greatest resonance with its user and therefore becomes widely spread) is never remixed beyond recognition. Only specific parts of a CIMM are pasted over or changed out, but the formula by which the CIMM is remixed stays consistent.

Let us consider the "Distracted Boyfriend" meme in various remixed states to understand which parts of the original image template must stay the same for it to retain signification (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Nostalgic doodle remix. Source: remixed by the author via Microsoft Word.

Here, the Boyfriend is labelled as "an 11-year-old," the Girlfriend as a normal "s," and the woman in red as a Superman "s." We see the meme-ification of a situation with which most people from a specific generation will be familiar – as children, they were more drawn to the thrill of sketching out a Superman "s" in place of a regular "s." All parts of the original image template are discernible in this remix. The superimposed phrase adds a new layer that does not obscure the base template or its emotionality, but builds upon it, relying on the image template's pre-ascertained signification to inform the memetic text.

In the Figure 8 remix, each figure's facial expression is obscured by the remixed object labels, and therefore their respective body language, which informs how to read the situation at hand, cannot be identified. A meme user whose first experience with this CIMM was this specific iteration of the meme might not understand what renders the CIMM funny, as they cannot understand its connotations – the body language, which makes the situation resonant and therefore humorous, is not readable. However, meme users already familiar with this specific image template will be able to cognitively "fill in the gaps" – already understanding the context of the image, they will find the meme humorous despite not being able to discern the figures' facial expressions. Thus, when one is already familiar with an image macro meme template, as long as the template is recognizable in the CIMM's remixed state, one will be able to understand the meme's message.

As shown in Figure 9, in the case that all three figures are totally obscured to the point that the original template cannot be ascertained from the remix, the meme ceases to be intelligible and therefore also ceases to be humorous.

Figure 8: Nostalgic doodle remix covering faces. Source: remixed by the author via Microsoft Word.

Figure 9: Nostalgic doodle remix to the point of template obfuscation. Source: remixed by the author via Microsoft Word.

Within each image macro meme, the immediately digestible visual component acts as a prompt towards its viewer, signaling the emotion that the verbal component and subsequently the text is meant to elicit. Consider the difference in signification between Figures 7 and 10. Each text is necessarily read differently, due to their differing visual components. While the image macro in Figure 7 fits with the situation at hand and adequately depicts an eleven-year-old choosing the enticing Superman "s" over the staid, normal "s," the image macro in Figure 10 – a template used to evoke a situation in which three equally responsible parties try and heap their portion of the blame on others – is less appropriate for this situation, and therefore the resultant meme is less humorous. Thus, we can see a meme user's reaction to a remixed CIMM will be firstly informed by its visual component, which acts as the immediate signal for how the meme is to be read, and the humor that is to be derived from it; the verbal component is contingent upon the emotional landscape that the visual component has provided. Therefore, any CIMM can only be remixed insofar as the connotations that the template image evokes are still applicable to the new situation posited by the remix.

Figure 10: "Spiderman pointing at Spiderman" nostalgic doodle meme. Source: Spiderman pointing at Spiderman template found at imgflip.com. https://imgflip.com/memetemplate/206014687/3-Spidermen-Pointing-at-each-other (accessed 8 January 2024). Remixed by author.

2.3 Signification and remix – verbal component

If the visual component of a CIMM is what furnishes its emotional digestibility, then the verbal component can be said to fully situate the meme reader, creating the context in which the emotion of the image is to be elicited. CIMMs are funniest and most resonant when the remixed verbal component exposes something both niche and widely relatable: following the suggestion that new media has turned hidden and mundane practices into highly visible public culture (Burgess and Green 2018), one could argue that a meme has the highest ludic potential when it exposes specific but common behaviors that individuals have largely considered inconsequential, vaguely taboo and, well, individual. The verbal component of a CIMM is the part of the meme that does the network positioning by which memes are often understood: "are you in or are you out?" If a meme user finds the verbal component of a remixed meme funny, they signal that they can be counted among a specific community to which the meme relates. This urge is also rewarded by the medium of social media, which encourages a meme user to share the meme with others to demonstrate one's belonging to a network and to extend that network to others, incentivizing meme users to relate themselves to memes.

In the case of image labelling memes, the remixed verbal component is only constrained in that each image label must correspond with the correct figure and reveal the equivalent tensions between figures posited by the original image template. However, other CIMMs have text components that are more distinctive and provide the primary means of remix. In these cases, I will show that the verbal component, despite its greater capacity for remix, can also only mutate up to a fixed point before it loses its significance. As with its image template counterpart, there are formulae that must be followed in instances of remix.

Let us consider variations on the "One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor" meme (Figure 11) to understand the extent to which the verbal component of a CIMM can be remixed before it loses relevance.

Figure 11: Original "One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor" meme. Source: Captain Blubber. 2014. One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor (accessed 8 January 2024).

In Figure 12, we see that deviations from the standard verbal presentation of memes – white characters outlined in black, usually in the font "impact" and most frequently with all words capitalized – detract from an image macro meme's immediate identification as a meme, and are less widely propagated, such that we see few, if any, mainstream memes that deviate from these norms.[3]

As shown in Figure 13, in the case of this CIMM, it is the specific words and syntax of "one does not simply" that must remain the same in each remixed CIMM for the text to achieve signification.

When the phrase's meaning is paraphrased (Figure 14), the resulting meme is less recognizable and therefore less resonant. Although the words "walk into Mordor" remain in this verbal component, we understand that the meme's signification does not hinge on this part of the phrase. More than the content of the words, it is their arrangement in CIMMs that renders the verbal aspect of the meme amusing and recognizable.

Figure 12: Original verbal component, original syntax, but different visual representation. Source: remixed by author via imgflip.com.

Figure 13: Remixed text keeping "one does not simply" part of original verbal component. Source: gaioaa. 2013. Image #339,386. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/339386-one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor (accessed 8 January 2024).

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3 For more on the importance of meme font, see Edwards (2015). Note that this is not the case for Doge memes, whose verbal component must be in brightly coloured Comic Sans font to attain maximal resonance.

Figure 14: Remixed verbal component keeping meaning of original meme but not syntax. Source: remixed by author via imgflip.com.

Even when the syntax and font are used appropriately (Figure 15), the absence of capitalization also renders the meme less recognizable and less resonant.

Finally, verbal components cannot be mixed and matched between different CIMMs (Figure 16). Here, the verbal component is notably identifiable with the "Is This a Pigeon" CIMM precisely through its specific syntax, structure, and word

Figure 15: Remixed verbal component keeping syntax but not capitalization. Source: jiblington. 2013. Image #380,790. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/380790-one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor (accessed 8 January 2024).

Figure 16: Remixed meme using verbal template from different CIMM. Source: remixed by author via imgflip.com.
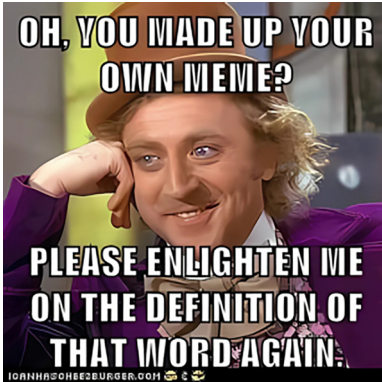
Figure 17: Example of "Condescending Wonka" meme, where rhetorical question and passive aggressive response makes up verbal component of CIMM. Source: DireClownFail. 2012. Image #266,562. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/266562-condescending-wonka-creepy-wonka (accessed 8 January 2024).

choice. As such, its application to the image component of "One Does Not Simply Walk into Mordor" does not succeed in creating a resonant meme.

Almost all, if not all, of the above limitations apply to CIMMs that have a distinctive verbal component: see, for example "Condescending Wonka" (see Figure 17); memes whose verbal components are even more grammatically elaborate, such as "Mocking SpongeBob" (see Figure 18), which uses alternating uppercase and lowercase letters to produce the readerly effect of said mocking; or even "Doge" (see Figure 19)[4] and "LOLcats" (see Figure 20)[5] and their associated linguistic modes.

Each of these CIMMs' verbal component follows its own specific rules for modulation, outside of which it must not err if it is to retain its original signification. The verbal component, like the visual component, is recognizable outside of its corresponding image macro meme format (for example, the "Mocking SpongeBob" meme's grammatical formula is often used outside of the meme context to denote scorn) – however, it is *only* recognizable as a direct consequence of having formed part of the original CIMM template. The signification of the verbal component of a meme, whether it hinges on the syntax, grammar, or lexis of the CIMM, informs the second-order semiological system of image macro memes to a significant degree.

Despite their ludic potential and capacity for remix, CIMMs are by and large a normative genre which must follow specific, hitherto unspoken rules in order to

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4 For more on the specific syntax of Doge, see Punske and Butler (2019).

5 For more on LOLcats as a genre of meme, see Knobel and Lankshear (2008).

the logster ✨
@poedamercn

"Dont use that weird spongebob mocking meme"
Me: DonT uSe thAt WeIrd SpoNgEboB MoCkinG MEme

Figure 18: Example of "Mocking SpongeBob" meme, where alternating capitalization denotes scorn. Source: Matt. 2018. "Dont use that weird spongebob mocking meme" Me: DonT uSe thAt WeIrd SpoNgEboB MoCkinG Meme. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1253025-mocking-spongebob (accessed 8 January 2024).
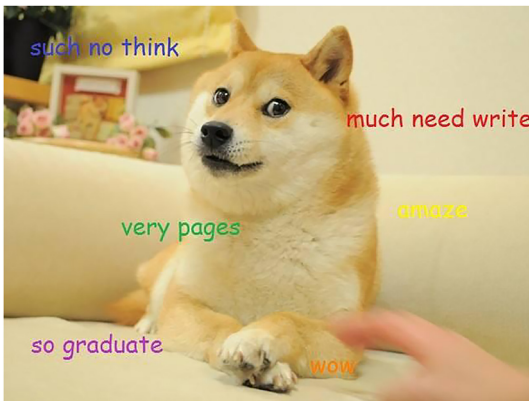

Figure 19: Example of Doge meme (regarding education), in which the multi-colored, sans-serif font is combined with grammatically incorrect structures to denote earnest stupidity. Source: chairmanfrank. 2015. Thesis Doge. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/746779-doge (accessed 8 Jan 2024).

achieve resonance and signification. Both the visual and the verbal component of a CIMM must be crafted according to meme-specific constraints, as detailed above. The verbal component of a CIMM has a greater capacity for remix than its visual component and can undergo greater change before it is rendered unintelligible, irrelevant, and therefore no longer funny. In all cases, the visual component and the verbal component of a remixed CIMM must work in tandem for the new text to be maximally resonant.

Figure 20: The original LOLCats meme, featuring the recognizable "I Can Has Cheezburger" phrase. This meme spawned its own linguistic mode of "lolspeak." Source: Jason Skimmer. 2011. Image #48,689. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/48689-cheezburger (accessed 8 January 2024).

2.4 Consolidation of a CIMM

A complete CIMM goes on to consolidate its specific signification by a symbiotic process – "funnier" memes, or in other words, remixed CIMMs whose verbal component more accurately or resonantly demonstrates the visual component at hand, are more widely spread. Remixed CIMMs whose verbal component fit less accurately or resonantly with the visual component (or vice versa) are not spread. The meme user becomes the point at which varying references come together (Milner 2016: 29), or "the space on which all the quotations [references or significations] that make up a writing [meme] are inscribed without any of them being lost" (Barthes 1977: 148). Popular memes are those which resonate with the greatest number of meme users, whose overlapping significations are both niche and understandable to the largest number of people. The more opportunity there is for remix within the template of a meme, the more that specific image and its verbal counterpart will be spread, thereby establishing an image macro as a CIMM. Meme users will also understand a certain verbal grammatical structure to be associated with the image macro at hand, which will become just as inextricably associated with the image and its emotions.

Memes, with the immediacy of their visual components and their recognizable, accessible, and abbreviated text components, are the perfect evolution of literary material for generations living in late-stage capitalism. "Writing has never been capitalism's thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate," say Deleuze and Guattari (1983 [1977]: 240). It follows, then, that memes have acquired such primacy as texts in the modern day. Fisher notes that "[t]eenagers process capital's image-dense data very effectively without having to read" (2009: 25). This process of consolidation is further enhanced by the fact that the meme is also propagated as an exact replica of itself, with no variation outside of the primary remix (forwarded as a direct message [DM], tags, retweeted, etc.). In this way, memes are proliferated in the same way and with as little deviation as works of literature in the post-Gutenberg era, only sped up through the means of instant messaging. Modern-age social media is the prime grounds for this type of proliferation. In an attention economy, memes, with the immediacy of their visual components and their accessible and highly abbreviated verbal components, constitute the perfect texts for communication governed by algorithm.[6] Since remix changes the least it can, the lack of superfluous variation in the image itself leads to a much quicker and more entrenched association of the exact image pertaining to a particular CIMM with the set of emotions that it comes to signify. Through constant reinforcement, the "myth" of a meme – the unquestioned association between a CIMM and its signification – becomes naturalized and consolidates itself in the meme's own metalanguage, or second-order semiological system.

It is a knowledge of the metalanguage of memes that renders a meme user meme-literate or not. A literate meme-user will understand the significance of individual CIMMs without recourse to interpretation of the image macro, and will have the ability to wield the appropriate CIMM to fit the situation at hand. Those who encounter the Distracted Boyfriend meme, for example, will not need to undertake a visual reading of the image every time they encounter a remix before they understand the indignation experienced by the Girlfriend and the temptation experienced by the Boyfriend, and are able to apply these emotions to the situation created by the meme's verbal component. Once an image macro meme becomes canonical, a meme user will largely bypass the interpretive reading of the image and skip directly to the emotions that the image is meant and known to elicit. As such, the image and the grammatical structure of the accompanying text become a shorthand for a highly specific and complex set of interacting emotions. Moreover, since memes now have their own rich history, a literate meme user will also have a generalized knowledge of past CIMMs, and understand how they have influenced the development of contemporary ones. With a greater knowledge of the meme landscape, meme

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6 For more on the attention economy, see Finn (2018) and Langham (2006).

remixers and users are able to create and enjoy memes that are increasingly interreferential.

3 Intertextuality in CIMMs

Memes have always been self-referential – being "in on the joke" is one of the main reasons why memes become widely proliferated in the first instance. The oldest known meme, "Kilroy Was Here" (Figure 21):

> … finds its origin in World War II, and popped up in all sorts of places during and after the war. Bjarneskans, Gronnevik, and Sandberg (1999) describe several factors that have contributed to the success of "Kilroy was here": the artefact is easy to reproduce, but it is at the same time sensitive to mutation and creative input; it lacks univocal meaning; it does not require direct host-to-host contact for reproduction, though *users still experience a sense of "belonging to" when sharing the meme.* (Zenner and Geeraerts 2018: 168, my emphasis)

This sense of "belonging to" forms a crucial part in the spreading of memes; Shifman (2013) identifies this aspect of meme creation and proliferation and explores the role it plays in creating a network of meme users. It also lies at the heart of Henry Jenkins' rejection of the language of "virality" in meme studies. Positing the terminology of "spreadability" instead, Jenkins' work highlights the agential nature of meme building and proliferation, which relies not on mechanisms of passive infection but rather on the interaction between Text, author, and reader (meme, meme remixer, and meme user; Jenkins et al. 2013).

The "Kilroy Was Here" meme, which, comprising text and image, might be considered the very first CIMM, demonstrated a level of self-consciousness in its
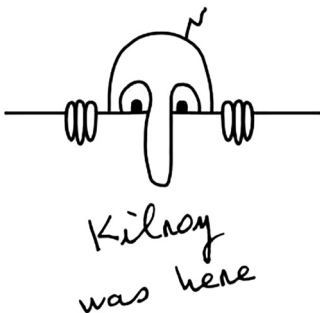

Figure 21: A modern rendition of the "Kilroy was here meme." Source: KovacsUK. 2005. Example of "Kilroy was here" graphic. *Wikipedia.* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8f/Kilroy_was_here.png (accessed 8 January 2024).

reproduction: the riff "Kilroy will be here next week" found at a Florida airbase demonstrates ludic play with tense, and is an early example of the self-referential remix that contributes to a meme's popularity (Suman 2021). However, it is only recently that memes, especially CIMMs, have become *inter*-referential, riffing off each other or referencing one another as discrete texts. The appearance of these referential memetic texts allows us to consider the development of memes as a literature in its own right.

Zenner and Geeraerts (2018) offer important examples of intertextuality in early CIMMs (early 2000s and 2010s memes, with their unchanging stock figures and lesser tendency towards visual remix, can almost all be classified as CIMMs). A significant example is the spliced "Socially Awkward Penguin" and "Socially Awesome Penguin" (Figure 22).

The Socially Awesome Penguin has charisma; his easy charm is undercut by the oblivious Socially Awkward Penguin, who fumbles every invitation to intimacy by the unnamed Girl. By merging these images to create a new text, this meme demonstrates a level of image macro meme intertextuality; however, it only ever references and inverts itself. Until recently, intertextuality was limited to these instances of self-referentiality, or internal play: memes that Zenner and Geeraerts identify as intertextual have their referentiality limited by the bounds of the text. In other examples, memes that feature high levels of "external referencing" point towards to the non-memetic world and thus demonstrate the interaction between the language of memes and the language of a "real life" outside of memes.

But recently, a new strand of CIMM development has seen memes as discrete texts begin to interact with each other, enriching the notion of intertextuality within memes. Now, totally separate memes that have no shared origin reference one another and converse with each other, largely only achieving signification when

Figure 22: Socially Awkward-Awesome-Awkward-Awesome Penguin (Zenner and Geeraerts 2018: 179).

Figure 23: Original "Is This a Pigeon?" meme. Source: "Is This a Pigeon?" *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon (accessed 8 Jan 2024). Original image from Katsuyoshi Yatabe, *The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird*, 1991.

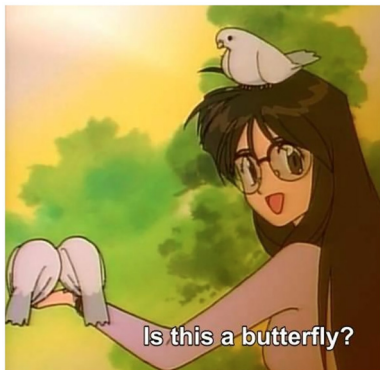**Figure 24:** Dialogic "Is This a Butterfly?" meme. Source: "Is This a Butterfly?" meme. *Know Your Meme*. https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon (accessed 8 January 2024). Original image from Kazuhiro Furuhashi, *You're Under Arrest*, 1996–1997.

posited in tandem. Let us take into consideration the intertextual memes of "Is This a Pigeon?" (Figure 23) and "Is This a Butterfly?" (Figure 24).

According to knowyourmeme.com, the "Is This a Pigeon" template image was first uploaded on December 6th, 2011, but made a comeback in late April and early May of 2018, at which point the image's original source became known: "On May 11th, 2018, Kara Dennison, one of the original fansubbers of the Fighbird anime, made a Blogspot post about the backstory of the meme and the series which it originated from."[7] Soon after, on June 26th, 2018, the image that would form the basis of the "Is This a Butterfly?" meme was posted on the internet and became widely spread. These

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7 https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon (accessed 8 January 2024).

images come from two wholly unrelated and generally unknown animes: "Is This a Pigeon" comes from *The Brave of Sun Fighbird,* whereas "Is This a Butterfly" is taken from *You're Under Arrest,* neither of which attained mainstream popularity outside of Japan. However, in the sign system of memes, both images are widely recognized to the point of canon and are directly interreferential. While as first-order signs, the images may exist in both the world of anime and the world of memes, the first-order signs will only be readable as each other's counterpart when informed by memes' second-order semiological system, or metalanguage.

The increasing interreferentiality of image macro memes is indicative of an ever-expanding literature of memes, in which certain memes acquire an entrenched enough signification to form something of a canon. Texts which reference other texts beyond their own bounds offer a strong indication of an assumed familiarity on the part of the meme audience with a corpus of memes writ large. In this literature of memes, images' signification become divorced from their origins in the non-meme world and take on meanings that only hold weight in the context of other memes. As the corpus of CIMMs grows, each meme increasingly becomes a "tissue" of other memes.[8] Whatever signification an image might have in public discourse or "real life" is promptly rendered secondary once an image becomes recognizable as a CIMM. The image macros that make up each CIMM acquire discrete significations in the language of memes, many of which only make sense when informed by the metalanguage of memes. As the number of CIMMs grow and begin to make reference to each other, a canon of memes begins to form, in which individual texts are informed by other texts.

4 Conclusions

A study of memes that involves reading individual memes as texts bears fruit for both meme scholarship and semiotic scholarship alike. A semiotic analysis of canonical image macro memes allows meme scholarship to trace the most important grammatical elements of meme text construction and to outline the requirements and constraints that underpin the construction of a coherent and resonant CIMM remix. reveals the usefulness of reading memes as texts, informed by their own discrete language. The corpus of meme texts that have evolved over the years can be understood as a literature, and a consideration of this literature, and especially its nascent canon, reveals a developing mythology or metalanguage specific to memes. Taken altogether, this article serves to demonstrate that a semiotic reading of

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8 Riff on Barthes' statement: "text is a tissue of quotations" (Barthes 1977: 146), which itself echoes Kristeva's assertion that "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva 1986 [1980]: 37).

individual memes as texts, which constitutes a hitherto neglected element of meme scholarship, can elucidate a number of central questions in the study of memes, semiotics, and digital communication, and can help clarify the directionality and the extent to which each of these factors implicate each other in the construction of a successful meme.

The rapid development of memes has also precipitated an increasingly elitist stratification of memes, whereby the use of "old" or irrelevant memes marks a meme user out as "out of the loop," or even as a "Boomer" (a neologism of the digital age replete with negative connotations), thus establishing a hierarchy in the purportedly democratic sphere of the Internet. A study of this hierarchization of memes would allow us to better understand the mechanisms by which a meme user acquires meme literacy, and bolster the argument for a memetic language. Additionally, users of the internet have seen the rise of increasingly niche meme pages, such as theorycel Instagram or "shitpostbots," which tend towards the craft of obscure, visually incoherent memes, whose aim is incomprehensibility rather than accessibility. Such memes still attract a wide and fervent audience; an analysis of these memes and their users might help us learn more about the ways in which communities are forged through digital communication.

A semiotic reading of memes also helps us further understand where mechanisms of communication and meaning-making have changed in the digital age and where they have remained the same. The rapid proliferation of a perfectly reproducible image through social media plays a crucial role in the consolidation of a CIMM's entrenched meaning. As more and more images have their emotional reading entrenched by way of meme sharing, as a mythology of memes becomes more widely known, and as memes come to play an increasingly dominant role in digital and non-digital communications as a shorthand for emotive expression, it will prove interesting to consider whether the sharing of CIMMs via the internet has an effect on our reading of emotional landscapes in non-meme spheres. In other words, does the proliferation of memes make our emotional reading more normative, or do memes exploit the normativity of our emotional readings – and do memes have an effect in shifting the norms of emotional expression? While the digital age has changed the ways in which and especially the speed with which we communicate with each other, the mechanisms by which meaning is generated and communicated remain largely the same.

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