

Introduction

memetic tacticality

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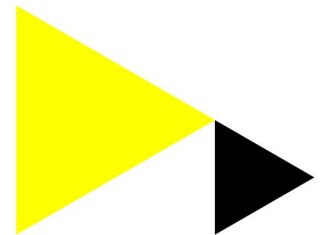
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CRITICAL MEME READER II

INC READER #16



MEMETIC TACTICALITY

EDITED BY CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND LAURENCE SCHERZ

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The logo for the Institute of Network Cultures features the text "Institute of network cultures" in a reddish-brown color. The word "Institute" is on the top line, "of" is in the middle, and "network cultures" is on the bottom line. Behind the text is a complex, abstract network diagram with many nodes and connecting lines.

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INTRODUCTION: MEMETIC TACTICALITY

CHLOË ARKENBOUT AND LAURENCE SCHERZ

'It's much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of meme-culture.' — Åke Gafvelin

'We cannot have a meaningful revolution without humor.' — bell hooks

'Leftist memes be like: [a 3000-word essay crammed in one image].' — Unknown

'Memes are often representative of ourselves, our fears and our way of relating to society.'
— clusterduck

'And as Picasso famously related, "art is an instrument of attack against the enemy. The strange thing about social media is that we are also our own enemy."' — Marc Tuters

'Critical design can never be truly popular, and that is the fundamental problem. Objects that are critical of industry's agenda are unlikely to be funded by industry.' — Anthony Dunne

'Thinking is not nostalgic.' — Geert Lovink

'If you wanted to see the future you could not go to conventional sources of information.' — Peter Schwartz

'If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it.' — Audre Lorde

'It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism.' — Angela Y. Davis

'There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons.' — Gilles Deleuze

'What matters is not to know the world but to change it.' — Frantz Fanon

When memes started to play a substantial role for Ukraine as a warfare technique, mainstream media seemed to wake up and grasp the political power these viral images hold. Pro-Ukraine memes in which Ukrainian soldiers are depicted as heroes, Russian soldiers and Putin are ridiculed, and the West was criticized for not helping Ukraine enough flooded Telegram, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Other types of memes addressed the hypocritical and often downright racist refugee policies of European countries (looking at you, the Netherlands), the imperialist role NATO might have in all of this, and the dangers of Russophobia. Journalists seemed to struggle endlessly with the

following questions: Is war something people should *not* be able to make fun of through memes? Or is it, in fact, ethically justified once we realize that humor serves as a coping mechanism? (If you ask us, and you do: some memes are too grim or cruel, yet others brighten truly horrific realities or hold invaluable political power.) We ‘meme experts’ were suddenly asked for media appearances non-stop: to talk about how memes are influencing war, but also to discuss the political impact of memes in local elections, how they are employed by political parties and activists alike, and whether or not they have replaced the traditional newspaper cartoon. Multiple meme researchers around the world have stressed the political power of memes for years now, whilst struggling to receive substantial amounts of funding for this exact field, one considered by many as still ‘too niche’. Now, finally, the general public seems to have caught on as well. While this is a favorable development, we must address the equally troubling fact that, oftentimes, something *deeply* horrific needs to happen before enough people realize you were not rambling or ranting blindly after all. And we certainly weren’t. We were slamming on doors that needed to be opened, right away. However, let it be crystal clear: in this light, we do not enjoy being right.

The first *Critical Meme Reader*, published in 2021, showed us how meme studies have a rich history in globally addressing the political power these viral images hold—one of the field’s most discussed topics being, of course, the great meme wars of 2016. In our first reader, *Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, Andy King effortlessly explained how the alt-right used memes as a warfare tool, in which the innocent Pepe the Frog was claimed as its symbol and the storming of the Capitol as its climax.¹ The internet subcultures that once thrived in relative obscurity, as Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg stipulate in their brand new book *Meme Wars*, had been drastically overlooked until that dramatic day, January 6th 2021.² King illustrated how ‘the alt-right [...] have molded their image into that of an underdog—a convenient ploy to justify aggressive tactics such as spamming pro-choice Facebook groups with images of aborted fetuses, raiding subreddits and shitposting cringe compilations of angry feminist and liberals appearing to “cancel free speech”. Their outreach was far and wide—no corner of the internet was spared.’³

This image still haunts us today: the ghost of an alt-right underdog, begging for scraps as if hurt by society. And who, we might ask rhetorically, are being portrayed as radical, ‘too woke’, a *danger* to democracy? Progressive leftist people that dare to speak up against oppression. Marginalized people literally begging their governments to honor their basic human rights.

1 Andy King, “Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare,” in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 217-235.

2 Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 4.

3 King, “Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare,” 218.

What Donovan, Dreyfuss and Frienberg teach us with their beautiful reconstruction of the untold story of online battles uprooting democracy in America, is that the political power of memes, their sheer potential to mobilize, is incomparable to anything we've seen before. In fact, the left should 'learn to meme', as Mike Watson puts it⁴ and—dare we say it—take lessons from the alt-right's tactics.

However, what was shown in our first *Critical Meme Reader* is that the left already *is* memeing successfully: Anahita Neghabat demonstrated how memes can function as a strategic tool for political counter-narratives and as an alternative for problematic mainstream media,⁵ Saeeda Saeed told us about her meme art, which helps critique the oppressive regime of Saudi Arabia,⁶ Sarp Özer wrote about how Erdogan is vulnerable to memetic humor,⁷ and Caspar Chan elaborated on Pepe being reclaimed and given new meaning in Hong Kong protests.⁸

Nonetheless, memetic logics are moving beyond images into tactical actors and processes embedded in society as well, as Anirban Baishya illustrated in the first reader⁹. Baishya showed us how the Blue Whale Challenge, an online game in which kids receive mysterious assignments every day, ending with having to commit suicide as the last challenge, caused mass hysteria throughout the country. Even though there never was any actual proof of this game existing, both government and worried citizens created and organized multiple infographics, YouTube-tutorials and mass protests. Baishya defined this process as *memetic terror*:

Memetic terror is an affective, networked fear of breaching. It replicates itself through exposure to repeated information, reverberating throughout digital infrastructures, as it interacts with personal devices, policy, and regulation, as well as users' bodies.¹⁰

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- 4 Mike Watson, *Can the Left Learn to Meme? Adorno, Video Gaming and Stranger things* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2019), 1-112.
 - 5 Anahita Neghabat, "Ibiza Austrian Memes: Reflections on Reclaiming Political Discourse through Memes," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 130-142.
 - 6 Saeeda Saeed, "Dear Mr. BoneSaw your face smells like a chicken shawarma: A Clapback to Saudi Arabia's Electronic Army," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 143-153.
 - 7 Sarp Özer, "Your Feed is a Battleground: A Field Report on Memetic Warfare in Turkey," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 236-247.
 - 8 Caspar Chan, "Pepe the Frog Is Love and Peace: His Second Life in Hong Kong," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 289-306.
 - 9 Anirban Baishya, "It Lurks in the Deep: Memetic Terror and the Blue Whale Challenge in India," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 248-260.
 - 10 Baishya, "It Lurks in the Deep: Memetic Terror and the Blue Whale Challenge in India," 249.

What we also, maybe even mostly, have taken from our first meme reader, is how memes can be deployed as tactical devices: not just as a way to channel voices, but as weapons, ammunition, roadblocks that lead to a better world. This is what we focus on in this second *Critical Meme Reader*—the tactics of memes. Their (political) power has moved beyond virtual images; the distinction between the virtual and ‘real life’ no longer applies, or perhaps was never really there. If memes play a substantial role in the Ukrainian war and are used as a tool by the alt-right to mobilize people to storm the Capitol, can they also be used by the left to spark a revolution, as memetic warfare which is far more immediate and accessible than real-life demonstrations?¹¹ What kind of labor would that require? And what if the same logics behind memetic terror were used for spreading *progressive* ideas for a possible future? To imagine, if you will, a hopeful future?



Fig. 1: Where?

Meme Activism and Warfare Tactics

Memes are definitely not our masters' tools: they are ours alone, and they will break down any house they feel like; currently they're already being used as ammunition for political ends all around the globe. Whether it's the Chinese government using cuteness to distribute its

11 King, "Weapons of Mass Distraction: Far-Right Culture-Jamming Tactics in Memetic Warfare," 234.

power during the COVID-19 crisis, as Jamie Wong illustrates (**page 76**), or playful memetic affordances on TikTok that are being used for Palestinian resistance, as Tom Divon explains (**page 88**). Whether it's memes being used to mobilize political violence, as Bhumika Bhattacharyya shows us (**page 106**), or as tools during the Presidential Elections in 2018 in Brazil, according to Isabel Lögfrén (**page 52**), it's clear that memes are immensely powerful. Memes are critiquing surveillance capitalism, memes can make theory more accessible (or are even theory in themselves, according to Jordi Viader Guerrero (**page 260**), memes uphold a mirror, showing the politics of the everyday, as Mariana Manousopoulou (**page 298**) sees it. They can take us by the hand, guide us through the politics of Russia's complex history, pop up in critical videogames, influence gun violence and immigration policies, balsam our souls when used as coping mechanisms for traumatized minority groups; they can be even an effective tool for decolonization, for liberation of indigenous people. The list of political memetic tactics currently employed throughout continents goes on: memes are everywhere, residing on each digital doorstep; breathing, growing, taking on new powers. They are specific to each culture, each context, adaptable as can be. The list goes on.

Meme Design and Labor

One such power is how to design the perfect political meme, a secret shared with us by Chloë Arkenbout in her interviews with nine Dutch leftist meme makers (**page 20**), whose memes also end up on the street as stickers, invading the public space with fierce ideological weaponry. It's these same ideological weapons that are also used in the context of critiquing the art industry, with all its shortcomings, ranging from precarious work environments to a total lack of social safety (Dutchies, remember Julian Andeweg?). Both Manique Hendricks and Marijn Brill point out that memes have become a new form of institutional critique (**page 191** and **page 178**). Hendricks states that memes are the perfect tool for a new generation of artists, curators, researchers, writers, and students to question institutional systems and power relations. Even though memes might *look* less dangerous than a critical review in an art magazine, according to her 'they provide humor, a certain catharsis, and a possible ground for self-identification or affirmation for the viewer: you are being made fun of, but at the same time you're also *in* the joke.' For the art world, memes are a perfect medium for playful self-mockery, while at the same time being a tool for serious critique. An artwork in itself, then.

However, the production of critical memes has a dark side to it as well: it is no coincidence that Anahita Neghabat stopped making memes—she was simply too emotionally drained from being 'mansplained' all the time (**page 149**). How does, indeed, a meme maker remain positive enough to keep on fighting the good fight? How does not only the meme, but also its maker keep their power intact?

Speculative Memes and Imaginaries

Memes are a powerful tool to question power, to critique and to create. Yet how do we get from this point to actually mobilizing the revolution our world desperately needs? When are we going to storm *our* Capitol, the Capitol that is capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy? How do we use memes to create a world built on values such as intersectional equality, solidarity, empathy, compassion, care? A world, in fact, built on love? Apologies if we sound a tad bit emotional here. But time is running out—climate disaster is a grim reality and it won't be long before a new pandemic hits. Or, who knows, aliens might even come and invade our planet?



Fig. 2: Hey.

The true political power of memes lies in their potential to be used as a proactive design practice, to build imaginaries for a better world. By thinking through alternative stories of possible futures, memes can become a way of talking in-depth about the implications of those potential outcomes of our society.¹² As the iconic futuring-expert Peter Schwartz perhaps would have concluded, if he were to apply his method to memes: memes can

12 Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991), xiv.

bring mankind's unspoken assumptions about the future to the surface.¹³ This is something Jasmine Erkan and Emma Damiani demonstrate with their (not so) fictional preview of our future (**page 207**). Memes can be powerful vehicles in challenging our 'mental models' about the world, and can potentially lift our 'blindners', those that limit our creativity and resourcefulness.¹⁴ They allow us to anticipate difficult times, and to make us see opportunities which otherwise would have remained invisible to us.¹⁵

It might be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. However, lucky for us, it's also easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of meme culture.¹⁶ So, let's try and imagine a world *after* capitalism, shall we? The best speculative designs do more than communicate; they suggest possible interactions and behaviors, according to Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, authors of *Speculative Everything*.¹⁷ They state that the left has relied too heavily on reason, ignoring the possibility of fantasy.¹⁸ And, yes, activists do burn out quickly, ending up as nihilist shadows of their once hopeful, combative selves. But let's not despair. How about we start seeing memes for what they truly are? A boundless source of inspiration, a starting point for the radical change so desperately needed in the world. Our reality may be grim, but our future doesn't have to be. Let us, for the love of memes, make it playful, euphoric, abundant. Let us dance upon the graves of nihilist media and worship our new gods: the memes.

Savriël Dillingh states that true hope can only be forward-facing (**page 314**): 'That is, it looks towards something that is undoubtedly good and beautiful, but necessarily something we cannot yet understand. We know it's there, but we simply do not yet have the conceptual language to express it.' Luckily, we have memes, seeing as, according to Dillingh, they allow progressives to *mass produce hope*. And it makes sense, because if memes can have a positive impact on our mental health (**page 140**), as Laurence Scherz illustrates, their healing power might be capable of so much more—perhaps even a healing, or *saving* of the world? To quote Dillingh once more: 'Now doesn't that just make you hope?'

13 Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain*, xv.

14 Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain*, xv.

15 Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain*, xv.

16 Åke Gafvelin, "On the Prospect of Overcoming Meme-Culture, or, The Last Meme in History," in *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, ed. Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson and Daniel de Zeeuw (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2021), 185.

17 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013), 139.

18 Dunne and Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*, 159.



Fig. 3: Sorry not sorry.

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