

# Towards the Production of Memonic Theatre: memes as public space for reason(ing)(s)

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The project of this piece is to produce theoretical space for something called “memonic theatre.” Theorizing something is already a simulcratic process that may acknowledge itself as such and recognize its own inherently ideological, aesthetic, and politically-driven spatializations for and through reason(ing)s.<sup>1</sup> To use meme culture parlance, representational reasonings—e.g. theories and other stagings of meaning, image, rhetoric—may be judged by memers and followers alike as “Based” or “Redpilled,” “Cringe” or “Bluepilled.” As most of those reading this already know, the pills are a reference to *The Matrix*, wherein Neo (Keanu Reeves) is offered a choice between returning to his old life as bio-battery whose consciousness is trapped in a simulation (blue) and staying born-again as a fully-conscious agent within a subscentent dystopia (red).<sup>2</sup> “Based” is a spatial metaphor, referring to the “grounding” of ways of seeing in precedence, dialectics, or logics, while “Cringe” describes images or ideas that cause repulsion in the receiver or spectator. These four qualities are x-y graphed through interactive social judgement of a materialized idea, for example, through comments on a meme<sup>3</sup> posted by a user on social media.<sup>4</sup> This mimetic framework, as a socially-interactive staging of qualification and judgement involving embedded cultural referencing, is an instance of what I will attempt to conjure here as “memonic theatre.”

**BASED:** Being based most broadly in Marxist thinking that has historically pitched subjects (workers, agents, actors, users) against and in co-production of economic, political, and conceptual structures (systems, apparati, paradigms), reproduces a sense of perpetual struggle for self-determination. Here, “man” perpetually rages “against the machine” and “natural beings” fight “the man.” This re-staging is also evident in McKenzie Wark’s description of *The Matrix* as “cinema of ontological hor-

ror" 5 through which Plato's Cave is re-allegorized as a technological superstructure that, like the so-called "third stage of the internet" both grounds and destabilizes "the real itself."<sup>6</sup> Wark further describes a contemporary moment in which both theological pre-determination of realities and humanist faith in the subject to know "the real" have collapsed, leaving us unconvinced that "reason" is of any use to (trans\*)human struggles for freedom against, from, or even within indifferent mechanisms.

Perhaps now, the assumption that the ability to see or know "the real" is the only pathway towards liberation must itself be called into question.

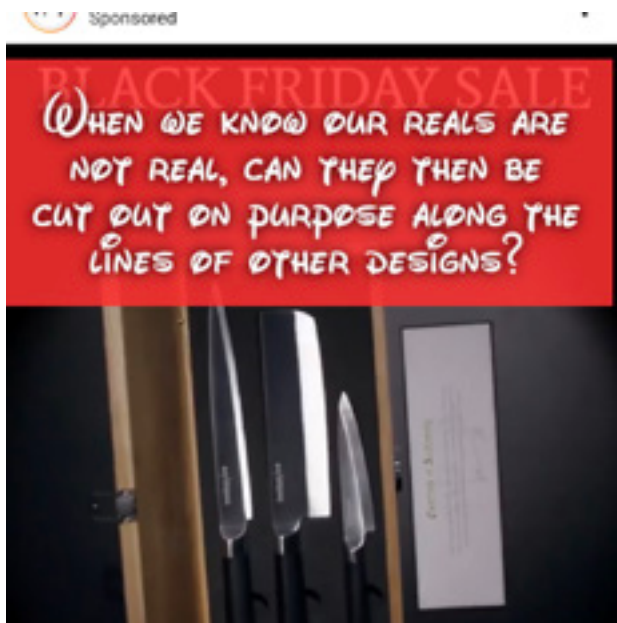
"The question of freedom, of the capacity to deliberately decide to be informed," writes Flusser, "has run like a red thread, unanswered. [...] For looking at the difference between natural and cultural information production from the outside, as a matter of degree [...] we come to regard freedom as subjective: we do experience our information as intentionally produced."<sup>7</sup> On the ways in which "our information," that is, our agent-determined performances subjectively and intentionally (re)produce realities, Peggy Phelan writes that "Each representation relies on and reproduces a specific logic of the real."<sup>8</sup>

Yet when attempts to see or even represent "Real-reals" are fully abandoned we are not simply left lost in labyrinthine catacombs of too many reals like lab rats to be devoured by the minotaur, rather "we" (human animals, presumably) maintain the dialectical capacity to design reasoning processes for reasons; that is, we enact discourses that both map and make the rooms.

In other words, when we know our reals are not real, it may then be reasonable to claim that they can be made on purpose (like theatre, or memes).

REDPILLED/BLUEPILLED: Focusing on agent-structure relations and the (e)motivated and intentionally-devised pathways of inquiry based in self-reflexive reasonings of "users" can help us move past what Richard Rogers calls the virtual/real divide,<sup>9</sup> a hauntology very much shared by "the theatre." While subjects or users are located by their spatialized distinctions and selec-

tions (each of which demarcates or produces different spaces of representation), particular ways of seeing and performing build passages between “the real” and “the artificial,” between “inside” and “outside” of labyrinths, hypotheses, matrices, and other built spaces. These building processes and built spaces are, as Merleau-Ponty and de Certeau describe, metaphorical, carrying perception between self and other, body and structure, between representations and subjects.<sup>10</sup>



Any general arguments that “the internet” at large “is” or “is like” either “public space” or “a theater” via some sort of re-framing of agora or Theatrum Mundi metaphors are both self-evident and incorporeal, creative and compulsory. Due to these metaphors, “the internet” feels constituted by coordinating prosceniums and frames and may be experienced as endless rooms of mirrors, a field pocked with click holes, or as “a series of tubes,” to quote our old meme-fodder friend Ted Stevens (R-Texas). Because cyberspace is “made out of language itself”<sup>11</sup> it requires such strategic metaphoric (inter)play to materialize, an sich. Naomi Jacobs describes how “We often use metaphors of place and space when we ‘visit a website’ or ‘retrieve a file,’” gesturing towards internet usage within Lefeb-

vrian notions of spatial practices that produce and are produced by habitus including not only embodied typing, clicking, coding while sitting at a computer but also mental or cognitive activities involving metaphorical representation. Jacobs continues, writing that use of spatial metaphors “may not purely be a habit of expression, but might be more fundamentally representative of the way that we manipulate information mentally, and indicative of something critical to the way people naturally interact.”<sup>12</sup> (*italics mine*)

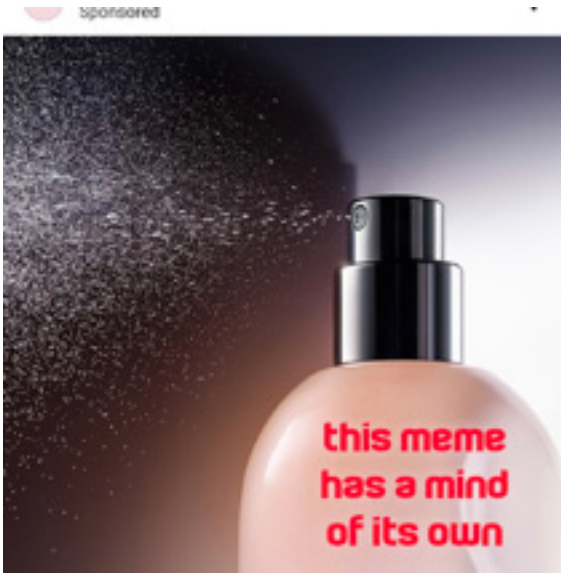
A social media “platform,” say Reddit, uses representations of language—obscuring code, cloud-storage of data, and other technological materializations as well as labor—to produce an interface that locates and situates subjects within what feels like or seems like (and indeed was initially declared to be<sup>13</sup>) a communicative commons. These feels and seems are however as dubious and potentially tragedy-inducing as Hamlet’s ghost; Jodie Dean builds on Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri<sup>14</sup> to pessimistically theorize such commons as fully determined ideologically and commercially by a “communicative capitalism,” which suppresses common approaches to systemic problems by isolating and circumscribing individuals as producer-consumers of themselves<sup>15</sup> and their own (dis)contents.



Two “hard problems” are thus mutually reproduced by framing social media as public space or as commons designed by both or either “natural” and/or “ideological-commercial” mentalities and interactions: the first is the hard problem of consciousness,<sup>16</sup> that is, how the meat-matter of the body-brain and conscious minds are imbricated, and second, the problem of capitalism and its seemingly Total co-productivity with forms of embodiment and consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Such problems<sup>18</sup> boil down to beliefs and their suspension; capitalism is reproduced by the belief that it is a “natural” economic system that is inextricable from human nature and biology, and complexly both challenged and maintained by beliefs that it is an ideological system that could be dismantled or replaced due to its constructed and at least partially agentically-produced nature.

CRINGE: Through its involvement of belief and reason, a theatrical frame for mimetic processes finds itself in dramatic conflict with cognitive and evolutionary frames for memetic processes.

Casarino and Negri remind us that “from Plato up, mimesis and metessi, representation and participation, have always constituted models for the penetration of Power into the improper—into what has been constituted as other.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, “memetics” is a research program that has framed “memes” as individual units of culture in order to mount empiric studies into what Francis Heylighen and Klaas Chielens describe as “the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes.”<sup>20</sup> The memetic program is underpinned by the assumption that “culture is composed of entities that replicate for their own sake.”<sup>21</sup> Grant Kien seems to believe that memes “themselves” embody a “survival drive,” not just metaphorically but actually, as he writes that “it is cybernetically logical that a meme is a unit of culture, but culture as a broader system determines and propagates memes. Humans, using memes as material for our constructions of virtual identity, provide the energy for memes to reproduce and launch themselves into the future. In so doing, memes feedback into the cultural system.”<sup>22</sup>



As a superstructure of techno-ideology becomes seen as more and more autonomous, recursive, inexorable, a schism appears between representations of human interaction that emphasize more behaviorist framings of “performativity” as ongoing, compulsory constructions of identity, and representations that involve “theatricality” as ways in which human persons enact ourselves for and through reason(ing)s, generating “a distorting filter through which the souls and intentions of others must be read.”<sup>23</sup>

To flag and frame some social processes and behaviors as “theatrical” is to claim that they are symbolic<sup>24</sup> and rhetorical,<sup>25</sup> at least seeing themselves as maintaining reasonings beyond (transcendentally) or otherwise within (transformatively) the determinations of “structures” that reduce existence to utilitarian competitions for survival. Here, theories of “theatricality” concord with Max Horkheimer’s critique of instrumental reason and preservation of emancipatory potentials singularly substantiated by the temporal imaginaries of the decaying organic mind,<sup>26</sup> Theodor Adorno’s “mediating instance of the spirit, independently of the will of the master, [that] modifies the directness of economic injustice,”<sup>27</sup> and of course Hannah Arendt’s valorization of theatre as the conflation of thinking and doing that produces agonistic politics.<sup>28</sup> “Theatre” itself is metaphorically materialized

as space-times for embodied reason and freedom in the face of autopoietic coercion and exploitation. Whether or not these capacities and spaces are “real” (truly functional) or “artificial” (products of belief) is a matter of and for ideology.

When a “user” of Instagram is holding their phone in their hand, they most often scroll downward through a “feed” of images by flicking a finger upward.<sup>29</sup> This pathway is unidirectional but rests or pauses may be performed at any time if the user stops scrolling. When the user stops scrolling, the amount of time they spend attending to a single location is interpreted to indicate their “interest,” which informs the algorithms built in conjunction with their entire history of behaviors to automatically generate the posts and ads on their personally-tailored “search page” as well as hierarchize the posts they see on their feed. Genres of content described and coded by other embodied persons also order and construct the unique experience of each user as Instagram is coded to track interactions, generating experiences based on direct messages, comments and likes, and people attached “IRL” based on interconnected recognition databases. These systems are sophisticated, automated, and hyperstructured versions of the ways cities co-produce experiences for “pedestrians;” for example, we may use the term “gentrification” to describe analogous but much slower and differently-scaled processes through which types of businesses, rent prices, zoning laws, and aesthetics shift in response to the identities, demands, desires, interests, behaviors, and abilities of inhabitants, in order to capitalize more efficiently and productively. In the cases of both Instagram, for example, and public IRL spaces may be seen as co-produced through spatial practices. Subsequently, pathways of bodily movement and mental discourse, or “orientations,”<sup>30</sup> are thus always in play; users and pedestrians may “wander,” or they may pursue ways of seeing based on conscious/conscience-driven objectives. Between the scales of the algorithmic social media platform and the city, sit theatre and theory, as deliberate navigations involving ethics and values, hopes, and beliefs, feelings of “belonging to” or “meaningfulness” that are “realized” by the one(s) carrying them, as well as what one may believe to be hard conditions of (the) matter; If I, a “user,” choose to orient a piece of writing through concepts of social, representation-



al, and/or abstract space as theorized by Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Christian Fuchs, and others, I do so for cause, in order to inquire into “rights” and abilities of inhabitants to conceive, activate, and otherwise produce spaces that meet their/our own needs and desires, both as conceptualized through representations of “the natural” and as intentionally, interactively built as sight-situating technologies.



In terms of the needs and rights of users, humanities scholarship about social media focuses on whether it limits or enables the “real life” performativities necessary for socio-political change.<sup>31</sup> Regarding the use of social media to organize bodies politic in the concrete sense, Thomas Poell and José Van Dijck write that at least “[social media] platforms can be temporarily appropriated as public spaces, facilitating protest communication. However, channeling protest and indignation through social platforms necessarily means that such expressions are highly formatted by the platforms’ architectures. Furthermore, such moments of publicness will certainly be brief, as social media are geared toward continuously connecting users to new trends and advertisements.”<sup>32</sup> In these ways, contestations over the “publicness” of space connects physical and digital space through common problems, as property and zoning laws, surveillances, and the

other regulatory and conditioning apparati involved in neoliberal post-consensual capitalism enforce modes of consumption and production, design behaviors, and generate the relations and resistances of different groups of subjects.

At first, direct application of Lefebvre's ideas about the production of space seem to reinforce senses that social media and internet "commons" are absolute and impenetrable realizations of corporatocracy. Christian Fuchs, in his analysis of Lefebvre's Three Levels of Social Space diagrams different types of subjects, dividing "experts, scientists, planners, architects, technocrats, social engineers" who are structurally agentic via their production of Representations of Space from the inhabitants and "users" of Representational Space, who passively experience space.<sup>33</sup> In Lefebvre, Representational Space is a "space of 'subjects' rather than of calculation;"<sup>34</sup> the calculated space or space for calculation is obscured and restricted, qualifying and quantifying subjecthoods, and regulating all everyday life and activities through the tripartite impositions, or deontologies, of what Lefebvre calls "'modern' neocapitalism."<sup>35</sup> These "three interrelated levels" are 1) biological reproduction 2) reproduction of labor power and 3) reproduction of the social relations of production. These reproductive levels are "a master's project"<sup>36</sup> producing only dominated space through which "lived experience is crushed."<sup>37</sup>

Through this *Scena Vitae*, the user, the plebe, the little maker of image spam (or "shitpost") memes from their private porcelain throne in the morning, is a passive pedestrian of Facebook's capitalist Representational Space, "crushed" into the material conditions of commercial data-mining. Meanwhile, one of the original coders, engineer, and oligarch of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, sits "above," constructing Representations that cull data, obscure labor, and hold consumers in captive spectatorship to advertisers. These two "roles" are both fulfilled by embodied human persons however, who may share the Representational Space of theory about memetics from evolutionary biology and cognitive science. In this space, the maker of memes (me, say) and Mark Zuckerberg are "users" and Richard Brodie, Richard Dawkins, Susan Blackmore, and many others, are the architects of Representations of Space about "memes."

Now, here I am, writing a paper about a totally fabricated term, "memonic theatre" and trying to "re-engineer" theories of memes around my own ethics, desires, and needs, which I feel are being crushed and dominated by biological fatalism and forms of Social Darwinism using memetic theory to justify necropolitics. In order to produce my "own" Representations of social media space, I must appropriate theories, including those of Michel de Certeau, who writes that "one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe-like, singular and plural practices [...] one can follow the swarming activity of those procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance."<sup>38</sup> Through de Certeau, the "user" may be seen as "the pedestrian" whose "interwined paths give their shape to spaces" organizing an "ensemble of possibilities" through "appropriation of the topographical system."<sup>39</sup> Thus, something called "memonic theatre" initially seeks descriptions and inscriptions of the singular and plural practices through which users of a social media platform like Facebook intentionally and creatively produce algorithmic responses and shift experiences for themselves and others through re-staging, or appropriation of the algorithmic architectures.

For instance, in the summer of 2020, the performative political use of hashtags deviated from both normative consumptive and resilient "constellational"<sup>40</sup> usages of social media to instead adopt the hashtags #donttreadonme #whitelivesmatter #blue-livesmatter #backtheblue and other slogans and tags from "the other side." The intention was to flood the feeds of those subjects who had "expressed interest" in fascist, white supremacist, and pro-police images and ideas with Movement for Black Lives images and information in hopes of "changing minds" or at least confusing the algorithms. The list of "counter" tags was shared via direct messaging, further increasing the "clout" of users and "boosting" their posts onto home search pages. The efficacy of this deviation is unquantifiable but the behaviors prove that the algorithms of the Facebook and Instagram industrial complex can be appropriated by users. While their structures can't be changed (and are unlikely to be hacked) their mechanisms can be "theatricalized" on scales and in ways that appropriate

them along the lines of the user's intentions and the agendas of ensembles of users.

The positionality or locatability of the subject, or "user," that agent who appropriates, is a problem that correlates and imbricates public space "IRL" (In Real Life) with "URL" (Uniform Resource Locators) structures and systems. The position of the "architect" however remains secured by power. These latter subjects also participate in daily spatial practices, and they too may be seen as either controlled entirely by mechanistic drives, say, to accumulate wealth, or they may also be seen as agentic subjects who to some extent carry beliefs into action. One of the reasons that Lefebvre's theories of spatial production have been so influential is that they do "distance" subjects from systems and structures of built environs and thereby seem to let in some last gasp of capacity for agentic rematerialization of the conditions of capitalism. In other words, Lefebvre "suspends disbelief" in the Total domination of capital(ism) by arguing that "the animal intervenes as a medium (means, instrument, or intermediary)."41 Here, the "medium" of a human body, and not just "the" body but particular subjects who smell, hear, think, feel, and prefer are necessarily called into participation, and "indeed the fleshy (spatio-temporal) body is already in revolt;"42 at least some spatialities are enacted by subjects who are more than vehicles for recording, decoding, or even desiring mechanisms of "the brain."43

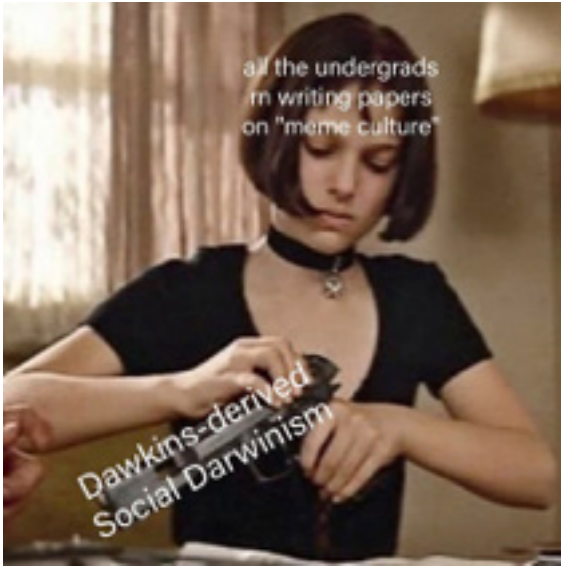
Lefebvre's conceptions of spatial practices are thus of great assistance to theorizing spaces between mimesis as intentional, preferential, sensuous imitation or mimicry and memetics as a science of "successful propagation." Further, with regards to the construction of Spaces of Representation that produce inhabited digital space, I believe it is crucial to perform abductive analyses that do not see "memes" as bits of information constituting autopoietic structures, and further, to perform analysis of "meme phenomenon" in the context of theatricality, for political and ideological reasons.44

Helpfully, Limor Shifman identifies two controversies inherent to memes as framed by memetics, labelling these controversies "biological analogies" and "who's the boss."45 Shifman

cites Henry Jenkins on biological analogies, writing that these have “been used in a problematic way, conceptualizing people as helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination of meaningless media “snacks” that infect their minds.<sup>4</sup> The second controversy, “who’s the boss,” stages “the issue of human agency in the process of meme diffusion.” Shifman gives us a spatialization here, a spectrum of worldviewings: “at one end are scholars such as Susan Blackmore, who claims in *The Meme Machine* that people are merely devices operated by the numerous memes they host and constantly spread.” In the middle of the spectrum is Shifman herself, who argues that “the undermining of human agency is inherent not to the meme concept itself, but only to one strain of its interpretation” and on the other end of the spectrum is “Rosaria Conte’s suggestion to treat people not as vectors of cultural transmission, but as actors behind this process.”<sup>46</sup> Despite the influence of Shifman’s book, definitions of “memes,” especially in more popular science and educational spheres, largely reproduce rhetoric from the far former end of the spectrum, where biological analogies proposed by Richard Dawkins are taken up as gospel.<sup>47</sup>

Dawkins, who coined the term “meme” and spawned the field of “memetics,” directly equated memes, e.g. “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” with genes, describing memes as fundamental units that encode heredities and are passed strictly “from brain to brain.”<sup>48</sup> Within Dawkins’s own theatre of conceptualization, Darwinism’s four postulates govern genetic and memetic replication, that is, units are variable and mut(ation)able, unit-qualities are “passed” (on or between), more “offspring” are produced than can survive, and the survival and reproduction of qualities are not random, rather favorable variations compete and are naturally selected to survive. In no way does a “host” choose, via their own attentions or intentions, which memes survive (no mention either of how a “tune” might initially be written). Dawkins cites his colleague and editor Humphrey’s summary of his own first chapter: “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. And this isn’t just a way of talking—the meme for, say, “belief in life after death” is ac-

tually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over.”<sup>49</sup> Dawkins does suggest that we (humans, universally) can resist our “programming” and behave altruistically through the implementation of reason, but he does not see the programming processes themselves as involving reasoning of any kind, rather he states that “We are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes”<sup>50</sup> and that the application of this in terms of culture and memes is “a truth” that “fills him with astonishment.”<sup>51</sup> Since Dawkins, “memeticist” evolutionary biologists, cognitive scientists, communications theorists, and even sociologists dealing with social media have adopted this conceptualization of meme production and consumption processes, arguing that memes operate through “contagion,” relying on the analogy of the virus, the viral. Dominic Pettman insists on the biological metaphor by distinguishing “memetic desire” from René Girard’s description of “mimetic desire” (which attributes original desires to objects external to the desiring subject), claiming that memetic desire “is not born in imitation, but rather infection or contagion. It retains traces of the original and essential triangular structure (desirer–mediator–desired), but fractalizes this throughout the network—to the degree that a specific mediator can no longer be confidently ascribed. The subject is therefore less an ape of established ideological patterns, and more the reflex, medium, or host, through which memetic currents flow or grow.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Kevin Kelly asks us to “consider culture as its own self-organizing system—a system with its own agenda and pressure to survive—[...] As Richard Dawkins has shown, systems of self-replicating ideas or memes can quickly accumulate their own agenda and behaviours. I assign no higher motive to a cultural entity than the primitive drive to reproduce itself and modify its environment to aid its spread.”<sup>53</sup>



I am certainly not the first to “cringe” and point out that memeticist ideation flirts with and often reinforces deeply deterministic and even fatalistic worldviews, at the very least de-centering the “ape” as an agent of mimesis, at worst reproducing “biosocial evolution” and “capitalism” not as ideological structures or Representations of Space, but as the very truth of nature and reality. These reasonings have political consequences, namely reinforcing confluences between biological Darwinisms and socio-political Darwinisms, which are and have always been disastrously entangled with white supremacy, capitalism, and ecocide.<sup>54</sup> Built spaces reflect ideological and doxastic convictions to such an extent that social media and its use of memetic theory may indeed operate as a paradigmatic materialization of Social Darwinism, that “unofficial religion of the West” as Mary Midgley wrote in her initial critique of Dawkins.<sup>55</sup> Yet, to argue that such frames are “the truth” is to deny the co-productivity of spatial practices and thus foreclose any deconstructive or reconstructive agencies within experienced, conceptualized, or lived space. That is, the “structure” here is not just the coded infrastructures that appear on our device screens but also an epistemic ouroboros of “hard coded” belief and senses of “inevitable natures” of “the worldwide web” that produces what Bogna Konior describes as “de-humanized apocalypticism, which can only be understood along-



side a larger reconsideration of human agency in the age of socio-geological crisis that is the Anthropocene.”<sup>56</sup>



In this meme, a mustachioed Pepe the frog shoots the Czar's family, who have Wojak heads. Pepe is perhaps the most famous meme of all time, originally drawn in 2005 by Matt Furie for his comic *Boy's Club*. Pepe has generated hundreds of articles, a documentary, and countless "spin off" versions of the drawing, in addition to thousands (millions?) of "meme" images. It is difficult to explain exactly what Pepe "means," but he is generally used to signify "a deplorable," in reference to Hilary Clinton's terming of Trump supporters as "a basket of deplorables" during a 2016 campaign speech. That same year, *Mother Jones* magazine quoted neo-Nazi conspiracy theorist Richard Spencer saying that Pepe "could also be seen as the reincarnation of an ancient Egyptian frog deity, Kek: 'He is basically using the alt-right to unleash chaos and change the world,' [...] 'You might say, 'Wow,' but this is literally how religions arise.'"<sup>57</sup> I will not launch into a tangent on "Kekistan" here nor mount a comparison between use of Pepe in the USA versus his use in Hong Kong protests, except to say that in both cases his emotional character might be described as nihilistic, zoned-out,



stoned, smug. In Matt Furie's original comic his catchphrase is "feelin good," which has also located Pepe within opioid crises. Wojak, or "feels guy," is another meme, used generally to signify feelings themselves. Born in Germany, Wojak has a textual association, "TFW," or That Feel When. "Wojak" as a way of drawing a person is also mimetic, with versions of Wojak including "NPC" (No Player Character, i.e. an "extra" in a video game), and a version with a huge wrinkled brain used to refer to someone who thinks (usually incorrectly) they are very intelligent. All of this cultural context is necessary to interpret this particular "image macro"<sup>58</sup> type meme, a visual image shared amongst users via social media. Literary-style interpretations might claim that this image shows Pepe as a revolutionary figure akin to a Bolshevik assassinating an out-dated regime (the Wojaks as the Czar Nicholas II and his family), thus advocating for violent acts as part of an alt-right uprising. One might also describe this image as staging a conflict between nihilism and feelings, showing how a refusal to "care" (Pepe) deposes emotional holds (Wojaks). Another interpretation might draw on Pepe's "drugged" nature and his relationship with white supremacy's reliance on artificial truths, eugenicist ideologies, religion, and other "opiates of the masses," showing how artificial or conditioned subjects are radicalized towards violence. By describing just three possible interpretations out of an infinite number, I am demonstrating both how such a meme can be treated as "art" or "literature," and how the same meme can have almost completely opposite political meanings: is this a meme "for" or "against" the alt-right? Does it even have anything to do with the alt-right, or are my own deepest fears dominating my "reading"? It is through social interpretive processes and reasonings that this "meme" operates; I might share it with a Russian friend just to see how she reads it.

The argument that meme-making and sharing is simply an "artistic practice" may seem obvious to those "Based" in theatre and performance studies as we are reminded, for example, of Elin Diamond's frameworks for "truths produced in engaged interpretation" (One, mimesis as representation, with its many doublings and unravelings of model, subject, identity (Irigaray, Derrida). Two, mimesis as a mode of reading that transforms an object into a *gestus* or a dialectical image (Brecht, Benjamin)<sup>59</sup> and be lead to demonstrate how is "meming" is a part of sui gener-

is human creativity, a story-telling urge and “specific imagistic medium” with “roots in the spontaneous image-making faculty of the human psyche.”<sup>60</sup> From a media studies perspective, Mackenzie Wark and Scott Wark work hard to describe what might better framed as “theatrical” operations in the most basic artistic sense: “The relationship between the Internet meme’s instance and plurality isn’t just a whole–part relation; nor does it recapitulate Charles Sanders Peirce’s type–token. Perhaps it is a little like the process that Guy Debord called *détournement*. Perhaps it is a little like what Jacques Derrida called iterability. However, it is not just something that happens in language. [...] It [the meme] mutates, we say, in circulation, through acts of collective production that stretch and mould [SpongeBob’s] features to affect the plurality through the instance.”<sup>61</sup> (lattermost italicization mine) Wark and Wark here suggest that “meming” processes are less about a contagious transference of propagandistic “bits” between brain-minds than they are about social conceptualizations through space-time. Pepe, Wojak, and SpongeBob are not memetic like covid-19 but mimetic like Antigone, who appears as a fabricated representative of idea(l)s throughout history and other narrative processes;<sup>62</sup> “Antigone herself” is no virus with some will to survive, it is her political resonance, her symbolic position as a preserver of ancestral tradition, as a sister, a woman in the face of patriarchal power (etc) that allows her to be taken up by reasoning artisans in order to stage Representations of Space through literary locution. “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions,’” writes Jacques Ranciere, “material arrangements of signs and images reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with the functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission”<sup>63</sup> For Ranciere, this “literarity” is both a “natural” capacity of “Man as a political animal” and a heterotopian procedure.

My project here however, “memonic theatre,” is not just an overflow of artistic play into digital space, but also as a way of re-mapping memeticist Social Darwinism and thus ideally the Representations producing “social mediations” themselves. Instances supporting this potentiality are plentiful, but attempts to project structural implications becomes absurdly theatrical: algorithms could be re-written to bring the least popular “me-

mes" to the fore, "backend" code could be visible and accessible to users, pathways pursued by users could directly construct wikis, and the metaphors used to theorize digital relations could be conscientiously implemented in orientation around reason(ing)s involving diffractive and diverse ethics, beliefs, and values...I am feeling foolish attempting to write these out. Yet, if such a matter as "memonic theatre" can thus somehow be produced through theoretical and theatrical reasoning, it will seem foolish, common, and it may feel like a "logic of the (un)real" that engenders through its suspensions of disbelief, its mimetic representations, and its communications of ethical positions, political values, and frameworks for meaningfulness, access to the acts of conceiving, calculating, quantifying, qualifying, and constructing that materialize Representations of Space,<sup>64</sup> or "sites for sight" online. Hereby, ontological reckonings would be either left by the wayside or seen solely as intentional "artificial" materializations. Presuming intentions to dismantle capitalist superstructures then, frameworks for publication might not assume or enable survival of the fittest paradigms, socially-interactive qualifications might not be oriented around on capital value but on aesthetic and subjective matrices of social judgement such as "Based/Blue Pill/Red Pill/Cringe," and mimetic staging paradigms might be circulated because they proliferate interpretations and reasonings rather than reducing them to competitive bio-social logics.

1 Jean Baudrillard frames this semi-tautology extremely negatively, *Simulcra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 80-81

2 Political divides between "left" (blue=awake) and "right" (red=asleep) are also present here, as well as a host of references to trans\* theory and culture, and to Jean Baudrillard's *Simulcra and Simulation*, which the character Neo is seen reading during the film.

3 I am loathe to define "a meme," but generally this refers some sort of cultural expression shared by people online and via digital devices, it can be something like a social score, a la the "ice bucket challenge," a video, a phrase, or simply a picture with or without words on it.

4 "social media" refers to internet applications designed specifically to connect users and mediate their interactions. Social media includes "social networks" as commercial applications, i.e. Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, that are built around userships and sharing of content (text, images, video, and so on) between users.

5 Mckenzie Wark, *The Matrix: Keanu lost in Plato's Cave* (1999) <https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-I-9911/msg00181.html>

6 Currently, this idea is emerging into mythological and narrative space, extrapolated from very specific and speculative theory and technical history of the Semantic Web and the "IoE" (Internet of Everything) as well as from theory about research methodology by Richard Rogers, *The End of the Virtual – Digital Methods*. Text prepared for the Inaugural Speech, Chair, New Media & Digital Culture, University of Amsterdam (May 2009)

[http://www.govcom.org/rogers\\_oratie.pdf](http://www.govcom.org/rogers_oratie.pdf)

- 7 Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 105
- 8 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2
- 9 Richard Rogers, [http://www.govcom.org/rogers\\_oratie.pdf](http://www.govcom.org/rogers_oratie.pdf)
- 10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London: Routledge, 2004), 61-68, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 115-130
- 11 Juliet Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, *The Internet Does Not Exist* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015): 7-8
- 12 Naomi Jacobs, *Living in Digital Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2018), 7
- 13 see, for example, John Perry Barlow, *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, 1996 [https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Declaration\\_of\\_the\\_independence\\_of\\_cyberspace](https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Declaration_of_the_independence_of_cyberspace)
- 14 Cesare Casarino, "Universalism of the Common" in *Diacritics* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 39, No. 4, Winter 2009), 172, Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In praise of the common: a conversation on philosophy and politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 44-46
- 15 Jodie Dean, *Democracy and Other Neo-Liberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 2-6
- 16 Another dozen pages here might lead us into Searle vs. Dennett debates in cognitive science and philosophy of mind regarding the central dramatic conflict of this paper, "mimesis" vs. "memetics"
- 17 See István Mészáros's critique and refutation of deterministic capitalism, *Social Structure and Forms of Consciousness: The Social Determination of Method* (New York City: Monthly Review Press, 2010)
- 18 "hard" problems in philosophy (the most well-known being "the hard problem of consciousness") are so-called due to their perennial return and that they involve contrary views and beliefs even within "scientific" frameworks. See John Kekes, *The Nature of Philosophical Problems: Their Causes and Implications* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 26-29, 138-141
- 19 Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, 207
- 20 Francis Heylighen and Klaas Chielens, "Cultural Evolution and Memetics," in *Encyclopedia of Complexity and System Science* (Brussels: Vrije Universiteit, 2009)
- 21 Francis Heylighen and Klaas Chielens, 283
- 22 Grant Kien, *Communicating with Memes: Consequences in Post-truth Civilization* (London: Lexington Books, 2019), 46
- 23 Marvin Carlson, "Resistance to Theatricality," in *SubStance* 2/3, vol. 31 (2002), 241
- 24 Joachim Fiebach, "Theatricality: From Oral Traditions to Televised Realities," in *SubStance* 2/3, vol. 31 2/3 (2002), 17-41
- 25 Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality* (London: Longman, 1972), 33
- 26 Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason* (New York: Verso, 2012), 159-168
- 27 Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Verso, 1997), 104-105
- 28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 187-188
- 29 Qualification: I describe here a user with certain physical abilities, there are other ways to navigate Instagram and use cellular devices, including voice activation, eye movement, and physical distribution of action through another body
- 30 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)
- 31 Thérèse f. Tierney, "Disentangling public space: social media and internet activism" in *thresholds* (Vol. 41, Spring 2013) 82-89, Marko Papic and Sean Noonan, "Social Media as a Tool for Protest," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 3 February 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110202-social-media-tool-protest>. 32 Thomas Poell and José van Dijck, "Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation" in *International Journal of Communication*. Vol. 10 (University of Amsterdam, 2016), 232
- 33 Christian Fuchs, "Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space," in *Communications Theory* 29 (2019), 137
- 34 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 362
- 35 Lefebvre, 32
- 36 Lefebvre, 165
- 37 Lefebvre, 51
- 38 de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 96
- 39 de Certeau, 96-97
- 40 Marcela Fuentes, *Performance constellations*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019)
- 41 Lefebvre, 194
- 42 Lefebvre, 201

- 42 Lefebvre, 201
- 43 Lefebvre, 200
- 44 Following Raymond Williams, Bruce McConachie articulates one of my implicit assumptions here regarding the operations of theatre: "the neo-Marxist cultural historian may anticipate that the theatre, like other cultural interactions, shaped history primarily by persuading its participants to accept certain values, ideas, and assumptions as normal and just." "Reading Context Into Performance: Theatrical Formations and Social History," in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 3, no. 2. (Spring 1989), 230
- 45 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 11
- 46 Shifman, 12
- 47 See for example, the proliferation of TEDx talks uncritically adopting Dawkins's senses of memes: Shontavia Johnson, 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYq92nt-OFU>) Emily Sands, 2017 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u2f44VdzBs>), Andrew Baron, 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0swAqcMnrOO>)
- 48 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 511
- 49 Richard Dawkins, 512
- 50 Richard Dawkins, 42
- 51 Richard Dawkins, 42-43
- 52 Dominic Pettman, "Memetic Desire: Twenty Theses on Posthumanism, Political Affect, and Proliferation," in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, eds. Aflie Brown and Dan Bristow (New York: Punctum Books, 2019), 29
- 53 Kevin Kelly, *Out of control: the new biology of machines, social systems and the economic world*, Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1994), 360
- 54 Herbert Spencer is most frequently blamed for fitting US American laissez-faire capitalism to Social Darwinism, see also Wilhelm Ostwald. For an in-depth discussions of relationships between capitalism, white supremacy, class hegemony, and Social Darwinism, see Robert Reich, Noam Chomsky, Stephen Jay Gould, and for a re-framing of evolution in resistance to its socio-political application, see Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Heinemann, 1908)
- 55 Mary Midgely, "Selfish Genes and Social Darwinism," in *Philosophy* 225, vol. 58 (July 1983), 367
- 56 Bogna Konior, "Apocalypse Memes for the Anthropocene God: Mediating Crisis and the Memetic Body Politic," in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, eds. Aflie Brown and Dan Bristow (New York: Punctum Books, 2019), 53
- 57 <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/10/richard-spencer-trump-alt-right-white-nationalist/>
- 58 See Bradley Wiggins, "Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape" in *New Media & Society*, 11, vol. 17 (December 2015): 1886-1906
- 59 Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: essays on feminism and theatre* (London: Routledge. 1997), ii
- 59 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 128
- 60 Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual and Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), xi
- 61 Scott Wark and McKenzie Wark, "Circulation and Its Discontents," in *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production*, eds. Aflie Brown and Dan Bristow (New York: Punctum Books, 2019), 303
- 62 See Sophocles *Antigone* (441 BC), Anouih's *Antigone* (1944), Graham's *Antigone Furiosa* (1985), Bemba's *Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone* (1988), as well as the innumerable stagings and productions of these plays through time, space, and contexts.
- 63 Jacques Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 39-40
- 64 Lefebvre, 32-33, 38-42, 50