

How to Read a Meme: Context, Agency, and Knowledge in *Distracted Boyfriend*



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Introduction

—Say it, no ideas but in things—
 nothing but the blank faces of the houses
 and cylindrical trees
 bent, forked by preconception and accident—
 split, furrowed, creased, mottled, stained—
 secret—into the body of the light!

These are the ideas, savage and tender
 somewhat of the music, et cetera
 of Paterson, that great philosopher—

—William Carlos Williams, “Paterson” 1927.¹

The lines above written by William Carlos Williams in 1927 were the beginning of a project that would occupy the next four decades of his life. The poem “Paterson” turned into the book *Paterson*, a sprawling five-volume epic that told the history of Paterson, New Jersey from the American Revolution up until Williams’ day. The core of the whole epic rests in the phrase “no ideas but in things,” present from the earliest draft of the poem. *Paterson* talks about the atomic bomb, industrialization, love, the nature of memory, and everything under the sun — but these discussions are all grounded in representations of real things and experiences. For Williams, a poet who famously described red wheelbarrows on which “so much depends,” and plums in iceboxes “which you were probably saving for breakfast,” the phrase “no ideas but in things” is a kind of motto.

This thesis is not about William Carlos Williams, but about internet memes. However, the position staked out by Williams in “no ideas but in things” applies just as surely to memes as it does to poetry. For Williams, any idea—whether it’s loneliness, socialism, or a scientific theory—is carried to us through some felt and sensed thing. It is the trees, bending winter branches to the sky, that underwrite the philosophical musings we have on the ride home. It is the “blank faces of the houses” that give us our first sense of history and where we come from. There are also the things which present ideas to us, forms of media: the book resting solid in the hand, the stage dimmed and then brightly lit, the screen tucked into the pocket. Abstract ideas

¹ “Paterson” William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: 1909-1939* (New Directions Publishing, 1986).

can't be separated from the concrete situations they arise out of, even if the drift of modern civilization lures us into living as if the two always were separate; tricks us into acting as if the imperial logic of markets and computer programs floats above at all times, corralling all things that lie within their explanatory power.

Art, as Williams practiced it, argues the exact opposite: ideas are not floating above anyone, they are under your feet and at your fingertips. Paterson, New Jersey, the place itself, is a “philosopher” because the things of the town produce ideas. Williams sees the systems (natural and manmade) which direct the course of water, the flow of traffic, and the bustle of commerce as the sources, results, and reflections of mental processes. Ideas live in things like memory lives in a souvenir: melting snow, open roads, leaves of grass, trees twisting toward the sun—these produce the theories, train the algorithms, and make the citizen. The poem (or the meme) seeks to bring the right things into the right arrangement, making possible new ideas and new bonds.

A meme represents a thing, and it also *is* a thing. The very fact that a meme circulates—that it arrives and departs, is shared and commented on, liked and saved—means something, and carries an idea in it. Like the trees planted in the park in Paterson, the meme is there because people put it there, because systems are in place to keep it there, and because we are in a position to see it. Implicit in these facts of circulation and worldly presence are particular ideas about how the world is made, how we live in it, and how it should be governed.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

-William Carlos Williams, “The Red Wheelbarrow”²

² “The Red Wheelbarrow” William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: 1909-1939* (New Directions Publishing, 1986).

When I first read the poems of William Carlos Williams, I did not understand why he was so famous. He writes about random things he’s seen driving around New Jersey, and sometimes the poems are confusing. You read something like “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and you wonder what the big deal is — it’s just a wheelbarrow that is wet. Then you read the words again, and again, and turn them over in your mind. As you work through it, you notice new things that strike you as beautiful or interesting. The poem puts simple things in an arrangement that makes it possible to have new ideas, and think through the world differently.

At first glance, many internet memes seem banal, frivolous, or thoroughly incomprehensible. But just like “The Red Wheelbarrow,” they reward close and attentive reading: looking at a meme, then looking again, and then turning it over in your mind is as illuminating an exercise as reading and rereading a poem.³ Memes are art, and I am studying them as works of art.

The Goals Of This Thesis



Figure 2. A Distracted Boyfriend meme, posted first by @nm161 to Twitter on August 19th, 2017. Archived to Know Your Meme.

This thesis aims to present an in-depth case study of Distracted Boyfriend, a meme that initially went viral in August of 2017 and since then has stuck around as a prominent and recognizable example of the object-labeling meme genre. The goal is twofold: firstly, to sketch

³ Of course, not all memes are rewarding to look at intently, just like how not all poems are as good as “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

out methods for critically approaching memes as literary texts and objects of historical study; and secondly, to look for what this meme, in its particular thingness and conditions of circulation, can tell us about the online world of 2017.

In the first chapter, I examine Distracted Boyfriend aesthetically, looking at it as an image, text, and rhetorical form. Beginning with an analysis of the stock photograph the meme is based on and an evaluation of that aesthetic tradition, I move into a reading of some of the most viral examples of Distracted Boyfriend. I find that the meme tends to represent a choice between an old paradigm and a new option, narrating everyday dilemmas as well as broader political and philosophical problems. Then, marrying insights from linguists studying memes to performance theories grounded in a reading of Shakespeare, I argue for viewing the Distracted Boyfriend meme format as a layered structure showing a series of nested discursive situations. The stock photograph at the bottom of the meme is first recontextualized by a person labeling the figures; then the labels and photograph are recontextualized by the act of posting the meme to a specific platform; and finally the post itself is recontextualized by the viewer looking at it and interacting with it. Tension and interest are generated in this meme through the accumulation of several different interventions and social framings: a meme is about the process of representing, judging, labeling, and contextualizing.

In the second chapter, I read Distracted Boyfriend as a historical document. I argue for fitting the aesthetic history and development of internet memes into the broader history of the internet. Comparing object-labeling memes to Advice Animals, I argue for an understanding of late 2010s memes as relying on metaphor rather than metonymy as an organizing device. Then, surveying the meme terrain as it existed in 2017, I analyze how Distracted Boyfriend went viral and the platforms it moved through, focusing on two different online communities: internet culture journalists working primarily off Twitter and people on Reddit attempting to classify and evaluate memes. An analysis of the meme's spread shows the role it played in community-making and the way it can testify to the incentives at play in internet culture in 2017.

Throughout the thesis, I work on a corpus of about forty memes sourced mainly from three places: Know Your Meme's entry on Distracted Boyfriend, articles published by various media outlets during the week the meme was viral in August 2017, and posts on some of the most popular meme subreddits during August 2017. There are thousands more postings of this meme, but the ones represented in my study are some of the ones which were the most seen and

the most paradigmatic for the format as it spread. My treatment of the Distracted Boyfriend meme is necessarily partial and incomplete, focused specifically on these sources and colored by their selective biases.⁴ My focus in this thesis is also exclusively on the period of time—roughly from August 19th, 2017 until the end of that month—when the meme first went viral. There are notable earlier and later postings of the Distracted Boyfriend meme, and it underwent interesting changes in the years after 2017 which would be a fruitful avenue of study in their own right. But by focusing on its initial period of virality, I want to study the meme not as the “classic meme” that it became (the process of meme canonization would be yet another thing worth studying), but as a new meme that went viral at a very specific moment in the history of the internet and of the 21st century.

The Historical Moment of Distracted Boyfriend

Distracted Boyfriend went viral according to a classically 2017 playbook. It originated from a stock photo taken two years earlier, and was first turned into a meme circulated with low intensity in closed Facebook groups in January and February of 2017. On August 19th, 2017, a viral tweet featuring an example of the meme was posted, and then reposted, receiving even more attention. Over the next three days, postings of the meme bubbled up across all major platforms. On August 22nd, Know Your Meme published an entry describing the meme, as posting continued to increase. By August 24th, a volley of explainer articles in the mainstream press about the Distracted Boyfriend landed in timelines along with a frenzy of Distracted Boyfriend memes. Distracted Boyfriend achieved peak virality and internet ubiquity towards the end of that week, circulated across all platforms, and was featured in listicles around the web. As the week lapsed into the weekend, posting cooled down until, as the new week dawned, the internet moved onto other memes.⁵

Distracted Boyfriend remained culturally relevant in the years afterward. Unlike some memes which are only popular for three to five days and then vanish, or are only well-circulated

⁴ In a forthcoming article in *The Critical Meme Reader, Volume 3*, I go more at length into Know Your Meme as an archive and source for meme studies. Other work about Know Your Meme has also been done by Ben Pettis — see: Ben T. Pettis, “Know Your Meme and the Homogenization of Web History,” *Internet Histories* 6, no. 3 (August 19, 2021): 263–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2021.1968657>. Pettis cautions against an “over-reliance” on Know Your Meme as a source, which is prudent.

⁵ “Distracted Boyfriend,” *Know Your Meme*, August 22, 2017, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend>.

within a limited community, Distracted Boyfriend became a part of the meme canon. It was posted, reposted, riffed upon, and famously featured above the fold of *The New York Times* in 2019.⁶ It remains one of the most iconic and recognizable memes—a sort of standard reference not just of its era or its genre, but of memes overall.⁷

This viral playbook no longer exists. We are now in a different era. In 2017, TikTok had not yet crossed the Pacific; artificial intelligence was just the dumb chatbots we'd played with in middle school computer lab; and the platforms were merely unpleasant, not yet actively hellish. It was a particular moment, defined by particular tensions and particular arrangements of attention, power, and capital. Now is the time to write about this era in internet history because within a few years, the records needed to tell a story about the internet in 2017 will mostly be gone, along with the cultures that produced them.⁸

The Historical Moment of this Thesis

Worlds end every day, and one of them ended on October 22nd, 2022, when Elon Musk officially took ownership of Twitter. For the better part of a year I had been using the platform to report on memes as a freelance editor for Know Your Meme, and for the better part of eight years I had been learning about life through the app and sharing the bangers I encountered there with my friends.⁹ Now it was over: Twitter's utility for my work and enjoyability for my leisure would decline until I felt angry and nauseous every time I tapped on the bird (which, as of August 2023, isn't even a bird anymore but just the letter 'X').

My story is not exceptional. In my time on Twitter, I made a few mutuals who had clout, but I never earned it myself. I have good memories of following discourses like Bean Dad with my friends, or connecting with strangers who later became friends over our shared appreciation for bots that repost the poems of Sylvia Plath. I also have bad memories of Twitter: refreshing the feed on January 6th to see the latest reports of shots fired and barriers breached, sitting in a

⁶ Ewing, Jack, Liz Alderman, and Ben Dooley. "A Fiat Chrysler-Renault Merger Would Put Nissan in a Bind." *The New York Times*, May 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/28/business/flat-chrysler-renault-nissan.html>. The online version of the article, however, uses a different graphic than the print version did.

⁷ It might be said that Distracted Boyfriend is to memes what a standard like "As Time Goes By" is to a jazz band, a song like "Wonderwall" is to a bar band, or what "La Vie en Rose" is to a tourist.

⁸ More about this issue and the problem of archival instability in Chapter Two.

⁹ A "banger" is a particularly funny, interesting, or provocative post.

puddle of dread on so many 3 AMs wondering why I hadn't put the doom-scroll down four hours ago. All of it, good and bad, is over. That internet no longer exists.

It wasn't just Twitter that changed. Around the same time, in late 2022 and early 2023, other parts of the internet I grew up with corroded. The transformation of Twitter was simply the most visible and mediatized part of a larger trend. Google Search is so clogged with ads and SEO copy written by AI that it barely works now; Instagram has kicked out all the communists and shitposters; and Reddit and Tumblr are in the midst of revamps designed to please investors over users. Some of this is the result of new technologies like artificial intelligence and cryptocurrency, which promise to remake the online world. Some of it is the result of political developments. Cory Doctorow has explained the end of the late-2010s internet through a theory of "enshittification." Like stars, platforms go through a life cycle: at the beginning, they're mostly interested in attracting new users and keeping old ones so they go out of their way to offer free and useful features; then, once there's a large enough user base, they're mostly interested in attracting advertisers, so the platform exploits data and gins up interaction across its products; and finally—this is the point many of them arrived at in 2023—a platform seeks to serve investors, squeezing maximum value out of both users and advertisers who are, because of the platform's monopoly, essentially stuck there.¹⁰

Because the platforms are sick, the larger media ecosystem is also sick. Facebook and Twitter are no longer referring enough users to most publications, so online media companies like BuzzFeed and Vice are declaring bankruptcy or closing divisions. To top it all off, content generated by artificial intelligence has flooded the web, adding tons of gunk and informational rubbish onto the already ailing platforms. I have not even mentioned the conspiracy theory calls for bloodshed that pop up with disturbing frequency.

Of course, change happens as you get older; it's the natural way of life. Years from now, I will be talking about Twitter beef from 2019 the way my father still talks about Linda Ronstadt. The Web of my later teens and early twenties was my way into the world, and the fear and sadness I feel about its death also gives me a sense of empathy for my elders who loved what I never knew: the vanished old internets of the 2010s, 2000s, and 1990s. However, memories of these dead internets remain, and they can be meaningful and constructive for us as we try to

¹⁰ Cory Doctorow, "Pluralistic: Tiktok's Enshittification – Pluralistic: Daily Links from Cory Doctorow," January 21, 2023. <https://pluralistic.net/2023/01/21/potemkin-ai/#hey-guys>.

figure out the internet we're currently living in. These memories might also haunt us. It is always both too early and too late to write internet history.

What is a Meme Exactly?

The concept of “meme” originates with Richard Dawkins in 1978 (well before the internet started) who defined it as a “cultural replicator” in his book *The Selfish Gene*.¹¹ A meme, for him, was a concept or technique which propagated through human culture the way genes propagate through human reproduction. Most contemporary internet meme researchers agree that his definition, coined before what we call “memes” even existed, is not useful. The meme as Dawkins saw it is extremely broad in its meaning (for Dawkins, everything from skirts to bridges, from novels to religions, are made of memes) and argues that patterns of cultural transmission mirror those of genetic transmission, encompassing random mutations, natural selection, and a “meme pool.” This is not true — cultural transmission does not work like biology.

“Meme” was coined by Dawkins because it sounded like “gene” but also like the French *même* and the Greek *mimesis*.¹² However, memes are not any more mimetic than any other kind of art: imitation is an essential component, but so is variation. Neither are the fundamentals of internet memes particularly new: images (moving or still) and text have been combined and passed around, laughed at, and appreciated for as long as people have had the ability to make them. What turns internet memes into a new and distinct art form is the internet and computers, which allow a new kind of work to be done upon image, text, and audience. For me, the word “meme” refers more narrowly to this kind of art, and not to all in the world that is transmitted through human culture.

Limor Shifman’s foundational 2013 book *Memes in Digital Culture*, rejecting the Dawkins definition, offers a broadly-accepted standard definition of a meme:

¹¹ Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New York : Oxford University Press. 1978. Accessed via OpenLibrary at archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/selfishgene00dawk/mode/2up>

¹² The concurrence of “meme” with “mimetic” leads some researchers to bring up René Girard and mimetic desire — which is applicable to memes, but not any more applicable than it is to other kinds of art.

“(a meme is) (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.”¹³

Shifman’s definition (in part C) situates memes squarely in the context of the internet, recognizing that this aesthetic phenomenon is categorically different from others in the past. Shifman also defines a meme not as a singular artifact, but as a “group of digital items sharing common characteristics”, and (in part B) she says they are connected to and responding to each other intertextually.¹⁴

In part A of the definition, Shifman famously breaks down the materials and practices of meme-making into three “dimensions”: “content, form and stance.” The sharing of these three things are what groups a series of memes together. Crucially, not every meme in a group has to share all three with every other, just at least one of them. In *Distracted Boyfriend*, the content changes when I write new text over the people in the meme, the form changes when I modify the appearance of the image or rub against the prefabricated rhetorical structure of the meme, and stance changes when the people circulating the meme change.

Stance for Shifman seems to be the trickiest of the dimensions in her “trinity,” and to define it she borrows concepts from sociology. Stance is the assumed sense of who a meme’s public and maker are, its emotional tone, and its communicative function. The stance of a meme might include its political valence, its register, its communicative function (some memes, like the ones with cats wishing you a “Happy Wednesday” are phatic, others are conative, poetic, metalinguistic, etc.).

Stance depends on who uses the meme, why they use it, where the meme is seen, and who looks at it. For this reason, the stance of a meme is always a sort of intervention. The first modern usage of the term “meme,” which applied the word from Dawkins to pieces of internet culture, was by Mike Godwin in his 1994 essay in *Wired* magazine, “Meme and Countermeme.”¹⁵ In the essay, Godwin describes how he came up with Godwin's Law, which

¹³ Shifman, Limor. *Memes in Digital Culture*, 40. The MIT Press, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs14s.1>.

¹⁴ While Shifman’s definition identifies memes as a “group” of objects, the word “meme” is also commonly used to mean one of the objects belonging to that group. I will be using “meme” for both the singular and the plural. Sometimes, I will communicate the distinction through the definite and indefinite articles: “*the* Distracted Boyfriend” meme refers to the group, “*a* Distracted Boyfriend meme” to one post. This may lead to some confusion, but it seemed too elaborate and artificial for me to go against the general usage of the word “meme.”

¹⁵ McCulloch, Gretchen. *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules Of Language*. Penguin, 2019.

states “as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one,” and then purposefully spread it around online forums.¹⁶ Godwin calls his law a “countermeme” created in order to call out people who filled chatrooms up with the “meme” of Nazi comparisons. Its stance was aggressive, interventionist, and anti-fascist. A meme, in this sense, is a way of posting that serves to change the behavior of other posters and the vibe of an online space.

Later researchers have further developed these frameworks, extending avenues of inquiry into specific political memes (notably, Pepe the Frog) and also into semiotics.¹⁷ Many have used memes as a source to study other phenomena, investigating how memes get used in a given social movement or political campaign, or how they reflect different strategies by businesses or governments to extend control over populations.¹⁸ Researchers associated with the Institute of Network Culture at the University of Amsterdam have also pioneered a “digital methods” approach to internet culture, employing several disciplines and forms of inquiry.¹⁹ Outside the academy, collectives like DoNotResearch or NewModels, alongside independent artists and memers, have pursued theory-driven critical projects around memes.²⁰ And, of course, there is Know Your Meme.²¹

Many of these researchers are explicitly interested in memes as political tools, and turn their attention to memetic worlds beyond just the narrowly American one which occupies me

¹⁶ Godwin, Mike. “Meme, Countermeme.” *Wired*. October 1, 1994. <https://www.wired.com/1994/10/godwin-if-2/>

¹⁷ Bradley Wiggins, *The Discursive Power Of Memes In Digital Culture* (Routledge, 2019) offers trenchant analysis of memes and political developments in the 2010s. Also see: Ryan M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (MIT Press, 2018). Kate Miltner (no relation to Milner) wrote the “Memes” chapter in the 2017 SAGE Handbook to Social Media, which offers an overview of the field as it stood in 2017. Miltner, K. (2017). Memes. In: Burgess, J, Marwick, A, and Poell, T. (Eds). *Sage Handbook of Social Media*. Sage. In this chapter, two-thirds of the text is taken up with a discussion of memes in politics and as forms of political expression.

¹⁸ Daniel Bristow and Alfie Bown, *Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production* (punctum books, 2019) is a particularly incisive collection of essays and papers about memes, with a second half addressing Pepe the Frog from a variety of national and disciplinary perspectives.

¹⁹ The *Critical Meme Reader* series, edited by Chloë Arkenbout, is a great source. See Volume I: Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniël de Zeeuw, *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, 2021; and Volume II: Chloë Arkenbout and Laurence Scherz, *Critical Meme Reader: Memetic Tacticality*, 2022.

²⁰ DoNotResearch and NewModels both center around Discord groups and journals in which ideas are exchanged. I have contributed an essay to DoNotResearch and am a lurker in that Discord group. There are surely many other niche internet studies projects going on which I am not aware of, as well as individual creators. In relation to DoNotResearch, the work of Joshua Citarella (accessible through his Substack) and Brad Troemel (accessible through his Patreon) deserves serious consideration.

²¹ Know Your Meme’s entries provide researched accounts of meme origin and spread alongside collections of primary sources. The site has also published a series of “Insights” pieces over its existence that use the data and in-house expertise to tell stories about memes.

here. My direction is more aesthetic and critical (and my focus more local) but I don't believe I am depoliticizing the meme: rather, I am focusing on the qualities of memes *as* memes, before they become propaganda or personal testimony. I believe this sort of work is a necessary prerequisite for a further examination of memes as a kind of political discourse, since what makes memes politically useful in the first place is their aesthetic appeal and wide circulation. Memes as a media and art form create specific kinds of social situations which in turn become political situations. I am studying the *form* of politics that might move through memes rather than the *content* of politics; what interests me more than the points of view expressed through a meme is the kind of relation to the world and to others that it permits.

Since research and theory about memes stretches across several disciplinary domains (as evidenced by the breadth of people contributing to the field) I've often wondered what exactly I am doing here—whether it should be called history, sociology, literary criticism, or a series of mistakes. I've started thinking of it as *attention studies*. I choose “attention studies” because it echoes the phrase “attention economy” that has been used to describe the political economy of the digital era, but also because I think it reflects the stakes of studying any kind of text and makes the link between these texts and memes explicit.²² Creators, whether they make a novel, an advertisement, or a meme, do things to attract and hold our attention. Literary techniques like plot or meter (as well as meme techniques like object-labeling, the primary device at play in *Distracted Boyfriend*) can be read as operations to move attention. As a critic, I can assess the effectiveness of those operations and describe how they work, how they originated and developed historically, how they mean.²³

But attention isn't just attracted and held: it is also turned and conditioned by people choosing to do things. We don't have only one kind of attention: there are deep and shallow attentions, compassionate and hostile attentions, self-serving and communalistic attentions, sincere and fake attentions. Attention is power: it can be given or withheld by an individual, and this giving or withholding is a moral choice. It can also be coerced from someone, or exchanged for something. I choose to pay attention to what serves me, and I choose to not pay attention to what makes me uncomfortable. There is nothing neutral about attention paid or attention owed:

²² Yves Citton, *L'économie de l'attention: Nouvel Horizon Du Capitalisme ?* (Editions La Découverte, 2014).

²³ See also, for one of the best essays on the topic: Smith, Zadie. “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction.” *The New York Review of Books*, October 1, 2019. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/>.

the action a reporter performs in presenting a story so we click on it immediately and understand it quickly is not politically neutral but politically charged. Studying a text, in a sense, has always meant studying attention and how it is moved to serve different masters. With memes we have a source through which we can see attention at play in the 21st century internet, and a tool to begin thinking critically about how it works and is worked on.

Memes Considered as Practice

In this thesis, I am considering Distracted Boyfriend memes as images with text, but also as elements in an online space and actions performed in that space. Posting is a kind of performance, done in front of an audience, and a post itself ends up becoming part of a place: entering a new section of Twitter or a new subreddit, a user finds posts and looks them, which, taken together, are both the content and container of that community.

It is through memes that online space is inhabited and traversed, because on the internet people do not have bodies and there are no rooms to walk into. Geographic metaphors (in English, *website*, *web address*, and *platform*) create a sense of spatiality for the internet, and a sense of “hereness” happens through the simultaneous exchange of messages, images, videos, and texts. Manuel Castells defines space as “the material support of simultaneity in social practice,” the thing we need to be together in the same moment.²⁴ The internet allows simultaneity without physical proximity because my post can be read immediately and I can see the responses to it immediately. As Castells argues, cyberspace is a type of space, and it is structured, marked, and portioned out just like real space. I argue that what replaces the doors that close behind us or the ground that we walk across are the kinds of posts we share, including memes.

If online space is understood in this way, a meme does not end at the edges of the image and text, but extends into the replies of the post it appears in. The post itself then extends into the web of circulation and the community in which it is shared, embedded, and consumed. This community then extends into the platform(s) it exists on, and from there into the internet as a whole. Like a leaf attached to a tree, a Distracted Boyfriend meme participates in a much larger process.

²⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. 2010. Page xxxiii.

Geometrically, trees are fractals: branches split from the trunk like twigs split from the branches, like leaves split from the twigs, like the veins at the center of a leaf split from its stem. In a tree, the same structure is iterated across several scales, and I would argue the internet is the same way. The organization of elements and interpretive practices in a meme—the patterns in how it moves a viewer’s attention—reflect the structure of the internet as a whole. A leaf and a trunk are not the same thing, they look and behave very differently, but they have the same pattern moving through them.²⁵

This pattern, in a meme, is expressed through form. The form of a meme, like the form of non-online discourses, helps to structure the way social relationships happen and people act in space together: if the story takes a long time, you must sit there a long time; if the song is really uptempo and wild, you’ll want to dance with the person next to you. Any signifying act interpellates a viewer as a certain kind of audience — in particular, humor (which memes often participate in) creates in-groups and out-groups that share stances and frames of reference. Since the internet is not constructed out of physical space (in which the communication of others might be situated and understood) but rather by a shared vibe assembled out of posts, a form’s role in positioning subjects and structuring social interaction is even more pronounced. The way a meme pushes us to think and laugh is a microcosm of the way the internet pushes us to be.

Since meme forms order not just the content they hold but the patterns of interaction between people in an online space, formal analysis offers a means of understanding the ways of thinking and relating in a community. Formal features distribute attention and organize information, creating relationships between things and situating the participants in a conversation. Looking at the tools people invent to move attention around, you get a sense of what they mean to accomplish by moving that attention around, and what participants tend to remember, forget, conclude, or feel as a result.

So, the medium is the message—but it’s not everything.²⁶ Instead of arguing for the radical position that media technologies *determine* the ontologies and epistemologies of communities—that we feel the passage of time or the sensation of belonging in a place the specific way we feel them because we now look at screens instead of pages—I want to say

²⁵ Some might argue a better metaphor for the internet would be the rhizome, but I choose the tree because I don’t believe the internet fits the definition of rhizome. The internet as it existed in 2017 had a trunk, a center. This trunk was the platform structure and the policies of major players in it. Everything was not connected to everything else, but rather connected to one big thing (while also being interconnected).

²⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1964).

something else.²⁷ I want to propose form in media as an intermediate and contested zone. Through formal structures, meme creators and publics *negotiate* with their medium: form is a compromise between a medium and the people who use it. Through form, cultural traditions and individual choices meet the conditions of a medium and technology, altering to fill them in like water turning into the shape of whatever container you pour it into. The shape a form takes tells you about the container it's in, the job it's meant to do, and the trunk it's attached to.

So why did people in August 2017 all start posting a picture of a guy in a couple looking at a woman's butt and upsetting the woman he's already with? Further, what might that meme help us to understand about the society and the technologies we lived in?

²⁷ The maxim that "media determine our situation" comes from German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

Chapter One: How Distracted Boyfriend Works

The Stock Photo as Characteristic Product of Platform Capitalism



Figure 3. The original stock photograph by. Guillem, Antonio. Disloyal man walking with his girlfriend and looking amazed at another seductive girl. iStock. 1 November, 2015. [Link](#)

The stock photo which became Distracted Boyfriend was originally entitled “Disloyal man walking with his girlfriend and looking amazed at another seductive girl,” and it was posted to the stock photo market site iStock on November 1st, 2015. It was taken by Spanish photographer Antonio Guillem, who still runs a business selling pictures of “stock” situations to people who want to put them in websites or in advertising materials. The image costs \$12 for commercial use. Guillem’s photo portfolio on the iStock site includes a series of other images, intended for sale to businesses and individuals. You can imagine any of his images (a few of which are seen below) appearing in brochures, blog posts, and advertisements.



Figure 4. Some other examples of stock photos taken by Antonio Guillem, from his iStock site. [Link](#).

Stock photos inhabit a kind of gray area aesthetically. Photography scholar Paul Frosh describes them as coming from “a world most of us find fuzzily familiar.”²⁸ Stock photos are highly specific in one sense, depicting immediately-identifiable behaviors, gestures, and objects—and their value comes from how immediately-identifiable the situations and figures in them are. Yet, at the same time, stock photos are designed to be unspecific and generic: the woman with an earache, or the person raising their arms in triumph beside a mountain vista, are like the Platonic ideals of these behaviors and situations. Stripped of context, stock photos present a situation in terms that rid it of all ambiguity and particularity: nobody has ever drunk water by a waterfall in the way a woman in a stock photo does, but the stock photo corresponds to our idealized mental image of this behavior. They are portraits of stereotypes. What is depicted in the stock photo is less so reality than the average of our representations of a given reality.

Frosh outlines a “standard critique” of stock photography as a “public evil:” practically and historically, the stock photography business is a big data platform capitalist business. Like other platform capitalist businesses, stock photography giants—in particular Getty Images—create, archive, and format a market. Getty Images connects freelance photographers with their clients in the same way that Uber connects drivers with people who need a ride, or YouTube connects content creators with audiences.²⁹ These platform businesses, according to Nick Srnicek, are “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact,” and position themselves both “between users, and as the ground upon which their activities occur.”³⁰ Some of

²⁸ Frosh, Paul. “Is Commercial Photography a Public Evil? Beyond the Critique of Stock Photography.” In *Photography and Its Publics*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350054998.ch-010>.

²⁹ It’s called “stock photography” because the stock photography company buys a bunch of photographs and then holds them “in stock.”

³⁰ Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

the money made by the platforms come from their position as middlemen, but they actually end up making the bulk of their revenue from the harvest and manipulation of data. Because they set themselves up as the frame and setting of all interactions, recording every detail of what happens, they are able to produce and sell ever-more sophisticated representations of the market and its interactions. Knowing more about the market, they are able to shape the market. Platforms have “a natural tendency towards monopolization” because the bigger they get, the more attractive they become to sellers and buyers — and so they tend to horizontally and vertically integrate.³¹ By 2016, Getty Images dominated not only the stock image market but a variety of other types of photographic representation, such as sports photography and photojournalism. Srnicek, developing his definition of the platform also argues that “while often presenting themselves as empty spaces for others to interact on, (platforms) in fact embody a politics.”³² By coordinating the interactions between users, extracting data, and then continually optimizing and manipulating the rules of the game, platforms exert a kind of control and influence over how participants behave.³³ The platform writes the rules of the game by pretending it is simply a referee.

“Data” necessarily means “archive,” because this is where the data gets stored and organized. Michel Foucault’s account of the archive as a site of power applies to the platform capitalist business model: these businesses make money by writing “la loi de ce qui peut être dit”³⁴ or, more broadly, the law of not just what can be said but what can be done, transacted, sold, or bought. In the case of Getty Images, the platform archive writes the law of what can be seen. The archive, as Foucault describes it in *Archeologie du savoir*, is for talking what Google is

³¹ Srnicek’s term for this is “rhizomatic” (60) — and he cites Google’s effort to create not just Search, but also an internet browser (Chrome) an operating system (Android for smartphones) and hardware (the Chromebook). Each link in this chain is a source for data, and Google’s major competitors are also involved in the same domains — Apple does hardware, an operating system (OS) an internet browser (Safari), while social platforms like TikTok have developed an increasingly sophisticated search function through which users can find videos and content. This kind of integration mirrors Getty’s efforts to dominate not just the stock photo market but other ancillary or associated markets, such as photojournalism and historical/archival photography.

³² Srnicek, 29

³³ Srnicek’s discussion of the platform in *Platform Capitalism* is also, to some extent, a history of capitalism in the 21st century. He argues that in the late twentieth century in advanced and deindustrialized Western economies such as the United States, the platform emerged as a new kind of firm created out of new technology (computers, which can track data) and a financialization of the economy brought about by loose monetary policy (the era of venture capital, which allowed the funding of tech companies, and the era of quantitative easing which lasted in the US through the 2020s). Srnicek generalizes the platform to include not just social media platforms or big tech companies, but other kinds of firms that use platform tactics, ranging from General Electric’s pivot to collect data from industrial processes using its machines to the businesses of Monsanto and Airbnb.

³⁴ Foucault, Michel. « V. L’a priori historique et l’archive », , *L’archéologie du savoir*: sous la direction de Foucault Michel. Gallimard, 2008, pp. 173-180.

for posting. People build a worldview, write history, and make their living by the means of what the archive gives to them: rather than passively recording, the archive actively shapes and exploits.

Aesthetically, stock photography is bad for many critics because it “exemplifies processes of standardization, commodification, alienation, and stereotypical classification,” and by its very nature is “reducing (photography) to a machine for producing stereotypes.”³⁵ Stock photography creates “generic” images that fit perfectly into certain types and categories determined by the platform archive. Photographers shoot specifically to meet these categories. In this sense, the stock photography archive serves to make these essentially abstract categories more real and widespread than they were before, by nudging human behavior (the shooting of photographers, the purchasing of clients) into the boxes it creates. The generic scheme becomes a force at play in the world, a kind of algorithm that by selecting for and incentivizing certain kinds of expression ends up producing a form of reality that naturalizes and perpetuates its interventions. Online, the platform, archive, and algorithm (which are, operationally, limbs of the same animal) create the ground on which we have to plant and the weather under which we have to work. As stock photography becomes an ever-more “ambient” part of visual culture, both in online and in-real-life spaces, it ends up acting as a kind of coercive, commercializing code.³⁶

Stock Photo Memes as a Genre: Between Coercion and Interaction

Stock photography has long been one of the most frequent sources of inspiration for memes. Frosh even makes reference to the “web” and its “memetic” character as evidence for the claim that stock photos have a recognizable style, which many in the public know and critique through “satire” online.³⁷ Distracted Boyfriend inscribes itself in this tradition, and it is far from the only famous stock photo meme. Hide the Pain Harold (top left in the picture below), one of the most iconic memes of the 2010s, also emerges from a stock photo. So do many other “captioning” memes which develop characters out of the generic people in stock photographs. Many other object-labeling memes like Distracted Boyfriend also use stock photos as a base.

³⁵ Frosh, 28

³⁶ Aiello, Giorgia. “Perfect Strangers in the City: Stock Photography as Ambient Imagery.” In *Seeing the City Digitally: Processing Urban Space and Time*, edited by Gillian Rose, 233–50. Amsterdam University Press, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2j6xrs3.13>.

³⁷ Frosh, 24

Viral trends such as Stocking, which in 2011 involved people taking photos of themselves imitating situations from stock photos and then posting them online also participate in meme and internet culture's long-running fascination with stock photography.³⁸



Figure 5. A sampling of object-labeling memes, sourced from *Know Your Meme*.

A stock photo offers to meme makers the exact same attractions as it does to people wanting to use it for their web content or advertisements: an image which is highly specific, yet at the same time entirely “generic” and open to appropriation and recontextualization. The aesthetic of the platform-archive is genericity: both the look of stock photographs and the style of the writing produced by AI large language models is best described as generic. Seeing as stock photos represent a characteristic visual form of platform capitalism, expressing the influence of a coercive archive that breaks experience down into generic categories and pre-defined templates, the use of a stock photo in a meme could be read as a sort of disruptive play with this visual language — an attempt to make it non-ambient, to make noticed that which is supposed to be unnoticed, to insert friction into the otherwise smooth functioning of a power which, in a Foucauldian sense, relies on its normalization and invisibility for its strength. Memes tend to

³⁸ “Stocking.” *Know Your Meme*, October 20, 2011. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/stocking>.

select the more bizarre and absurd stock photos, which point to the ways in which the generic archive departs from reality as actually experienced.

But Frosh doesn't stop at the "standard critique," and neither do memes using stock photographs. For Frosh, it is inappropriate to read stock photography (or any cultural product of late capitalism) solely through a "hermeneutics of suspicion."³⁹ After all, supposedly pristine, elite, and non-evil cultural forms (like avant-garde art photography) are just as contaminated by the same logics as stock photography. Further, the people who sell, distribute, and look at stock photography or any kind of oppressive mass culture are not dupes. As Michel de Certeau describes, popular culture is often a kind of tactical appropriation of the cultural products made by capital's strategies, a popular "making do" with what the system provides.⁴⁰

The platform-archive of Getty Images is coercive in that stock photographers are nudged to shoot and buyers are nudged to shop according to its categories. But the tactical interventions of various human parties also play a role in determining the platform-archive's categories: the archive is, after all, promoting what sells well. Especially since it exists online, the stock photography archive is both coercive and interactive. The same could be said of social media platforms and their archives. Memes are a kind of document that flow both with and against the grain of the platform-archive structure. In some ways, they resemble the graffiti which de Certeau saw in New York in the 1970s, disruptive flashes of humor, braggadocio, and beauty on otherwise impersonal concrete. They take a stock photo and make it into something non-generic. But in other ways, memes are one of the products by which this coercive-interactive system nourishes and enriches itself.

Frosh highlights this ambiguity in his embrace of "genericity" as a force that might bring "solidarity." Stock photo images, for him, work by a logic of "approximation." They are powerful not because they represent distinct individuals, but because they represent a larger "type" of person, a "generic" identity. No stock photo accurately represents every or any person belonging to that generic identity, just as no real construction worker or doctor looks like the generic images we have in mind for those professions. But in the capacity of generic representation to allow one person to stand in for a larger group, a kind of solidarity is accomplished.

³⁹ Frosh, 30

⁴⁰ Michel de Certeau, *Arts de Faire*, 1990.

Much of internet sociality seems to run this way. The influencer claims to be so relatable, and the Wojak meme stands in for everybody on 4chan (or just the terminally online no matter which platform they lurk on) across all their diversity and different situations. Fundamentally, generic solidarity calls to a different kind of politics than many Western traditions (particularly the American one) are used to: according to a politics and aesthetics of genericity, we are not dignified and powerful because we are individuals with rights and uniqueness, but because we belong to identifiable generic groups. In a generic world, the motive forces behind things are not individual intentions and ambitions, but broader types. In a generic world, we live not in a Flaubert novel, but in a Balzac novel. We do not see our identities as possessing a kind of solid nucleus which draws in whatever traits and roles we play — egirl, friend, student, employee — but as a kind of collage made of these elements all layered atop of one another, each transparent enough to see through to the ones below, with nothing, in the end, at the very bottom.

Both stock photos and memes aren't about or by individuals, but rather center on these kinds of approximate representations, these general vibes that we share. Because these works of art are essentially authorless and endless, they root themselves less in a world of distinct individuals than in a constituency of generic types.

But like all photos, the stock photo does nothing until it is *looked at*.

Looking at the Distracted Boyfriend Image

The Distracted Boyfriend photo is an image that couldn't be seen by human eyes unaided, unless those eyes were severely farsighted: the blur of the woman in red in the foreground, the clarity of the couple on the right, and the indistinct blur in the background, is the effect of a camera's rack focus.⁴¹ The image, in this way, bears the mark of a camera and a machine-made vision of the world: it would be impossible to walk out on the street and see this way in real life, but like many stock photos the shot aims to land beyond the real. The clarity and focus in the middleground, which falls exclusively on the boyfriend and girlfriend, also emphasizes them and their positions, drawing the viewer's eye immediately. The visual distortion, in a sense, mirrors the movement of mental focus: the situation would never be *seen* in this way, but it might be

⁴¹ Rack focus is a technique used in many other stock photos as well. It refers to tuning a camera lens so that clarity no longer corresponds to proximity: with rack focus, what's close can be blurry and what's far can be clear.

remembered in this way. In the mental pictures assembled after events, we tend to select, emphasize, and focus on different places. The stock photo is a picture of a typical representation of a thing, not a picture of that thing itself.



Figure 6. The original stock photograph, again.

But this stock photo isn't merely *generic*, it's also somewhat narrative. Although the first area noticed by the viewer might be the area of clarity in the picture, the reactions registered in that area are not the first thing which happens in the narrative of the picture. In the Distracted Boyfriend stock photo, we observe an action that is in the middle of unrolling: first, the woman in red passes the couple and the Boyfriend turns his head to look at her (this just happened); second (and this is the part we see) his girlfriend notices his looking at her, and looks at him, dissatisfied; third (this is implied to happen soon) he will stop looking at the other woman and his girlfriend will respond, they will argue. This narrative is itself a stock and generic story. As certain memes like the one below show, it takes up themes that have been repeated throughout time and mythologies. The woman in red is even dressed in red, the color most traditionally associated with temptation and sexuality, while the couple are both in blue.⁴²

⁴² The specific shade of blue which the Girlfriend wears, in my view, is also a lot like the shade of blue usually associated with the Virgin Mary in religious art. This may, however, be reading too much into the meme.



Figure 7. This meme shows how essentially mythic and archetypal the Distracted Boyfriend situation is. Posted to Twitter by @fleabcgs on August 26th, 2017, receiving over 80,500 likes. [Link](#)

The thing which appears to trigger this chain of events — the backside of the woman in red — is not visible to the audience. At the same time, the blurriness of her front side renders her indistinct, and makes her look a lot like the Girlfriend. While the two women are in fact different models, the blurriness of the photo's foreground makes them appear nearly identical. The only difference between the woman in red and the girlfriend is familiarity and knownness: the woman in red is mysterious, hidden, unknown, while the girlfriend is old and familiar. The two women are abstractable into these positions, a perception of them which the audience necessarily shares with the man because the woman in red is blurred: like him, we see one of them primarily as strange and less-known, and the other as clear and familiar.⁴³

The lack of visibility on the woman in red, and her physical resemblance to the Girlfriend, also draws attention to the real catalyst, which is a pair of male eyes, the Boyfriend's gaze. While his gaze does not intervene in physical reality (the woman in red appears to be unaware of his attention, and an eye is not like a hand) it does have a real effect on the person he is with, the Girlfriend. We are gazing at a picture that narrates the consequences of a gaze. The central event is his decision to put his attention somewhere, to mark out and define his environment in a way that demonstrates not just his attitude towards reality, but his internal state.

⁴³ That we are led to identify with the man in this situation also calls to mind the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey, the sense that visual representations by default place a spectator in a man's shoes: that we are led to see women through a man's eyes. See: Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14–26. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3.

In this picture, looking is not a passive, distanced gesture, but an active and effective one. His look *is* a form of infidelity or chauvinistic aggression, but it is also a form of judgment: he thinks the woman in red looks good. Similarly, the Girlfriend's gaze also expresses a judgment: his behavior is bad. She models the socially accepted and default audience response to the boyfriend's behavior: disgust. Her reaction is prescriptive, telling us how we should react. She provides an immediate framing and commentary on his action, making this a picture not just of a man objectifying with a sexual gaze, but an illustration of this action being criticized, judged, and condemned. The girlfriend performs the function of policing his transgressive behavior, and serves to confirm what we already may feel, which is that his behavior is not okay.⁴⁴

One gaze is transgressive, lustful, and (particularly in the political context of 2017) coded as dangerous. The other gaze is judgmental, supervising, and disciplinary. This picture of two gazes is met by another set of gazes: the memers, yours, and everybody else's.

Multimodal Form and Collective Imagination in Distracted Boyfriend

Distracted Boyfriend isn't just an image, but an image-macro meme—that is, a picture or photograph with text placed on top of it. Image macros are one of the most recognizable kinds of meme. Generally, the text changes more often between postings than the core image—but each individual element within an image macro meme is open to transformation. As a conglomerate of image and text, an image-macro meme is a multimodal construction.

Taking memes as multimodal constructions means not reducing them to either images or texts, but analyzing them as something different than the sum of their parts. The image and text work together. For some linguists, such as Lieven Vandelanotte and Barbara Dancygier, the image helps provide a kind of grammar in an image macro meme.⁴⁵ In the case of Distracted Boyfriend, the essentially grammatical and simile role of the image might be understood as providing verbs and a comparison. In the image below—one of the first and most iconic postings — the Youth *desire socialism but are obliged by capitalism like how a man on the street desires a*

⁴⁴ Her function, in my view, may also be compared to that of a footnote: she breaks out of the main text, carrying an authority from the *outside* of it. Our reading of the Girlfriend takes place not only in another area of the picture physically (like the footnote takes place in another area of the page) but it unrolls slightly closer to reality than what happens elsewhere. We read her the way we might read a title, a page number, or a footnote; the way we may hear a voiceover narrator in a film. She frames, contextualizes, and disciplines the other figures on the page.

⁴⁵ Dancygier, Barbara and Vandelanotte, Lieven. "Internet memes as multimodal constructions" *Cognitive Linguistics* 28, no. 3 (2017): 565-598. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2017-0074>

stranger but is obliged to remain faithful to his girlfriend, with the italicized text playing the part of the image.



Figure 8. Original viral @nm161 posting, again.

The image tends to remain the same, serving as the structure on which the text is laid. It literally sits below the text, holding it up. Part of what makes an image macro an image macro is “its intertwining of creativity and stability,” as linguists Zenner and Geerateultz describe: some things remain the same across postings, while others change.⁴⁶ This distinction can be applied more broadly to other forms of expression: in poetry, for example, some elements remain stable (every sonnet has fourteen lines) while particular practices are “in play” and can be altered creatively by makers (a sonnet can be about anything). In a more broad linguistic sense, this principle can be applied to jokes: one asks “why did the chicken cross the road?” the same way each time, but the punchline changes.

The meme format (like the joke or poem) is composed of two kinds of things: the tangible *elements* of the meme (the photograph, the labels, the post on a platform) and the less-tangible *practices* of the meme (the convention of labeling with short phrases, of labeling with an agent and two choices, etc.) Going by this definition, a meme is a “Distracted Boyfriend meme” if it repeats these elements and follows these practices. But at the same time, many of the most successful memes bend these practices and distort these elements. There’s a productive

⁴⁶ Zenner, Eline, and Dirk Geeraerts. “One Does Not Simply Process Memes: Image Macros as Multimodal Constructions.” In *Cultures and Traditions of Wordplay and Wordplay Research*, edited by Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler, 1st ed., 167–94. De Gruyter, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbkjv1f.10>. Page 174.

tension between an imperative to follow the rules and an incentive for breaking the rules. In the meme below (Figure 9) the rules are “bent” by the replacement of the Boyfriend’s head with Donald Trump’s head. The image is no longer unchanged, and one of the text boxes is also deleted.



Figure 9. Meme posted by Instagram’s @adamthecreator on August 25th, 2017. Received over 47,000 likes. [Link](#). Notice the watermark indicating his authorship, in case the meme is circulated elsewhere.

In the next meme (Figure 10) the rules are bent by reversing the orientation of the image:

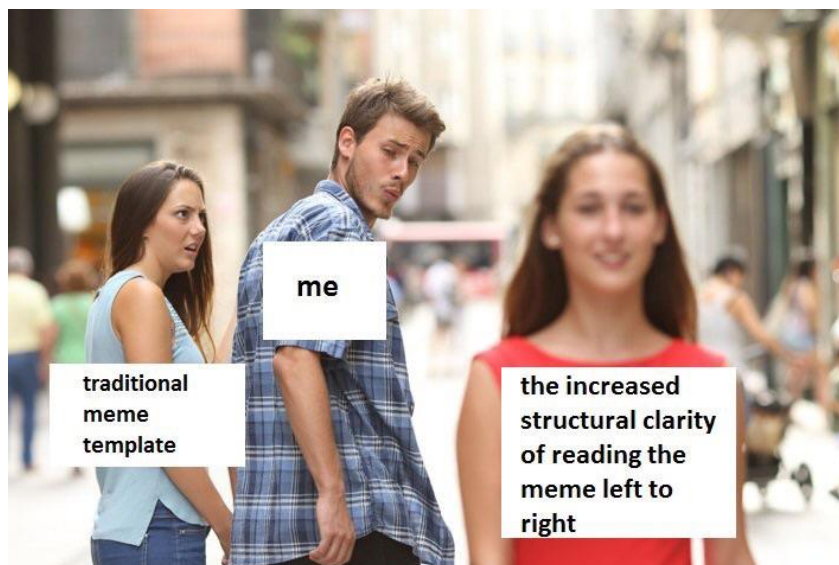


Figure 10. Reddit post, September 1st 2017. [Link](#).

In a sense, the meme format itself grows out of “bending” the rules of a larger social game. Labeling the image already bends the rules of looking at stock photographs, or of

straightforward interpretation of images: the Girlfriend is not a “traditional meme template,” she is a person; and the Boyfriend is obviously not “me,” he is a model living in northern Spain. Making or understanding a meme means deciding not to see the picture the way it is usually supposed to be seen.

This act of bending of the rules is the same thing that distinguishes poetry from regular speaking. People generally do not rhyme when they speak to each other, nor do they develop elaborate metaphors. What poetry does to language use, an object-labeling meme does to our general way of seeing pictures. But just because poetry breaks the rules of conventional speech, does not mean it doesn’t have its own rules: instead, poetry is defined by formal structures which discipline and direct expression. So are memes.

The tension between difference and repetition animates the meme and separates it from the realm of everyday, pragmatic representation. The artifice of a labeled character, like the artifice of a rhyme, distinguishes a meme and makes it “not real.” From this position of irreality, a meme can then experiment with ideas, points of view, and feelings.

In order to create community, we must first create spaces that are not real: spaces where we can imagine something. In formal structures, we see the codes that allow these spaces to be generated – the operations that prime and permit us to imagine. Collective life is illuminated, enabled, and parameterized by these patterned manipulations of language, image, sound, and vibes.⁴⁷

Choice in Distracted Boyfriend

The main formal structure at play in the meme is that of choosing. Generally, Distracted Boyfriend is used to represent a choice made by the Boyfriend acting as an agent. The woman in red represents a new, unknown option (she is blurry, after all) while the Girlfriend represents the familiar and normal option. In the chart below, I show some typical mappings of these positions onto each figure in the meme. Read vertically under each person in the meme are a list of values

⁴⁷ For a description of this process, see: Oren Izenberg, “Language Poetry and Collective Life,” in *Being Numerous* (Princeton University Press, 2011), <http://dx.doi.org/10.23943/princeton/9780691144832.003.0005>. My thinking here is also derivative of Veronica Forrest-Thomson, see: Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester University Press, 1978).

associated with the labels given to that person. Read horizontally from the woman in red to the Girlfriend are the positions which the three tend to be put together into.



New Paradigm	Agent	Old Paradigm
Id	Ego ("Me")	Superego
"Incorrect" option	Target of Satire	"Correct" option, normal
Online World	Human	Real World
Individual Desires	Liberal Subject	Laws, Social Norms
Distraction	Me	Responsibility

Figure 11. A table describing the different values that tend to be associated with each figure in the meme.

In the example below from August 24th, 2017, which is one one of the most viral postings of the meme, the boyfriend is "ME;" the woman in red represents an individual desire, a distraction, and a choice to turn away from responsibility; and the woman in blue represents what the "ME" should be doing instead:



Figure 12. Tweet posted by @gorewhore1234 on August 24th, 2017, receiving over 170,000 likes and 100,000 retweets and quote tweets. [Link](#).

In postings where the Boyfriend is identified as “me,” the identification is less often with a specific “me” than a sort of general “me,” similar to the lyric “I” in a poem. In this meme, the “me” is emphasized since it is in all capital letters. The “me” serves as a vacant position available to be filled in by the viewer—but it is never fully filled in or associated with one particular viewer, or even a class of viewers. Indeed, many of the replies to this meme (see figure 13) involve people tagging their friends into it — implicitly turning the “me” of the Boyfriend into a jokingly accusatory “you.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ It is quite likely that this process of tagging people into the meme — which gives them a notification on their devices, and then makes them encounter the meme when otherwise they wouldn’t — was responsible for the broad success and virality of this post.

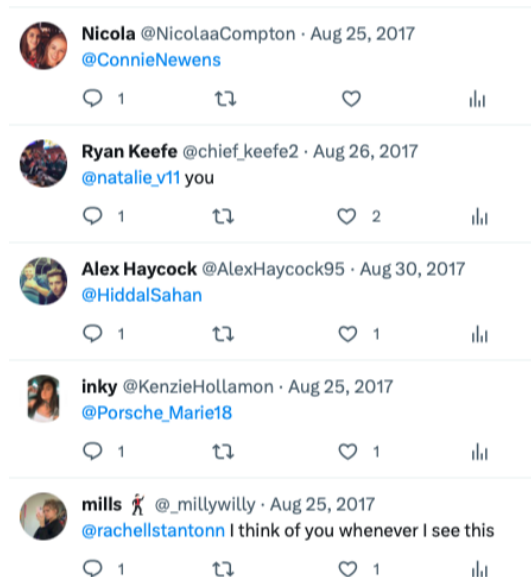


Figure 13. Comments on the meme in Figure 12.

Tagging people into the meme is possible because the “me” of the Boyfriend represents a kind of generic position: he stands in for every “me” in existence, particularly in a meme like this one which applies itself to a relatable theme. When the Boyfriend is labeled as “me” — a conceit which is repeated not just in many object-labeling memes, but in memes overall — the “me” is more of an open space in the middle of the action, a “someone-as-anyone” structure.

In the meme in Figure 13, the choice between the two options is not a deeply fraught one: in some instances, a nap is necessary; in others, it is an indulgence that gets in the way of “multiple pressing matters and responsibilities.” Part of the contrast and joke lies in the weighing of the single syllable of “nap” against the multisyllabic “multiple pressing matters and responsibilities,” which is almost as exhausting to read as it is to do. The stance of the meme, in a Shifmanian sense, is neither pro-nap nor pro-responsibilities. It is more descriptive, representing the dilemma of choosing between the two.

Some more examples of the “me” representing a generalized agent making a choice carry a different stance:



Figure 14. Tweet by @bilrac, August 22nd, 2017. Cited as the origin of the meme erroneously by an August 24th USA Today article. Received just under 33,000 likes. [Link](#).



Figure 15. Meme posted by since-deleted Twitter account @pattymo, archived to Know Your Meme on August 23rd, 2017. [Link](#).

The meme in Figure 15 also presents a dilemma, and again the woman in red aligns with a set of values tied to private life and individual desires while the girlfriend represents public responsibilities. But in this case, there seems to be more of a valence to the meme: the “me” is more accusatory, perhaps, because of the negative connotation of “hiding away.” This meme, posted on Twitter, was also probably read by a number of people hiding away in their rooms and escaping into social media, an activity which is solitary. This meme seems to suggest the “me” (which is also a “you” and by extension an “us”) really should choose “getting a job and talking to people.”



Figure 16. Meme from Facebook group nihilistmemes. Posted August 23rd, 2017. Received over 44,000 likes. [Link](#).

Similarly, the meme above in Figure 16, from the group “Nihilist memes” on Facebook, uses Distracted Boyfriend to carry a very dark joke about suicidal ideation. In this instance, again, the relatable “me” of the meme is to be properly restrained by “friends, family and loved ones.” The valence of a weighted choice remains when the Boyfriend does not represent a “me” and when other parts of the meme are altered, as in this Trump meme discussed in the previous section:



Figure 17. Same meme as Figure 9.

In the meme above, not only is the image altered, but the “me” label is swapped out for an accusation of a third person: Donald Trump. Text is also replaced by a photoshop job which puts the then-President’s face in the place of the man leering at the woman passing by. The frequent association of the Boyfriend with Trump is a recurring trope. But apart from this, what is again clear is the meme format’s set-up of a choice where one option correlates with private, online life and id desires, while the other aligns with duty, public life, and the proper course of action. In this case, the meme implies that Trump is making the wrong decision by turning to Twitter rather than his job of “acting like a normal President.”

Most of the time when the meme seems to advocate for one option over another, the better option is associated with the Girlfriend. When formed in this way, the meme is about a anti-social temptation meeting an obligation:



Figure 18. Meme posted by @Reverend_Scott to Twitter on August 23rd, 2017, receiving nearly 9,000 likes. The slight difference in picture tint (this one is somewhat darker and greener than many other Distracted Boyfriend memes) may be due to the image having been screenshotted, or saved in a different file format, before the meme was made. [Link](#).



Figure 19. Tweet from pundit @natesilver538, August 25th, 2017. Earned over 10,000 likes. [Link](#).

The Girlfriend's reaction guides our own, and along with her the audience is led to disapprove of the Boyfriend and the text affixed to the woman in red. The meme joins us to the Girlfriend condemning him, even when "him" means "me." But there is another way to read the image: the Girlfriend could be interpreted as possessive or shrewish, seeking inappropriately to restrict the freedom and the desire of the Boyfriend. Such an interpretation would go against the most responsible and (in 2017 in America) socially acceptable way of reading the situation, which would be to side with the woman over the boorish man. Since the image suggests a reading of the Girlfriend as righteously outraged (which, after all, she is — the kind of behavior displayed by the Boyfriend is gross) it creates a frame in which an essentially conformist position that is in favor of following rules, fulfilling responsibilities and participating in public life, gets promoted at the expense of individual liberty and desires. Using a gendered dynamic — condemnation of male ogling and misbehavior — the meme makes a statement that is in favor of whatever the established social expectation may be, against change and the individual.

But sometimes the Girlfriend is the wrong choice. In some Distracted Boyfriend memes, she represents the useless or oppressive tradition that should be discarded. Some Distracted Boyfriend memes implicitly label the Woman in Red as the correct choice and the Girlfriend as the incorrect choice. In these instances, the meme prescribes the choice of abandoning the conventional or expected ways of doing things for a new, more authentic way.



Figure 20. A tweet posted by @pixelated boat on August 24th, 2017. Earned over 16,000 likes. [Link](#).

In this example above, the woman in red represents the correct option according to the memer, as evidenced by the existence of the meme itself as one of the “meta memes about the meme.”⁴⁹

In the posting of the meme, which kicked off its virality — and sees the youth choosing between Socialism (the woman in red) and Capitalism (the Girlfriend) - the choice is ambiguous. If you read according to the more progressive and liberal gender script, then Socialism is a sort of inappropriate lark which the youth are pursuing, while Capitalism is the committed partner they should get along with. But then, if you read the Girlfriend (Capitalism) as a sort of possessive partner holding The Youth back, then you get a pro-socialist reading: young people must escape the oppression of capitalism and reform the system. The pro-leftist reading of the text coincides with an anti-Girlfriend reading of the image. It is up to the viewer which reading wins.

⁴⁹ The text affixed to the Boyfriend, which is much longer than the description affixed to either woman, also participates in going meta because it deconstructs the “me” position for what it is: a placeholder for a generic “Twitter user” that could be you, me, or us, but is nobody in particular. Again, the structure of “genericity” emerges: the “me” of the meme, like people in stock photos themselves, is a generic position rather than a particular character.



Figure 21. Original viral posting by @nm161, again.

The choice between these two different forces in life—on the one hand, the authorized, socially acceptable vibe of “responsibility,” and on the other dangerous, liberating allure of “distraction” — is existential and eternal. What animates the meme is the competing claims made by both. In 2017, as at other moments in history, this choice confronted everybody.

Going Meta: Shakespeare, Memes, and Representational Authority

The meme below, posted on Tuesday August 22nd, 2017, circulated a day into Distracted Boyfriend’s “viral moment,” which can be approximated to have begun that Sunday (more about this in the next chapter). By 2017, going meta was an established part of how memes worked, and an essential component of meme practice. Far from being an outlier, meta memes were a common category of meme. As memes about memes, they show a kind of discourse about the practice itself.



Figure 22. Tweet post by @leyawn, August 22nd, 2017. Received almost 32,000 likes. [Link](#).

In this meme, the preferred option (as demonstrated by the meme’s existence as a meta-meme) is the woman in red. The Girlfriend is labeled with panels from the Galaxy Brain meme, a format which was popular earlier in the summer of 2017, shortly before Distracted Boyfriend. Turning away from Galaxy Brain memes, the “me” of this meme turns towards Distracted Boyfriend memes about turning towards Distracted Boyfriend memes about turning towards Distracted Boyfriend memes about... and so on, in an endless *mise-en-abyme*. The preferred option is the woman in red who represents a continued descent into the meta-abys, but one gets the sense that the maker of the meme knows this is *way too much*.

Barbara Dancygier, in her analysis of various image macro memes, describes a meme as a “network” consisting of a “higher-level telling/thinking space, aligned with a narrator or another kind of teller, and an embedded space representing the word or thoughts aligned with the narrator herself or with another speaker/character.”⁵⁰ This higher-level space is the frame and container of the embedded space where a meme character is contained. “The final interpretation which emerges out of this network,” Dancygier and Vandenalotte write, “can best be understood as being resolved at the level of a supervisory mental space which we have labeled the Discourse Viewpoint Space.”⁵¹ This “supervisory mental space” which is produced by the synthesis of image, text, and context frames is where (and *when*, since as they write this is a “final”

⁵⁰ Dancygier and Vandenalotte, 569

⁵¹ *idem*, 568.

interpretation) the meme meets a viewer. Various other speakers, actors, and discourses are embedded within this larger, supposedly objective space and referential framing.

What the meta-meme does is draw attention to the layers, highlighting the series of embedded and supervising spaces between which discourse can occur. Beginning at the furthest depth, the image involves a woman judging a man as he judges a woman. At the level of the text, it becomes a memer judging the image of this action. Past the level of text, and into the meta level, it becomes about a meme maker judging the meme format, which is itself the game of placing text on top of the image. The meme above, with its *mise-en-abime*, inserts yet another level (or even further ones): the meme becomes about a judgment of the judgment of the meme format. The different points where knowledge and reframing happens are, in this meme, replicated endlessly into an infinite series of nested, embedded and re-embedded viewpoint spaces and meaning-making acts.

Just as the Girlfriend's gaze and expression frame the Boyfriend's reaction (or, at least, prime us in how to interpret him) the text which a meme maker places on top of the people frames the image overall. At various points anchored spatially within the meme image (text is on top, image below), situated temporally in terms of its circulation (users take for granted that the text is added *after* the photo was taken, just as the Girlfriend reacts *after* the Boyfriend looks) and pragmatically in terms of who does the utterance (the person labeling the image is never the same as the person who took the image), a new narrator takes what we're seeing and places it in a different context. The Girlfriend's gaze labels the Boyfriend as disgusting, just as the memer's marking labels the image as The Youth-Capitalism-Socialism. In each case, the layer below is still visible — the image never ceases to be an image of a guy looking at a girl's butt and getting criticized for it — but it is turned to say something else.

Crucially, at each point along this process, we see a kind of reality which is subordinate to our own, or contained within it, in the sense that we understand a fictional narrative to be contained within reality and a story told within a fictional narrative to be contained within the reality of that narrative. Like the famous play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*, the meta-meme is a series of successive framings which echo between each other: *Hamlet*'s "play-within-a-play" is designed to have an effect beyond the fourth wall (he means to "catch the conscience of the king," Claudius, who watches it) just as *Hamlet* itself is designed to have an effect on its real-life audience. Going in the other direction, the response of audience members to a production of

Hamlet affects its performance (since it is live theater) just as Hamlet's planning and intentions affect the production of the play-within-a-play. The borders between these different subordinate represented realities are all permeable.⁵²

Robert Weimann, Shakespearean and Early Modern scholar, probes the problem of meta-theatricality by proposing two competing sites of representational authority in Shakespeare's theater, both of which are spatially anchored on the platform stage. Downstage, in front of the audience is the site of the *platea* (this is a theater, you're watching a play) and upstage, in the represented space, is the *locus* (this is a room in a palace, you're watching the Danish court).⁵³ Some actions are more addressed to the locus, others to the *platea*. When Hamlet monologues, we see a form of action which is arguably more addressed to the *platea* than to the locus: it is an aside, breaking with the in-world action of Elsinore and Denmark. What Weimann seeks to establish is the fact that Shakespeare's theater demands the recognition of both *represented* authority and *representing* authority: for the play to make sense, Hamlet must be both a prince and an actor playing a prince.

The "audience laughed with rather than at the clown."⁵⁴ The public became complicit in the construction of the spectacle and its authority. "Playing a prince" is different from "being a prince," and the idea that something can be "played" or made real (when it is not real) through a process of dramatic representation is a radical idea. If a commoner, dressed up onstage, can be thought of as royalty if enough of an audience believes it, then what does that mean for the real, actual royalty? Puritans and Anglicans alike also didn't take kindly to seeing boys become women onstage, which was common practice in Shakespeare's day. For a society in which the expression of power was done primarily through costuming and theatrical rituals, and where law was more so performed than written down, the emergence of an authority tied to *representing* is a challenge to traditional power.

What a meta-meme or an aside on the Shakespearean stage does is draw attention to the *platea* authority that is doing the representing. A meta-meme reminds a viewer that they are looking at a meme, shifting the focus away from the represented action or situation (moving us

⁵² The meta-theatrics of Molière — particularly *La Critique de l'École des femmes* and *L'impromptu à Versailles* offers a more direct image of the audience itself and the actors themselves. Unlike *Hamlet*, which presents meta-theatricality within a fictional frame (the court of Denmark) Molière presents meta-theatricality at the real-life court of Louis XIV, writing plays about the reception of his own plays.

⁵³ Weimann, Robert. "Bifold Authority in Shakespeare's Theatre." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4, 1988, pp. 401–17. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870705>. Accessed 30 Nov. 2022.

⁵⁴ Weimann, 402

away not just from what's visible in the photo, but from the effect and intent of the words labeling it) to the meme's status as a post on a social media scroll. The meme is always meaning across both *locus* and *platea*: it's both a statement about (as in the earliest @nm161 viral example) youth politics (*locus*) and a testament to the internet as a way of sharing (*platea*). Specifically, on the *platea* level, the meme is an invitation to participate and be a part of a culture that exists and is constituted through memes.

Shakespeare's form of public theater was not like the traveling players performing tales from the gospel that defined the medieval experience, nor was it always a form of court entertainment. Rather, his public theater (which is Weimann's focus) was a secular form of communal aesthetic engagement done in a market context, a kind of art with one foot in the house of feudalism and the other in the yard of early capitalism. As Weimann writes, "...a commercially funded, secular, professional, shareholding enterprise tended to constitute conditions of discursive practice that in several important respects differed from those governing the dominant rules of discourse and ideology in Elizabethan England."⁵⁵

The Shakespearean stage offered up a new way of representing reality using poetry, architecture, and performance as the tools to forge it. Ultimately, that representation produced not just the court of Denmark, but a form of sociality and shared experience that occurred in a kind of public space which up until that point was historically unprecedented. The Red Lion, the first permanent, purpose-built public theater since Roman times, opened in London in 1567, shortly before Shakespeare started his career.⁵⁶ It was followed in the years to come by several other theaters, which operated in a section of London just outside the city walls called the "Liberties." In the Liberties, monasteries and markets coexisted with brothels, public theaters, housing for people with leprosy, and bear-baiting rings: it was a place where people had the "liberty" to do what they wanted, a zone that "constituted an ambiguous geopolitical domain over which the city had authority but, paradoxically, almost no control."⁵⁷ For Stephen Mullaney, a New Historicist reading the "symbolic topology" of Elizabethan London, the Liberties were a

⁵⁵ Weimann, 403

⁵⁶ Berry, Herbert. "The First Public Playhouses, Especially the Red Lion." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1989): 133–48. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870815>. The Red Lion, believed to have been built by John Brayne and James Burbage, the latter of whom was the father of one of Shakespeare's most famous actors and business partners.

⁵⁷ Mullaney, S.. "Shakespeare and the Liberties." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 10, 2005. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shakespeare-and-the-Liberties-1086252>.

place of “sacred pollution,” and the “margin” of city and state power.⁵⁸ Public executions took place there, but so did forms of illicit activity that were not allowed within the city walls. Crucially, for Mullaney, the grand gray areas of the Liberties were part of a system: their existence as a site of license, debauchery, and blood allowed the interior of the city to be more orderly and the interior of the church to be more holy.

In 2017, the internet functioned a lot like the Liberties in the 1570s: as a border zone, a space where the government had authority but not control, a place where pornography, commerce, and id ran free. Things could happen online—furry culture, conspiracy theories, fringe political arguments—which were socially shunned in real life. Leaving the city gate and going out to see a play in the Liberties was like logging onto the computer: new ideas and new pleasures abounded, the place was illicit, erotic, and dangerous. It was possible to masquerade as someone else behind a made-up username, to perform and try on identities unavailable in real space. Activities in the Liberties (especially the theaters) were often associated with disease, and the playhouses were closed whenever a plague came through—and similarly, when something gets popular on the internet, it “goes viral.” In the symbolic topology of modern space, the internet occupies the place of the Liberties, and like with art rooted in the space of the Liberties (such as Shakespeare’s theater) art rooted in the internet is concerned with representational authority.

To be a member of an audience in the sense that people in the Globe theater were audience members was a new innovation. It was a new form of spectatorship with a different rapport psychologically between both the people doing the performing and the members of the audience themselves. This new kind of spectatorship allowed for a collective experience that, while of course embedded in the pre-existing structure of church and monarchy (Shakespeare’s troupe was called “the King’s Men,” after all) was governed by a kind of authority that was alien to those pre-existing traditions and their ways of negotiating truth, legitimacy, and value. This authority was the authority of the *platea*: it was, in one sense, the authority of the brilliant artist creating an imaginary world, but in another sense it was the authority of an audience “validating” that imaginary world, suspending disbelief and choosing to inhabit it.⁵⁹ The monologue at the

⁵⁸ Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (University of Michigan Press, 1995). Page ix.

⁵⁹ Weimann, 405

beginning of *Henry V*, delivered by a Chorus (like the Ghost in *Hamlet*, scholars believe that Shakespeare often played these sorts of expository roles himself) illustrates this double power:

But pardon, and gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dared
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?⁶⁰

The power of the *platea* lies with the “flat unraised spirits” of actors and writers who, using their creative powers, endeavor to transform “this wooden O” of the theater into the battlefield of Agincourt.⁶¹ But it also lies with the audience (“gentles all”) which “pardon” this representing, allowing for its inability of the stage to *actually be* France or for the actor to *actually be* Henry V. Other famous phrases in Shakespeare draw this comparison: the famous *Macbeth* “Sound and Fury” monologue calls life itself “a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more,” while *As You Like It* declares “all the world’s a stage / and all the men and women merely players.” Further, the plots of the plays themselves often center around forms of performance such as disguises, masques, intrigues, and dissimulations. Shakespeare is as obsessed with talking about stage performance as meme culture is with talking about memes. In both cases, this meta-discussion is central to both an artistic practice and to a social and political practice. Like the public watching a Shakespeare play in a theater, which together commits the unprecedented and politically fraught act of giving consent and paying money in order to collectively feel something that is not religious, the public consuming memes is engaging in a form of community-making that is equally unprecedented and just as politically fraught.

Like the theater in the Renaissance, memes have what can best be described as a complicated relationship with traditional authoritative forms of discourse.⁶² Memes are often the

⁶⁰ Shakespeare, William. *The Oxford Shakespeare: Henry V*. Oxford Paperbacks, 2008. Act I Scene I, Prologue: lines 9-15

⁶¹ This line describes the theater’s shape in terms of a letter — again calling to mind also the code of language used in the dramatic representing act.

⁶² The theater was frequently attacked, criticized, and censored in Shakespeare’s day — calls to close the playhouses were incessant. Religious movements, particularly the Puritans, also despised performativity and the theater in all its forms, mandating plain dress and wanting to outlaw the theater. See: Morgan, Edmund S. “Puritan Hostility to the

vectors of misinformation and marginal views, sites of radical questioning and confrontation. In the mainstream discourse around memes, they have often been associated with fringe political positions, and this is true. But the conversation needs to go deeper than just identifying the ways in which Pepe is used to destroy democracy. An online community is not a public, in the same way that a public is not a congregation. The means of representing, and therefore the means of persuasion and description, are fundamentally different. This leads to a kind of authority in meme communities that is distinct from the authority developed through other forms of aesthetic experience: a person sharing a meme doesn't participate in its message the same way a person sitting in a theater participates in a play. The questions of who is qualified to tell the truth, what forms they may use to do it, and why they should be believed, are as pertinent now as they were in 1600. With this in mind, the meta-meme might be interpreted as a contemplation of how this new kind of public is constituted.

Locus and Platea as Discourse Viewpoint Spaces

Just as the *locus* and *platea* are located in particular spatial points on the platform stage, different discourse viewpoints (and, thus, sites of “authorization” for the representation at hand) can be located in the meme. If, for Shakespeare, the two sites of authority in the “wooden O” of the theater are arrayed by their proximity to the audience (the *platea* being the flat edge of the stage closest to the crowd, the *locus* generally being the furthest-back and elevated part), in a meme the different sites are arrayed by depth of field. Like onstage, these divisions are not purely spatial: *locus* and *platea* also exist as discursive categories and forms of address. But in general, they are loosely associated with particular areas in the visual field of the viewer.

I see these points as corresponding to particular contexts and particular actions by different agents. So rather than labeling them as “locus” and “platea,” I choose to employ the vaguer vocabulary of “layers” and “viewpoint spaces.” In the meme below, Figure 22, there are three contextual layers, one on top of the other: this thesis, written in 2023, the text captions, written on August 21st, 2017, and the original photograph, taken at some point in 2015.⁶³

Theatre.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 110, no. 5 (1966): 340–47.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/986023>.

⁶³ Know Your Meme. “Distracted Boyfriend.” Cheezburger, n.d.
<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend>.



Figure 23. A meme from /r/memeconomy that received 21 upvotes, later archived to Know Your Meme. August 21st, 2017. [Link](#).

Each of these contexts (2023, 2017, 2015) implicates a different set of actors and audiences. Each of these contexts is also associated with a different spatial region and “expressive element” of the meme: 2015 lives in the photo, 2017 in the text, 2023 in the framing of the meme on this page. Further, the figures in the meme are made to mean something different within each context. In 2015, the meme is a stock photo caricaturing sexist behavior by photographer Antonio Guillem. On August 21st, 2017, when posted with text labeling the figures on Reddit’s /r/introvertmemes, it became a participant in the context of an ongoing meme tradition.⁶⁴ In 2023, it’s part of my thesis. The photo and text are a kind of *locus*, the framing of it on a social media scroll “as a meme” or in a thesis are the *platea*.

Each of these successive layers changes how we read the ones below it. Your perception of this meme, framed as it is here, is very different from what Redditors in August 2017 saw. Similarly, the three people looked very different to Redditors in 2017 than they did to Antonio Guillem in 2015. The meme ties these contexts together into one knot, using the depth of the image to differentiate them.

It is this negotiation of contexts that makes the meme a meme. Typically, a humorous effect comes from the juxtaposition of the 2015 photographic context (which is a picture of a man leering at a woman, which we interpret a particular way) with the 2017 meme context (which is a joke about eating healthfully, that infantilizes the man). At each context is an

⁶⁴ Reddit. "Hot New Meme Format: Buy Buy Buy." r/MemeEconomy, 21 Aug. 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/MemeEconomy/comments/6v4ykp/hot_new_meme_format_buy_buy_buy/.

interpretive community, which both brings the meme together and is produced by it.⁶⁵ At each context is an “authorizing” action, which renders the representation intelligible and legitimate.

I’m limiting the scope of my work to Distracted Boyfriend, but I believe the general type of approach I’m taking could be used for other kinds of memes. It’s not a one-size-fits-all kind of approach, but the difference between Distracted Boyfriend and a TikTok video meme is still more like the difference between a flannel and a t-shirt than it is like the difference between a baseball cap and a pair of wool socks. This is because the use of visual layering and depths to depict context-shifting comes from the Graphical User Interface (GUI), which has characterized the computer experience since the 1980s. Ultimately, the place where context is being produced here is in the *interface*.

On a personal desktop computer, icons float on a screen framed (at the top, usually) with a kind of control bar listing battery, time, and other contextual clues about the condition of the device. The cursor floats above the icons, representing the user’s “I” (when it hovers over text, it literally becomes an I). Clicking an icon opens a program, which presents itself as a “window.” Metaphorically, the window opens onto a space beyond and below the space of the cursor and the screen. For most applications, this window has a frame, mirroring the one of the whole screen: a scroll bar on one side, and a kind of control panel on top that allows the user to navigate within the application. If the application is an internet browser, going to a website opens another kind of window, which is contained within the window which is contained within the screen. The GUI works by creating a series of frames, layered on top of each other and cascading deeper into specificity, as the picture below shows.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ I use the term “interpretive community” in the sense that Stanley Fish uses it. Reader Response theory, as he formulates it, strikes me as a particularly useful lens to look at memes: here, too, the reception is as important as the production of text. See: Fish, Stanley. *Interpretive Communities: The Reader in the Text*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

⁶⁶ Steven Levy, “Graphical User Interface (GUI),” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/graphical-user-interface>.

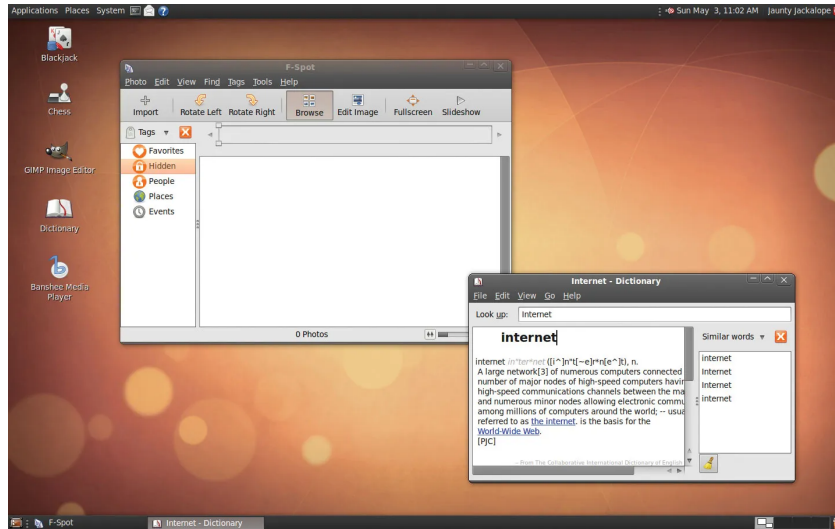


Figure 24. GUI image from Britannica. [Link](#).

As Johanna Drucker argues in “Reading Interface,” the GUI’s arrangement of information works to “organize our relation to complex systems” rather than just representing those systems to us.⁶⁷ What we manipulate onscreen is “an abstraction of computation, not a window through which information passes like fast food at a drive-through.”⁶⁸ Prior to the GUI’s invention, interfaces like punch-cards or command-line coding offered a different context for our interaction with computers.⁶⁹ Since the GUI is historically specific, belonging to a certain era and relying on a certain repertoire of hardware (keyboard, mouse, screen) the interface relations it creates (and the ways of viewing information/reality they suggest) are also historically specific.

With this in mind, Drucker argues for us to view interface as a “constitutive boundary space,” in which different systems and agencies meet and evolve. For her, it is crucial to study “the rhetorical semantics of graphical organization, because they construct meaning rather than simply present it.”⁷⁰ We can’t separate our thinking from the interfaces we do it on and the contexts those interfaces allow us to construct.⁷¹ In the same way the architecture and layout of

⁶⁷ Drucker, Johanna. “Reading Interface.” *PMLA* 128, no. 1 (2013): 213–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23489280>.

⁶⁸ Drucker, 217

⁶⁹ In the 1960s, Douglas Engelbart, the inventor of the computer mouse, auditioned a series of other devices (including a knee brace, with which the user moved a cursor by moving their leg, and a joystick) before settling on the mouse and a rudimentary form of the GUI as the preferred method of presenting the machine’s operations to the user and allowing the user to manipulate the machine. For an interesting ‘future past’ of computing, see: Engelbart, Douglas C. “Display-Selection Techniques for Text Manipulation.” In *Proceedings of the December 9-11, 1968, Fall Joint Computer Conference, part I*, 611-628. San Francisco, CA: AFIPS Press, 1968. Accessed: <https://dougengelbart.org/content/view/145/>

⁷⁰ Drucker, 218

⁷¹ No ideas but in things.

the city structure the way people socialize, the layout of the GUI structures the way people think and work online. The windows-within-windows presentation of information turns specific communicative contexts into discrete, manipulable rectangles whose relation to one another and time is communicated through their relative depth on the screen.

This method of visually representing context-shifting as layered windows is characteristic of the internet as it existed in 2017 when the Distracted Boyfriend meme went viral. Take, for example, this Twitter exchange surrounding Lil Nas X:⁷²



Figure 25. Lil Nas X tweet. [Link](https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1222571894483931136).

There are three layered contextual framings in this tweet. At the lowest layer, a homophobic Instagram post by Pastor Troy @pastortroydsgb stands next to a picture of Lil Nas X. The middle layer is Twitter user @yoyotrav (Ronald Isley) posting a photo of that Instagram post with his own comment defending Lil Nas X and criticizing Pastor Troy. The top layer is @LilNasX himself joking about the whole situation and saying he looks good.

⁷² Nas X, Lil. "damn i look good in that pic on god." Twitter, January 29, 2020, 6:37 PM. <https://twitter.com/LilNasX/status/1222571894483931136>

The lowest-down layer happened first and the uppermost layer happened most recently, so the layers visually communicate a chronological relation between the three contexts. There are also three different speakers (Lil Nas X, Isley, Pastor Troy) each represented in their own layer. Further, there are three different moments of reception: the first is Ronald Isley's interpretation of Pastor Troy's Instagram post. The second is Lil Nas X's interpretation of Isley's interpretation. The third is the interpretation of the 616,000 fans who liked the Lil Nas X post. It should be noted that in the user interface of Twitter, the reception of a tweet goes into the frame surrounding it, which is a form of control bar that allows a user to interact with the tweet. The experience of reading on social media consists of opening these contextual windows, glancing at their frames, and interpreting the relations between them. Further, it means contributing to the construction of these framings with your own interactions.⁷³

Distracted Boyfriend, like the Lil Nas X tweet and the GUI, is a series of nested context-framings, using visual depth to present the relationships (both chronological and pragmatic) between different contexts. Returning to Drucker's contention that the GUI exists not only to "represent" but to "organize our relation to complex systems," I would argue the mission of internet memes is similar: not to represent, but to organize relations. In this sense, memes are not primarily doing *mimesis*. They do not imitate reality, but rather organize our relations with it by enunciating and manipulating contexts for aesthetic effect. This is because the computer interface and real space are not distinct, phenomenologically speaking.

The relationship between a smartphone and a self is like the relationship between a hand and a self: the computer grasps and displays things that are separate from the self, and on these things – like pages, pictures – *mimesis* is performed. But the device itself is in the same category as the hand. Extending this metaphor, online context-forming operations (memes) are like the gestures learned by the hand to act upon the social world: posting a meme with your phone is like pointing or waving with your hand. Memes are to online space what architecture and ritual are to real space. Memes are the terrace and tables we sit at, but also the *social codes* that contextualize that terrace as a zone where we may sit, eat, and watch the street; that render our selves as customers and that guy with the white shirt we gesture at as a waiter; that transmute the paper I pay with into money and the trash-filled pavement over the railing into rue de Sevres.

⁷³ Which are limited not just to likes, shares, replies, etc. which are visible to you, but also include those whose traces are hidden – like the amount of time the eye or finger rests on a piece of content, which the algorithm takes into account.

Chapter Two: Distracted Boyfriend in Historical Context

Evaluating Memes As Historical Sources

“Given that 2017 may have been the most depressing year ever with an Internet connection,” wrote Nathan Heller in the December 11th, 2017 issue of *The New Yorker*, “the delight of the Distracted Boyfriend meme was not unlike the perverse pleasure taken by Distracted Boyfriend himself: it allowed America to turn its attention away from much more important commitments.”⁷⁴

“Much more important commitments” likely meant (among other things) the administration of Donald Trump, the effects of climate change, and the decay of the post-1945 world order. Heller situates Distracted Boyfriend in the context of “a year shaped by endless news-cycle distraction, fractured alliances, and the wolfishness of men,” all of which the meme depicts, in one way or another.

But I argue that rather than helping America “turn its attention away” from these issues, the Distracted Boyfriend meme actually helped people examine, prod at, and attempt to negotiate the real-world problems of 2017. Like other topical works of art, Distracted Boyfriend helped people discuss the reality in front of them. It offered a structure for carrying on a conversation about the problems at hand.

The first and most iconic viral example of Distracted Boyfriend, which was posted on August 19th (seen below) treated political commitments directly, describing the increasing draw of socialist candidates (a year after Bernie Sander’s 2016 presidential bid) for young people. From there, internet people kept on using the meme to describe the situations that citizens faced, both within the United States and in other countries. The choice depicted at the heart of the meme — between an individual desire and a social responsibility — is a classically political one.

⁷⁴ Heller, Nathan. “The Distracted Boyfriend Meme’s Perverse Pleasure in 2017.” *The New Yorker*. 11 December 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/likes/the-distracted-boyfriend-memes-perverse-pleasure-in-2017>



Figure 26. The original @nm161 viral posting, again.

Memes are not just about funny things, but about deeply serious topics too. They can be a method for sharing personal stories, a device for posing political arguments, and a way to find aesthetic beauty. Through a meme, a whole swath of internet users conjugate their experience and put it into terms that will be legible to others. As such, memes are one of the more valuable historical sources available for telling the story of the 21st century.

After all, internet culture *is* culture in the 21st century. According to Pew Research, 77 percent of Americans owned a smartphone in 2017, the year *Distracted Boyfriend* went viral. A similar rate — seven in ten — used a social media platform.⁷⁵ Among Americans aged 18-29, Pew Research reported that the rate of smartphone ownership was “nearly ubiquitous,” standing at 92 percent — and the rate of social media use was just as high, at 88%.⁷⁶ App analytics provider Flurry found that, on average, Americans in 2017 spent five hours per day on their smartphones.⁷⁷ After beds and workplaces, the internet was the place where people spent the most time.

Similar data collected by other outlets tells the same story: over the 2010s, more and more of human work, leisure, and overall sociality shifted from real-world settings to screens. The difference between the internet and physical reality may have been, at one time, like the difference between outside and inside: two distinct realms. By the late 2010s, that was no longer

⁷⁵ Pew Research Center. “Record Shares of Americans Have Smartphones, Home Broadband,” January 12, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/01/12/evolution-of-technology/>.

⁷⁶ “Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States,” Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

⁷⁷ Simon Khalaf, “U.S. Consumers Time-Spent on Mobile Crosses 5 Hours a Day,” Flurry, March 2, 2017, <https://www.flurry.com/blog/us-consumers-time-spent-on-mobile-crosses-5/>.

true. Given the centrality of computers and the internet to 21st century life, future historians will have to interface with computers rather than folders full of paper.⁷⁸ History research will rely on reading through the structures (principally platforms) that undergird sociality on internet-connected screens and finding the tensions, trends, and human stories that exist down in there. Studying culture and history that happens on the internet poses a number of unique methodological considerations, which thoughtful attention to a meme like Distracted Boyfriend can help to expose. In this chapter, I want to examine how memes like Distracted Boyfriend can be applied as sources — and the challenges inherent in such an approach. In a larger sense, I want to argue for the place of meme history as an important component in internet history more broadly. My contention is that Distracted Boyfriend (or any meme) might be productively treated as a historical source in two ways: by reading them, and by tracking them.

Firstly, a meme can be *read* as a cultural text that represents (in the same way poems, paintings, etc. do) the situated opinions and emotions of the people who post and view it. A meme represents a point(s) of view and draws from a shared set of understandings. A meme belongs to a broader tradition which has a history: Distracted Boyfriend was influenced by many other memes and it has gone on to influence many subsequent memes. Meme culture deserves attention because of its richness, sophistication, and centrality to contemporary life; but it also must be considered (and criticized) because it is an active and influential force in the world, since historical events and processes get articulated through the codes of meme culture.

By this, I mean that art plays a role in making history: the Early American Republic cannot be understood without considering the Greco-Roman traditions in which the Founding Fathers were steeped; just like how the Contemporary American Republic cannot be understood without considering some of the very online traditions that modern political movements draw from. George Washington was depicted as an American Cincinnatus, and Donald Trump is depicted as a Groyper Pepe — these representations are neither meaningless nor without influence on real-world events. Actors conceive of themselves and those around them using representations and symbols furnished by works of art. Models of aristocratic republicanism adapted from readings of Roman and Greek texts influenced the development of the American

⁷⁸ I initially wrote “stare at screens” instead of “interface with computers” here, but changed the phrase because in the years to come, interfacing with computers may happen through a means other than the screen. The Apple Vision Pro, described by the company as a “spatial computer,” promises a kind of computing totally apart from the screen. If such an augmented/virtual reality interface replaces the screenic one (which is already happening for some) historians will be wearing headsets instead of staring at screens.

Constitution, just as experiences of decentralized online community-building influence the structure of many contemporary social movements. Reading a meme with history in mind tells us something about the people who used that meme and the historical situation it participated in.

Secondly, a meme can be *tracked* as a piece of viral media that moves between platforms and users. Putting a GPS monitor on the foot of a pigeon or the tail of a whale gives a biologist insight not just into the individual animal but into its flock, its species, its migration patterns, and its entire ecosystem; similarly, following one meme as it bounces from platform to platform and community to community offers insight not just into that one meme but into the broader forces and systems that steer its movement. Studying a meme is a way of studying platforms, users, and online communities, because a meme moves through all of these and carries their traces.

Tracking memes may also end up being one of the best ways available to study the platforms and the internet. This is because doing internet history is like searching for needles in a haystack that is on fire. There is so much of it, and it is all ephemeral. Records are removed, softwares outmoded, accounts suspended, and posts taken down. The archive evaporates. According to a recent study conducted by Pew Research, as many as 40% of all tweets from the summer of 2020 using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter were no longer accessible in the summer of 2023.⁷⁹ Unlike sources written on paper, which are shelf-stable and can sit in folders or boxes for years, digital posts decay, degrade, and disappear within months of their creation. Adding to the methodological difficulty is the researcher's dependence on the platform's own functions, capacities, and whims to access that material. The difficulty of preserving the internet may lead to a strange situation down the road: as more and more of our society and discourse move to online formats, more and more of what people are doing and saying to each other will disappear. People in 2040 might have a clearer and less ambiguous historical record of the year 1980 than they do of 2020, because the sources for 2020 will have, in large part, vanished, become corrupted, or been held hostage behind paywalls and firewalls by corporate or political interests. This kind of archival instability is a breeding ground for fake news and misinformation: without

⁷⁹ Sara Atske, "Social Media, Online Activism and 10 Years of #BlackLivesMatter," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech, June 29, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/06/29/blacklivesmatter-turns-10/>.

a reliable record of what happened or when, actors can twist the narrative to suit their own interests.⁸⁰

In the absence of a more comprehensive record, memes can offer information about how communities and publics were structured at different points in internet history. Memes cannot fully plug the gaps and holes in the record, but they can help with the task. As highly visible (and mobile) digital artifacts which are frequently saved by individual users in personal archives outside of the large platform archives, memes may be a class of source that sticks around better than others.

In this chapter, I will first read Distracted Boyfriend as a meme that reflects the historical moment in internet history that it emerged from, as well as the moment in American history it participated in. Then, I will track Distracted Boyfriend's movement through two of the several platform communities that received it: journalists on the online culture beat scrolling Twitter, and meme connoisseurs on Reddit trying to figure out what is cool and what is not cool.

2017 and the Web 2.0 Period

The most well-known way of periodizing internet history is the scheme of Web 1.0 (1993ish-2007ish), Web 2.0 (2007ish-2020ish), and Web 3.0 (2020ish to present). The numbering terminology is inspired by the way programmers document successive forms of their projects. As is often the case, there is no clear consensus on these periodizations: some researchers and practitioners speak of up to seven different Webs, or make finer-grained distinctions between periods such as Web 2.0 and Web 2.5. The borders between one era and the other are also fuzzy: Web 1.0 kind of ends with the introduction of the smartphone and the creation of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, while Web 2.0 kind of ends with the introduction of the blockchain and artificial intelligence, and with the decay of Web 2.0 platforms. Further, this periodization scheme reflects a Western-centric (and, specifically American-centric) account of internet history. In many countries, there was no Web 1.0 period: the first mass adoption of internet-accessing devices did not happen in the 1990s with desktop computers, but later on in the 2000s or 2010s with smartphones. Also, in many countries—such

⁸⁰ In a sense, this has always happened with every media form: archives are always to some degree coercive. But the situation with the internet is still particularly worrisome.

as authoritarian China— the internet’s relationship with state power and the economy has been structured differently.

The term “Web 2.0” was first coined in 1999 by Darcy DiNucci, writing about web design and web aesthetics.⁸¹ DiNucci saw a transition happening from the dominant aesthetics of the early internet to something new – to Web 2.0. As high-quality graphics displays became cheaper, and computing overall became easier and more user-friendly, DiNucci argued that the style of web design was entering a new period. She also argued that new and different sorts of screens - laptops and phones, rather than desktops — necessitated new styles and approaches in web design.

Tim O’Reilly then popularized the term in 2005, applying it to a changing business and production model.⁸² O’Reilly was among the first to describe the rise of social media and ecommerce platforms, and identified Web 2.0 as the emergence of the platform as the dominant mode of doing business online. Rather than specialized producers running their own ecommerce businesses, blogs, or art practices (as had been the case in Web 1.0), Web 2.0 was an era in which these people moved their activities to platforms like Amazon and Facebook, where the broader public of users could also generate content and value.

Lev Manovich, writing in 2008 about culture industries online, draws a distinction between Web 1.0 as a “publishing medium” and Web 2.0 as a “communication medium:” the majority of the content on Web 2.0 platforms is produced by users and for other users, rather than by professionals seeing what they do as “publishing.” (Manovich, 320) Further, on Web 2.0, content is no longer introduced on more or less static pages managed by individuals, but on dynamic pages interlinked with other pages that allow users to move around, organize their experience, and respond in a more specific and deliberate way. Manovich, however, caveats the idea of “user-generated” with an important claim apparent to anyone who has spent a lot of time online: there are posters and there are lurkers. All active users are engaging with and contributing to content, but not all users are generating content, it is usually a distinct minority that does that. And, as Web 2.0 progressed, content creators became increasingly professionalized, with influencers and meme accounts selling advertising space, making deals with brands, and even

⁸¹ Darcy DiNucci, “Fragmented Future,” Web Design Museum (Print Magazine, April 1999), <https://www.webdesignmuseum.org/web-design-history/web-2-0-1999>.

⁸² Tim O’Reilly, “What Is Web 2.0,” O’Reilly Media, September 30, 2005, <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.

organizing around collective issues related to platform policies and compensation. By 2017, when Distracted Boyfriend came about, these Web 2.0 ways of doing business and leisure on the internet were well-established.

Overall, the periodization system of Web 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 marks a series of intertwined processes and changes: Web 2.0 is both a specific aesthetic design vibe (as DiNucci writes) an economic model (as O'Reilly writes) and a model for the culture industries (as Manovich writes). It is also an array of devices on which the internet is accessed, a set of protocols for how sites function and connect, a mode of user behavior, as well as a set of political and economic conditions in which the internet is planted. Each period of “internet history,” then, should also be understood as a distinct period in the history of personal computing, in web design, in software development, in business models, and in governance.

These strands are all connected: Web 2.0 begins in the mid-to-late 2000s around the time of the smartphone, and a smartphone-centric internet both makes a different set of demands on web designers who have to create for a smaller screen and also enables an acceleration of data-driven platforms — since a computer that travels in a pocket and interjects itself as a middleman in every transaction of daily life can generate much more data than a computer which just stays on a desk. The advent of smartphones also allowed more users to log on, increasing the volume and intensity of internet culture. The strands are knotted together, each causing and caused by the others. In the table below, I describe some of them:

	<i>Hardware</i>	<i>Software</i>	<i>Economic Model</i>	<i>Design</i>	<i>Chronology</i>	<i>Regulatory Scheme</i>
<i>Web 1.0</i>	Desktop computers, laptops	RSS, e-mail, etc.	A kind of commons. Publishing model.	Text centric	1993-mid 2000s	None, or else treated like publishers
<i>Web 2.0</i>	Laptops, smartphones	Algorithms	Surveillance capitalism, fiat currency. Participatory model.	Image centric, fragmented across several kinds of screen	Mid 2000s - 2020	None, but internal to the platforms the rise of “content moderation” and public scrutiny

<i>Web 3.0</i>	Smartphones wearable devices, internet of things	Artificial Intelligence, blockchain	Decentralized exchanges, cryptocurrency	Video centric, haptic	2020- present	Forms of governmentality are increasingly based on the use and exploitation of online space/platforms (ex.: WeChat, Meta, Google)
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Table 1. Phases of internet history.

Distracted Boyfriend comes about towards the end of the Web 2.0 era, and is marked by its moment. Alongside web design, economic models, and hardware, the style of internet culture evolves from one moment to the next.⁸³ There are Web 1.0 memes, Web 2.0 memes, and Web 3.0 memes. Web 2.0 memes like Distracted Boyfriend are memes made to be seen on smartphones, meant to be transmitted and received over Web 2.0 social platforms, and circulated not through the Web 1.0 model of “publication” but through what Manovich would term the Web 2.0 model of “communication.”

In Web 1.0, the user typically logged in through a desktop computer and browsed websites most likely created by other identifiable individuals, reading content or else publishing content. In Web 2.0, the user typically logged in through a smartphone and browsed platforms where content from many anonymous and unknown users was aggregated, and then used these platforms not just to consume but to produce and communicate.⁸⁴ The differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 are not just differences in ways of accessing and interacting with the internet, but in ways of imagining yourself as an agent online.

In the same way that the desktop and the smartphone create different postures of the body — one makes you sit down at a chair and look straight ahead, while the other leads you to hunch your neck and turn your face downwards — these devices also create different habits of mind. Similarly, reading a personal blog written by a creator with whom you have a relationship leads to different habits of mind and empathy than reading hundreds of little snippets written by

⁸³ “Internet culture” as a broad category involves not just memes but influencers, art, and content creators of all sorts. But I am mostly focused on memes here, as you already know.

⁸⁴ Of course, there is overlap between these two eras, and in other parts of the world the historical transition happened differently than in the United States

hundreds of strangers, on a platform run by an algorithm designed to keep you angry. All these interventions interpellate subjects in different ways.

Formal elements of memes (and other internet art) are, like changing hardware or business models, a factor in and reflection of the historical development of the internet as it lurches and bounces from era to era. The ways memes are funny, or meaningful, or true, tell about how people identified humor, meaning, and truth in different kinds of online social settings. Further, the ways in which memes made use of the cultural/material affordances around them, pushing the medium and using the device and platform in inventive ways, offer a dynamic archive of how those devices and platforms were understood, obeyed, and opposed.

Platforms and Memes in Internet History

In a 2022 report for Know Your Meme, I looked at our “site of origin” data for every meme on the site for each year between 2010 and 2022.⁸⁵ The different evolutions of the web are legible across these data streams: in 2010, a number of smaller, more boutique sites operating along the “publication” model dominated and the only true platform that took up a considerable amount of meme space was Youtube. A few years later, the smaller websites that collectively took up a quarter of total meme origins were largely replaced by platforms. By the mid-2010s, this Web 1.0 model of circulating and creating memes had largely been superseded.

⁸⁵ Aidan Walker, “Where Do Memes Come From? The Top Platforms From 2010-2022,” *Know Your Meme*, August 29, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/editorials/insights/where-do-memes-come-from-the-top-platforms-from-2010-2022>.

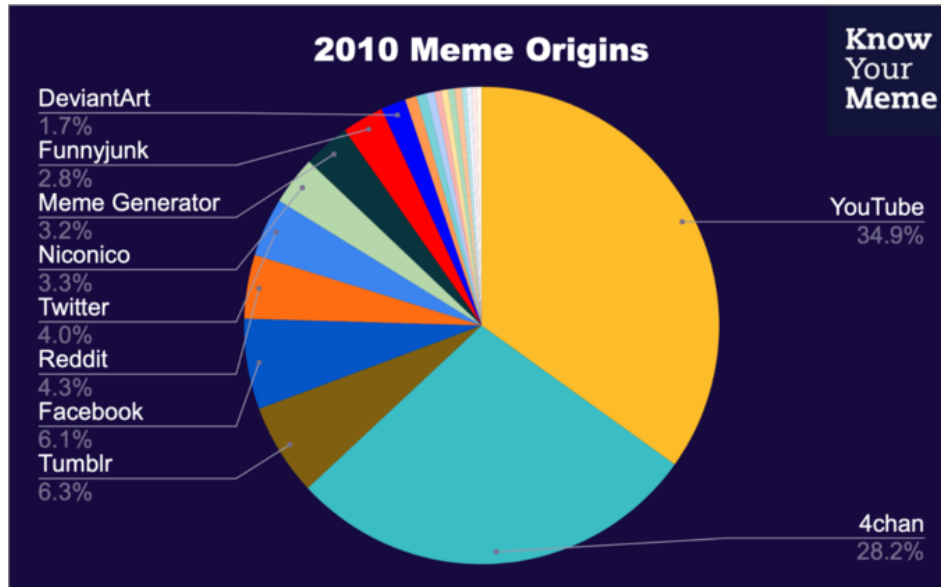


Figure 27. A chart from Know Your Meme's "Where Do Memes Come From?" Insights report.

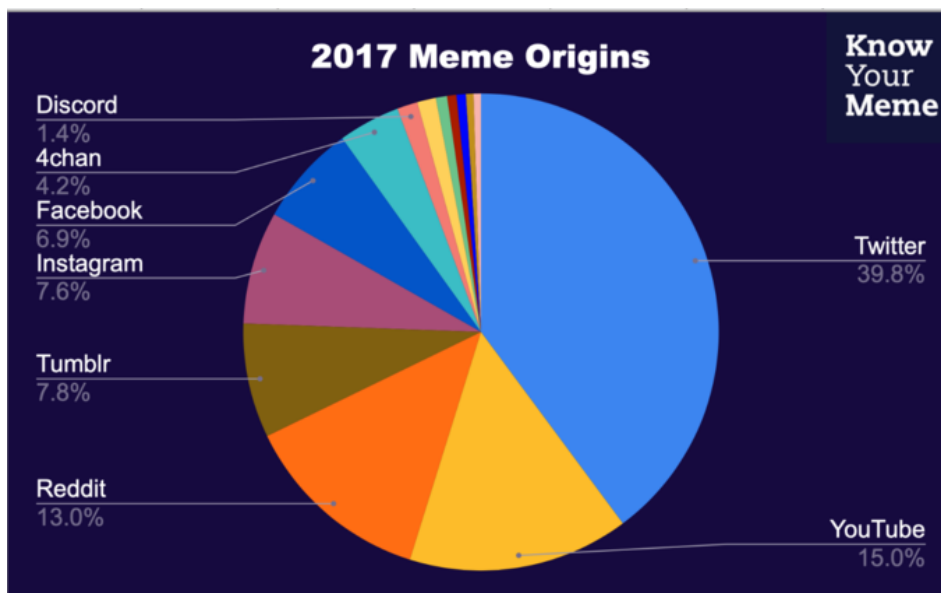


Figure 28. A chart from Know Your Meme's "Where Do Memes Come From?" Insights report.

The most meme-fertile of these platforms — Twitter — was specifically tailored to smartphones, which outpaced laptops and desktops as the dominant way of accessing the recreational internet in the mid-2010s. But Twitter's predominance in Know Your Meme's data might also reflect the reality of our methods (and those of everyone else writing about internet culture at the time). Twitter was the easiest to hunt for memes and breaking news on. By design, the platform was intended to be a "public square" on which announcements were made and

conversations had: rather than clustering interaction around smaller communities in one space (like Reddit, Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook) Twitter presented itself as a sea of buzzing back-and-forths. Through a verification system (now gone) Twitter also attracted a number of politicians, journalists, and celebrities — it evolved, over the 2010s, into a crucial piece of the information infrastructure that ran American public life. Twitter was the umbilical cord linking internet culture to older forms like television, print, and radio as well as traditional guardians of the discourse such as academics, journalists, and politicians. Twitter never had quite as many users as Facebook, but much of its influence came from the fact that it was more centrally positioned vis-a-vis the traditional media and professional structures that scaffolded the public conversation.

By 2022, the year we finished the report, the social internet was dominated by TikTok — an app which, like Twitter, presents itself as a generalized and open public space, a kind of sea where everything floats along. A platform like TikTok — video-centric, meant exclusively for smartphones, and powered by a sophisticated and intense algorithm — would also not have been possible in the 2000s or even the early 2010s.⁸⁶ TikTok’s ventures into new domains like retail, text-based comments, still photos, and livestreaming mirror the efforts of other platforms, which are now all seeking in one way or another to become “everything apps.”⁸⁷

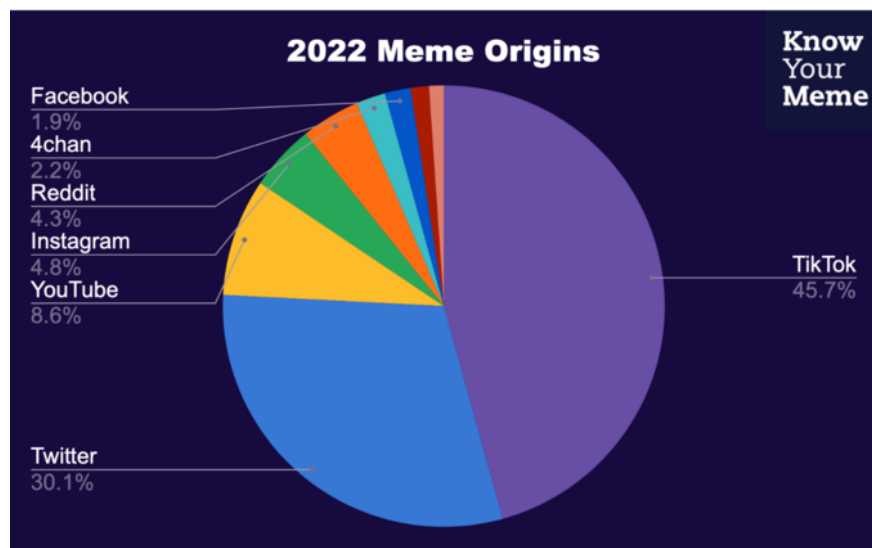


Figure 29. A chart from Know Your Meme’s “Where Do Memes Come From?” Insights report.

⁸⁶ The video-sharing app Vine, an important forebear to TikTok, did exist in the early 2010s. But it was not nearly as big or elaborate as TikTok is, nor did it have as many features.

⁸⁷ This will lead to totalitarianism. The rise of Chinese-owned TikTok should also be read as an important historical development in the political structure of the internet, as an American-led internet is replaced by a new model.

What this data shows is the extreme instability of the social internet. Platforms rise and fall in a matter of years. Beginning with an array of decentralized image boards and blogs organized along Web 1.0 principles and technologies, American internet culture coalesced by the mid-2010s into a field dominated by six algorithmically fueled Web 2.0 platforms (Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Tumblr) which made their money (or, more often, didn't make money but attracted continued rounds of investment) through selling advertising space and harvesting data from users who accessed these sites for free.⁸⁸ By 2022, TikTok, a much younger platform, emerged as a winner, outcompeting the rest.

A quantitative analysis of memes in aggregate can offer this sort of insight, reflecting trends in the broader culture. But a qualitative analysis can also offer further depth of understanding about how these platform ecosystems work. Looking at how memes moved over the internet, these six platforms (and a few others existing on the side, notably 4chan) were all accessed through and tightly linked to another platform: Google and its search function.⁸⁹ Further, all six were tightly linked to one another in the actual, practical circulation of content. Distracted Boyfriend certainly fits this pattern: it experienced viral spread across all of the existing platforms at the time. A famous tweet from Tom Eastman from 2018 makes this point:



Figure 30. A tweet from Tom Eastman. [Link](#).

⁸⁸ I caveat this claim by calling it “American internet culture,” even as “internet culture” remains a global phenomenon.

⁸⁹ Another linkage, through both Google and through Amazon, is in the purchase of server space and cloud space.

Or, put otherwise in a Tumblr post, which was later screenshotted and posted to Pinterest:



Figure 31. A post describing this theory, found on Twitter (I don't remember where, frankly, and that fact illustrates the point I'm making here).

Internet content in the 2010s, including memes, was defined by this kind of circulation. As Joey Cosco, internet culture writer for digg.com in 2017 puts it, “every social media site becomes a Twitter screenshot machine.”⁹⁰ In 2017, there was no such thing as a meme that existed exclusively on one platform. To be on any one of the major platforms from roughly 2015 to 2022 was to see content that had been produced on all of them. Some of the most viral posts on Twitter are screenshots of Reddit threads, some of the most viral posts on Reddit are screenshots of Tumblr posts. Memes originating from a tweet in 2015 often become most popular on Reddit or in Facebook groups, then are revived on Tumblr a year later, then cycle back around to Twitter. In the late 2010s, TikTok entered into this ecosystem of circulation.

Certain patterns emerge in the way that content is shared between these different platforms. Twitter, where things are most findable because of search functions and the ability to more rapidly discover posts or users with whom one is not familiar, tends to be where journalists (or meme archivists) catch wind of the latest trends and developments. Memes from 4chan tend to travel through Reddit and from there into the broader internet.⁹¹ Scrolling Instagram (particularly its TikTok clone feature Reels) is essentially like being on TikTok with a week's

⁹⁰ Cosco, Joey. Interview with Aidan Walker, July 13th, 2023.

⁹¹ Communities on Reddit like /r/4chan and /r/tumblr exist specifically to share posts and commentary about what happens on the other platforms.

worth of delay involved. This structure is always changing as the platforms and what people use them for change.

Cross-posting between platforms was a vital part of Distracted Boyfriend’s spread. For example, the August 26th posting of the meme, seen below, which occurred on Twitter, where it was very successful (gaining over 30,000 likes in the course of a few days) led to the following in the replies on August 27th between the original poster and a commenter.



Figure 32. Posted to Twitter by @fleabcgs on August 26th, 2017, receiving over 80,500 likes. [Link](#)

Anna realizes that this repost of the meme comes from a tumblr user, cateastrophie, and another commenter instructs them to include a live link back to the post “so people dont crucify you lol” (seen below). This exchange illustrates how the process of cross-platform circulation worked: often, users posted memes they did not make themselves and which they did not know the provenance of at the time of posting. There was also, to some extent, a kind of territoriality about different platform communities or informal rule to post links and credit the original creators of memes.



Figure 33. Replies to meme in Figure 32.

The original Tumblr post, from August 24th, 2017, received over 74,000 notes (Tumblr’s metric which counts up all total engagements for a post including likes, reblogs, and replies).⁹²



Figure 34. Tumblr posting by *cateastrophi*. [Link](#)

Another example of cross-platform circulation can be seen in the narrative of the meme in Figure 35, which I found via Know Your Meme and the Distracted Boyfriend entry image gallery, where it was uploaded on September 1st, 2017. The link affixed to the meme there credits it to a post on Reddit’s /r/dankmemes, where it was captioned “sorry it took so long” and received over 19,000 upvotes.

⁹² A key difference between Tumblr and other platforms is in the lack of transparency around metrics for Tumblr posts. Unlike on Twitter where responses to a post are sorted, classified, and quantified, Tumblr presents one raw number. Further, Twitter’s reply-chain structure in 2017 allowed comments to link back to each other so that a discernable conversation could be easily read by an onlooker, while Tumblr did not. Tumblr also, as of 2017, did not show follower counts for individual profiles, unlike Twitter which actually emphasized them. These features helped turn Tumblr into a unique discursive community: not only was the app a bit more complicated to use, it was more complicated to game. People don’t really get “tumblr famous” the way people can get “Twitter famous” because the platform just isn’t designed for that, even though there are prominent accounts that run businesses (often art) such as *cateastrophi* themselves.



Figure 35. A post with comments attached from September 1st, 2017 on /r/dankmemes. It received almost 19,000 upvotes and over 150 comments. [Link](#).

The commenters on /r/dankmemes provide a link back to what may be the original posting of this meme on Twitter, and find the poster of this meme on Reddit guilty of plagiarism. However, some users argue that the plagiarism “just makes the meme even danker.”⁹³ Promiscuous circulation, for this community, is a given in memes and part of what makes them so interesting: there is no fixable or findable original point, instead the meme circulates in an endless, mutating flux. The Twitter post from which the Reddit meme was taken received over 100,000 likes on August 31st, 2017 and inspired over 30,000 reposts to Twitter itself, and an example of one of them is seen below.



Figure 36. A quote-tweet of the August 31 Twitter post by @haroldteevee, which received over 30,000 likes. [Link](#).

⁹³ “Dank” means good.

Later examples of this “increased structural clarity” Distracted Boyfriend meme can be found posted to Facebook meme groups, posted to different subreddits, and reposted across Twitter. The original artifact of this meme remains unverifiable — it could very well be that the Twitter post by @haroldteevee is copied from another source. The same could be true of essentially every example of Distracted Boyfriend or any other meme cited in this thesis; the two examples I have chosen here are only legible as examples of promiscuous circulation because commenters on the posts remembered seeing the same meme somewhere else and cared enough to cite it. Certainly, countless examples exist where this action was not taken.

This kind of interchange between platform communities is also not unprecedented. The way in which content moved in 2017 from Twitter to Reddit to Tumblr and back again is similar to the way an idea might move from academics to journalists to policymakers and back again. In each situation, certain rules (both formally stated and informally followed) govern the way communities on each platform interpret and share information, but the information itself moves promiscuously between them — and, by design, individuals chart personal and professional paths which cut across several different platforms and communities. A policymaker reads the newspaper’s synopsis of research findings, just as a Reddit user will see a Twitter screenshot referencing a Tumblr meme: these discursive communities create meaning together rather than apart from one another.

Metonymy and Metaphor: Web 1.0 Memes and Web 2.0 Memes

The line between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 as historical periods is muddled: one period turns into the other gradually; there are holdovers and precursors popping up on either side of whatever hinge or pivot point might be identified. However, each period of organization meant a different kind of circulation for memes as well as palpable differences in form and style. To identify what is saliently Web 2.0 — and therefore, historically situated — about Distracted Boyfriend, it is necessary to compare this meme to memes that came before and participated in a different internet.

Limiting the scope to simply image macros—and putting aside video memes—the iconic memes of the early 2010s (the transition period between Web 1.0 and 2.0) seem to revolve

around characters. LOLCats and Advice Animals are among the best-remembered.⁹⁴ These memes placed text on top of pictures, just as Distracted Boyfriend does, but they did so in a manner that was stylistically distinct. Joey Cosco, internet culture reporter at digg.com in 2017, described the era around 2017 as the “middle ages” of memes, and that descriptor has stuck with me.⁹⁵ Something distinct happened before them, and something distinct has since happened afterwards. Standing in the middle, memes like Distracted Boyfriend show a meme culture in transition — a meme culture faced with a choice. Turning to Advice Animals as an example, I want to compare the early style to the middle style of Distracted Boyfriend.

Advice Animals are a sprawling family and grammar of memes — in 2011, Know Your Meme went so far as to visualize them existing on a “periodic table.”⁹⁶ Generally, Advice Animals feature a static image of a single character, with some text above it (often a set-up) and some text below it (often a punchline).⁹⁷ Advice Animals represent a series of character types and corresponding stances: Advice Dog, the progenitor of the entire trend, started circulating in 2006 and depicted a dog giving terrible advice. Other notable Advice Animals included Bad Luck Brian, a character who would always see an unfortunate outcome (upper right in figure x) and Confession Bear (lower left in figure x), a sun bear which would represent a user’s confessional speech. Often, Advice Animals worked in conversation with one another: Courage Wolf emerged as a counterpoint to Advice Dog on 4chan’s /b/, and over time Advice Animals evolved into a deck of recognizable meme characters which a poster could choose from to express whatever they wished. A smattering of Advice Animals, sourced from Know Your Meme, are presented below:

⁹⁴ Rage Comics are worth mentioning as well, but I draw the distinction here between pure image macros — which are made of a picture with text placed on top of it — and the formulaic, essentially narrative constructions of Rage Comics. True to their name, Rage Comics are Comics: they feature a sequence of different situations, one after another, unlike LOLCats, Advice Animals, or Distracted Boyfriend, each of which feature just one situation. For this reason, I am taking Advice Animals as a more fitting comparison for Distracted Boyfriend.

⁹⁵ Cosco, Joey. Interview.

⁹⁶ Gulin, Olivia. *Visual Analysis: Advice Animals*. Know Your Meme, 29 April 2011.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/editorials/white-papers/visual-analysis-advice-animals>

⁹⁷ “Advice Animals,” *Know Your Meme*, August 18, 2011, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/advice-animals>.



Figure 37. A selection of Advice Animal memes from Know Your Meme.

For people who were children in the 2000s and 2010s, Advice Animals are deeply nostalgic — however, they seem unsophisticated and primitive in comparison to later developments in meme culture. Compared to the complexity and sophistication demonstrated in Distracted Boyfriend, an Advice Animal is relatively simple. Understood as a broader system (there are over 116 documented “Advice Animals” on Know Your Meme) Advice Animals are as intricate as later image-macro memes — but individually, they narrate actions and reactions, utterances and ironies, rather than complex situations like Distracted Boyfriend.

Advice Animals are still made today, and they share many features with later memes. But they represent a distinct era that is now over. This stylistic shift, like the shift in web design principles which DiNucci described in 2001, or the broader transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 (or, now, Web 2.0 to Web 3.0) is due to several intertwined factors.

First, the tools available to meme makers in 2017 are more accessible and easy to use: anybody with a Google account can manipulate an image, and apps like Mematic make it easier to add labels and alter images. Meme creation no longer required a sophisticated understanding of Photoshop, nor was it bound to the formats available on sites like Meme Generator. Another part of the difference has to do with the momentum of a tradition: in general, posters in 2017 are posting for an audience that is significantly larger, more engaged, better-versed in the codes of

the art form, and more critical of memes than those in 2011. A meme-maker in 2017 can draw on years of ancient meme characters, themes, and forms — and remix them in interesting ways to entertain an audience, while the 2011 meme-maker is working with fewer materials.

Second, the circulation of Advice Animals was also different. They were created, for the most part, using specific third-party websites such as Meme Generator, which offered users an image macro with blank fields on bottom and on top, and often carried the watermark of those sites. Advice Animals were then posted mostly on imageboards and the dominant platforms of those early days — 4chan, Reddit, and Tumblr. Visually, they were marked out as memes (and not as another kind of content) through their use of Impact font, which signaled that they were to be read not as normal posts but as meme posts. This visual code no longer held for 2017 memes, although Impact font could be used (and still is used) to make a meme feel “retro” or old-fashioned.

Dancygier and Vanderlatten, in their analysis of Discourse Viewpoint Spaces, use Scumbag Steve as a major example. Scumbag Steve is an Advice Animal originating in 2011, which used a photograph of a young man taken in 2006 for his rap album cover and “portray(s) the character as an opportunistic and freeloading juvenile who wreaks havoc in various social situations.”⁹⁸



Figure 38. A selection of Scumbag Steve memes from *Know Your Meme*.

⁹⁸ “Scumbag Steve,” *Know Your Meme*, January 18, 2011, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/scumbag-steve>.

Like most Advice Animals, Scumbag Steve uses Impact font in a top text/bottom text structure, and focuses on a singular character. Dancygier and Vanderlatten identify a “supervisory mental space” apart from the character which contextualizes and judges him as irresponsible: the meme in the lower left corner is funny because it’s the sort of thing this kind of man (if you know one like him) would definitely say. The meme is interesting when it hits the nail on the head and finds the right detail or the right kind of utterance to represent this social type. It is also interesting when it plays with the form, as shown in the bottom meme where Scumbag Steve asks to borrow a car and then is never heard from again (there is no expected bottom text, perhaps representing his lack of care in returning the car or communicating).

The relationship between text and image is relatively standardized: the words on the image belong to the same environment as Scumbag Steve, he either says them or they directly describe the actions he has taken. There is a form of attribution going on. The maneuver in Distracted Boyfriend is manifestly different: the words added on top of the image are, generally, outside of the world of the image. Scumbag Steve is a distinct character fleshed out through the text added to the image, but the figures in Distracted Boyfriend — while they may also correspond to character types such as “scumbag” — are more appropriately understood as *positions* in a situation. The Distracted Boyfriend meme presents a metaphor: the relationship between the three pieces of text is like the relationship between the three figures in the image; but Scumbag Steve presents a metonymy: the text and the image are parts of the same whole, logically contiguous.

Roman Jakobson presents metaphor and metonymy as the two opposite poles structuring human discourse, and this holds true for memes: in some memes like Distracted Boyfriend sense is assembled through the substitution of one element by another, and each element takes the form of a different substrate (text or image); in other memes (like Scumbag Steve) sense is assembled metonymically, through a series of logical associations or further elaborations of a theme: he would say this because he is Scumbag Steve.⁹⁹

Earlier image-macro memes—Rage Comics, LOLCatz, Advice Animals—tend to be metonymic, while later image-macro memes—object-labeling formats such as Distracted

⁹⁹ Roman Jakobson and Halle, Morris (1956) *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances in Fundamentals of Language*. The Hague & Paris: Mouton, section *The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles*

Boyfriend, but also stock character formats like the Bro Explaining series - tend to be metaphoric. However, these later memes are metaphoric in a highly-specific way: they involve inserting another personality (often an “I”) into the figures of the meme. One end of the metaphor in Distracted Boyfriend memes is always the figures involved, but the other end is the situated selves of people in the real world. These memes are also not one-to-one metaphors of an object to another object: rather, they present situations or relationships between figures and compare those to situations and relationships in real life.

As metaphoric expressions, memes like Distracted Boyfriend do not present characters so much as they present positions. The focus and the energy of the meme moves from what is represented (as in Scumbag Steve, where a good meme is a meme that represents well) to the person representing. The intrigue and focus of an Advice Animal is on the character and what it says, rather than the manner in which the memer is making the characters express something, like it is in Distracted Boyfriend. The energy in Distracted Boyfriend lies more squarely in the supervisory mental space rather than within the world of the meme.

Instead of just delivering a joke, late 2010s meme formats carry on a meta-conversation about the where, how, and what of the meme itself. Compared to the barebones setup-punchline structure of many early memes, Distracted Boyfriend is a more sophisticated format with more places to editorialize and customize. The most interesting part about a Distracted Boyfriend meme is less so what the three people are doing than it is the gesture of labeling *that* picture with *those* words. The humor often comes from an effect of juxtaposition, reducing a complicated discourse to a crude situation, or displaying wit by describing a situation using the form.

The shift of emphasis from the first, directly referential kind of humor and viewpoint space to the second, more meta viewpoint space (e.g., the meme is no longer funny because of what it depicts but because of what it is) suggests a different relation between the viewer and the screen. This sort of relation is a specifically Web 2.0 kind of relation: the meme image is a manipulable site of turnable context, the emphasis no longer landing on the represented thing but on the process of representation. Rather than a spectator, the viewer is a co-conspirator: they are watching and judging someone else's judgment of the image even more than they are watching and judging the initial image. Their regard is of the same caliber as the creator's: the mode of address is not from publisher to public, but from person to person — communication.

Object-Labeling as a Meme Genre

Object-labeling as a meme genre is distinguished by the essentially metaphoric operation at play: like in Distracted Boyfriend, labels are placed on top of figures in an image. This process has existed for centuries and is frequently used in cartoons. One-off examples of object-labeling — in which a photo is labeled but then isn't picked up with and turned into a meme — have been posted for as long as the internet has been around.¹⁰⁰ But in 2017, object-labeling memes saw a kind of dominance and golden age which lasted through the rest of the late 2010s. By 2018, the amount and frequency of object-labeling memes posted led Slate journalist Heather Schwedel to write a trend piece on the phenomenon. Schwedel reached out to Adam Downer at Know Your Meme, who said “there were a few before, but that one (Distracted Boyfriend) really brought the style to popular culture.”¹⁰¹ Don Caldwell, editor-in-chief of Know Your Meme, concurs: “that was the first really big one of that kind.”¹⁰²

As Downer said, there were a few before. One of the earliest object-labeling memes recorded on Know Your Meme comes from the summer of 2012, and was first posted on Tumblr:



Figure 39. A Me vs. You meme posted by Tumblr user fuckeverylastoneofyou on June 11th, 2012. From Know Your Meme, original posting is lost.

¹⁰⁰ “Object Labeling,” *Know Your Meme*, January 24, 2018, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/object-labeling>.

¹⁰¹ Heather Schwedel, “Thanks to the Distracted Boyfriend, We’re Living in a Golden Age of ‘Object Labeling’ Memes,” *Slate*, March 22, 2018, <https://slate.com/technology/2018/03/memes-are-object-labeled-now.html>.

¹⁰² Don Caldwell. Personal conversation with Aidan Walker. November 2022.

Typologically, Me vs. You memes are different from later object-labeling memes in that what changes between postings is the image: the text labels of Me and You remain constant, but are always placed in the same relation: the figure labeled Me is higher up, more glamorous, or more interesting than the figure labeled “you.”¹⁰³ Inevitably, reversals of the format occur: some self-deprecating posts place “you” in a higher-up position, and “me” in a lower-down one, or have multiple yous and multiple mes. The stance of posting is a display of dominance: posting a Me vs. You meme jokingly illustrates the superiority of one poster over another.



Figure 40. A Respect Women meme from Know Your Meme.

The other most major early object-labeling meme—Respect Women, which started as an online comedian’s catchphrase and later became a meme— also saw the image change but the text remain the same. Respect Women pictured Respect as some kind of violent or drastic action performed by a “Me” (presumed to be male) on women, in a sort of ambiguously sexist pattern of posting (like in the meme above).¹⁰⁴ In both Respect Women and Me vs. You, the relationship between the pieces of text comes before the image, which is added on as illustration, unlike in Distracted Boyfriend.

¹⁰³ “Me Vs. You,” *Know Your Meme*, April 24, 2014, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/me-vs-you>.

¹⁰⁴ “Respect Women,” *Know Your Meme*, May 5, 2017, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/respect-women>.



Figure 41. On left: the original drawing, and on right: a “Problems, Stress, and Pain” meme from *Know Your Meme*.

Object-labeling as a meme tradition did not really start in earnest until 2017 — the same year as Distracted Boyfriend. In the “Problems, Stress, and Pain” meme above, which started spreading on Reddit in April of 2017, an artist’s cartoon drawing was recaptioned to represent different situations, such as in the early viral example (shown above right) that discussed avoiding government surveillance online using a private browser.¹⁰⁵

Through 2017 and 2018, Know Your Meme recorded a number of other object-labeling memes, a sampling of which are shown below.¹⁰⁶ In all of these later object-labeling formats, like in Distracted Boyfriend, the image is more or less stable while the text changes across postings. The relationship between the figures in the image is connected, metaphorically, to the relationship with the things described by the text.

¹⁰⁵ “Problems, Stress, Pain,” *Know Your Meme*, May 4, 2017, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/problems-stress-pain>.

¹⁰⁶ Going through the history of a series or genre of memes as I am now, the question arises — which ones are popular and worth looking at? Know Your Meme’s archive offers some metrics to go by (namely, page views and number of memes uploaded to the gallery) but it is biased by the interests of the site’s user base. Similar methods of assessing significance or notoriety for a meme are also difficult to judge, especially when a meme comes from further back in the historical record. I have chosen examples based on representative meme formats that remain in use to this day, and which, from my perspective as a user and viewer, seem to belong to the core canon. This selection is, of course, an educated guess, subjective and personal. My account is not exhaustive, and there are many more examples of object-labeling memes.



Figure 42. A sampling of object-labeling memes from *Know Your Meme*.

Distracted Boyfriend, occurring in August 2017, is perhaps the most successful and recognizable object-labeling meme. It was also, as covered in various press stories and end of year recaps (including the one cited from *The New Yorker* at the beginning of this chapter) one of the most recognizable and popular memes of 2017 overall.

Distracted Boyfriend, as Seen From Meme Connoisseur Reddit

On December 31st, 2017, on Reddit's /r/dankmemes, the user Arcanoot posted "The full 2017 meme calendar," seen below:

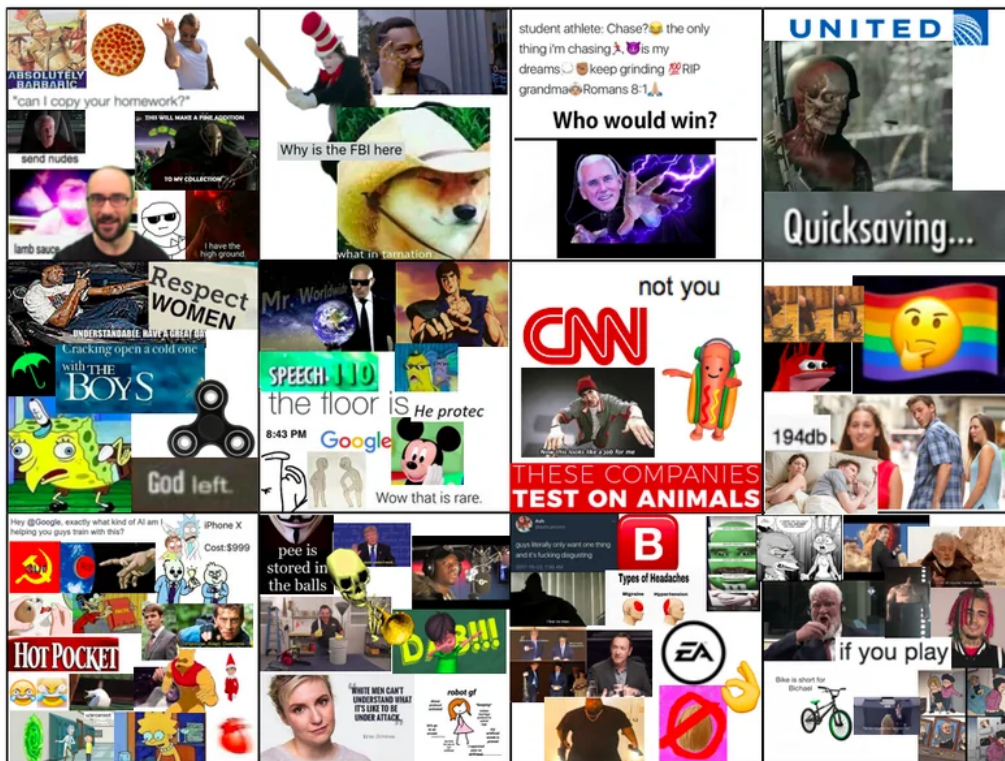



Figure 43. Arcanoot's calendar. [Link](#).

Beginning in January, on the top left corner, and extending to December on the bottom right, this “meme calendar” participates in a trend that grew popular in the mid-2010s, especially in meme connoisseur communities on Reddit. Looking back on a year of internet culture, calendars review which memes were popular at which moments and serve to let a community remember and mark its changes. On this meme calendar, Distracted Boyfriend appears towards the end of the slot corresponding to August, denoting its flourishing as a viral phenomenon between August 20th, 2017 and August 30th, 2017. This meme calendar post received over 1,500 upvotes. Over five years later, in 2023, remains Arcanoot’s sixth-most liked post over a posting career on Reddit that began in October 2016. Reception from the community of /r/dankmemes was mixed:

 TachankaNeedsANerf · 5 yr. ago

Not only was 2017 the best year for memes but jesus christ it was the worst fucking year too...




 217  Reply  Share ...

Figure 44. Comments on the calendar.

said TachankNeedsANerf, in the most upvoted comment on the entire post.¹⁰⁷ CrowTheBird1 was more positive, congratulating the meme community overall:

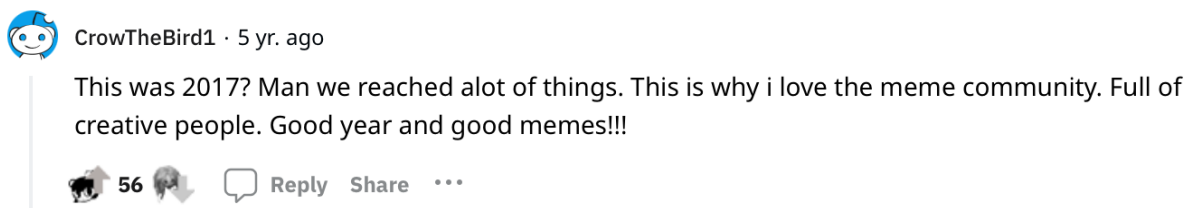


Figure 45. More comments on the calendar.

Reddit is “a culture and many cultures.”¹⁰⁸ A subreddit like /r/dankmemes is a smaller community housed on the larger platform, using the same tools, layout, and design features to host conversation and media content. There are subreddits for essentially everything, and Reddit offers several different ways to browse them: a user can look at a feed that shows only subreddits they are subscribed to, they can look at a feed which will suggest new subreddits to them, or they can look at one specific subreddit and what is posted there. /r/dankmemes is one of the largest subreddits on Reddit, and in terms of meme culture in 2017 it was highly influential. The subreddits are all staffed by volunteer moderators, who are usually very engaged users that create the rules and moderate content within their own domains, generally without pay.

An overall culture pervades Reddit — the kind of personality that would do the work of moderating a discussion forum for their own niche topic of interest, for free, is the kind of person that is attracted to the platform. But Reddit is also known as a kind of commons or decentralized sort of town square, where the power to direct conversation lies with moderators and users rather than with an algorithm or the company itself. Reddit is also known as a site of ferociously defended in-groups: many subreddits are private, requiring an invitation, and many Redditors aren’t afraid to criticize others.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that a Reddit upvote is not what a “like” is on other platforms. Rather, a Reddit upvote score represents a kind of floating average: the total number of upvotes approving of the post minus the number of downvotes disapproving the post. Posts which have more upvotes are more visible, so in this sense Redditors actively participate in deciding what the website they’re on will look like and what kind of content will succeed.

¹⁰⁸ Elliot T. Panek, *Understanding Reddit* (Routledge, 2021).

In response to Arcanoot's meme calendar, robbierottens criticized certain editorial choices about which memes to include, calling Salt Bae (over in January) "normie shit."¹⁰⁹ Another poster pushed back against this claim, arguing that Salt Bae was actually "dank."

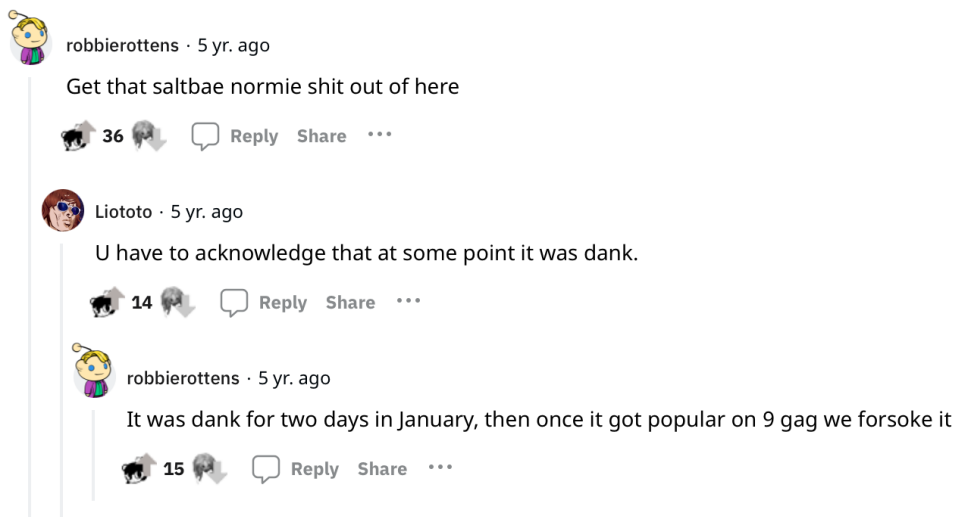


Figure 46. Further comments on the calendar.

The dichotomy of “dank” and “normie” is a specialized vocabulary used to evaluate memes on Reddit, which has largely spread into other sites and platforms of the meme world. “Dank” is good, rare, and special while “normie” is derivative, boring, and overplayed. “Normie” is an abbreviation of “normal,” whereas “dank” seems to have two derivations. “Dank,” in its non-slang signifying sense in English, refers to something that is moist and old, and was often used in the mid-2010s to talk about older-style memes for which users were nostalgic, as opposed to newer-style memes. “Dank” is also a slang descriptor of marijuana quality: “dank” weed is good weed. The association of memes with marijuana is not a coincidence: in 2017, in many parts of the world, marijuana remained illegal but not socially stigmatized. An illicit vibe hung around the drug, which was also deeply associated with

¹⁰⁹ Salt Bae is a Kurdish-American restaurateur running a chain of extremely expensive steakhouses. He became internet famous in January of 2017 for the elaborate and dance-like presentation of the meats at his restaurants, which involved Salt Bae tossing knives around, jiving his hips, and provocatively sprinkling salt over pieces of beef (hence the “salt,” and “bae” is a slangy term of endearment for a lover). Salt Bae, in a sense, pioneered a particularly theatrical approach to posting about food on social media. However, as the years went on, more and more internet users soured on him, particularly after a series of controversies. Food reviewers said his meats were subpar and overpriced, his waiters sued him for skimming off their tips and won, and in 2018 a Czech influencer was severely burned while eating at Salt Bae’s restaurant. In particular, Salt Bae was criticized for somehow getting onto the pitch after the 2022 World Cup to take pictures with Lionel Messi and touch the trophy, in a sense mirroring the performance of French President Emmanuel Macron’s attempted consolation of a disappointed Kylian Mbappe. Since then, the internet and meme community’s overall opinion of Salt Bae has soured, but /r/dankmemes was already firmly set against SaltBae back in 2017.

countercultural movements from earlier in the 20th century. Memes, through this slang, are figured as a sort of underworld product, like marijuana. A bad meme, then, is a meme that leaves the underworld, which becomes “normal” — or, rather, “normie.” “Normie” itself carries certain connotations, generally referring to non-online culture: a meme becomes “normie” when your mom sees it and talks to you about it, when it appears in more mainstream parts of the web, and certainly when major newspapers and magazines reprint and comment on it (as happened with Distracted Boyfriend).

Meme communities develop elaborate forms of what critics Iona Literat and Sarah van der Berg call “vernacular criticism.”¹¹⁰ Taking memes as a form of “contested social capital,” through which, in a Bourdieusian sense, hierarchy in online communities is structured, Literat and van der Berg profile the meme subreddit /r/MemeEconomy through this lens. In the case of /r/MemeEconomy, which relies on an extended series of stock market metaphors, the “capital” argument is particularly pertinent. Posters speak of “investing in,” or “buying and selling” memes. Collectively, like a real-life market, the posters on /r/MemeEconomy negotiate the value of the content they circulate. The ultimate prize, however, is not monetary. What’s at stake is social belonging. The most relevant distinction is between the “insiders” who post and know about memes, and the “normies,” whose interaction with memes is downstream of the subreddits. In comments quoted by Literat and van der Berg, a core member of /r/MemeEconomy hilariously says, “(normies are) like cattle or sheep or a similar subservient commodity. They should be eating memes out of the palm of our hand.”¹¹¹

As Literat and van der Berg put it, however, “insiders need outsiders – need ‘normies’ – to distinguish themselves as such.” A meme cannot be “dank” unless another meme is “normie.” Cultural capital is valuable precisely because it is unevenly distributed. The main function of subreddits like /r/dankmemes, or /r/memeeconomy (which Literat and van der Berg focus on, and which was also important to the rise of Distracted Boyfriend) is to curate and regulate memes: to determine what is dank and what is not. In the case of /r/dankmemes, one of the ways this is done is through an arduous audition process: people who want to post memes on /r/dankmemes must be long-time users of Reddit who have received at least a thousand “karma” (points garnered through positive interactions by others with your posts). If they don’t meet these fairly

¹¹⁰ Buy memes low, sell memes high: vernacular criticism and collective negotiations of value on Reddit’s MemeEconomy

¹¹¹ Literat & van der Berg, 239

rigorous requirements, they can first post memes on a different subreddit called /r/SpecialSnowflake. If they garner enough upvotes and karma on /r/SpecialSnowflake, they are then qualified to post to the much larger audience of /r/dankmemes.

The massive meme subreddits are highly regulated communities of practice which exercise considerable influence on how memes are later digested. Even if formats don't begin or originate on a meme subreddit, they are often refined and distributed through them. Often, Know Your Meme sources its memes from Reddit and these meme communities, and there are deep institutional ties.¹¹² Others writing about memes rely on the subreddits, as do posters reposting memes to other platforms. Further, it is on these subreddits that meme culture (and the vocabulary associated with it) finds its most concentrated form.

For these communities, memes serve a “constitutive” function: they are a way to determine who is and who is out, to make social bonds and advance a particular worldview. In this sense, the meme's manipulation of context becomes a process of creating a shared context: by determining a standard for what is funny or dank which is distinct from the standards of the mainstream or non-online world, meme communities create an alternate discourse. By establishing not just slang, but their own highly-developed institutional structures for the sharing and criticism of memes, these meme communities stake out a discursive zone that sees itself as superior and above that of mainstream discourse. Through memes and vernacular criticism, systems for validating or dismissing cultural production are invented. Individual users gain clout and credibility (in the case of Reddit this is represented through measures like karma or status positions like admin; but on other platforms it might be represented through follower counts or a verification badge) through the platform and its communities, not through traditional gatekeepers, the market, or other arbiters of prestige. The nature of legitimacy is determined through a strange mixture of democratic approval from a community and curating operations performed by a computer according to an algorithm's objectifying logic.

¹¹² *Meme Insider* magazine, where I started writing about memes, is run by Know Your Meme — but it started as a community project managed by the /r/memeeconomy subreddit.



Figure 47. An */r/memeeconomy* post of the meme, which received over 47,000 likes on August 25th, 2017. [Link](#).

Distracted Boyfriend was posted to both */r/MemeEconomy* and */r/dankmemes* during its week of virality, where it was discussed in-depth. In this posting, from August 25th (around the moment of peak saturation) posters used the Meme Economy stock market lingo to discuss this “meta-memery” about the meme itself. By that point, as expressed in the meme, connoisseurs had already tired of Distracted Boyfriend and viewed its presence on their feeds as a form of annoyance. By sharing this annoyed feeling at a meme that had gone mainstream, they cemented a bond — but then, by turning it into a meme itself, they created art.

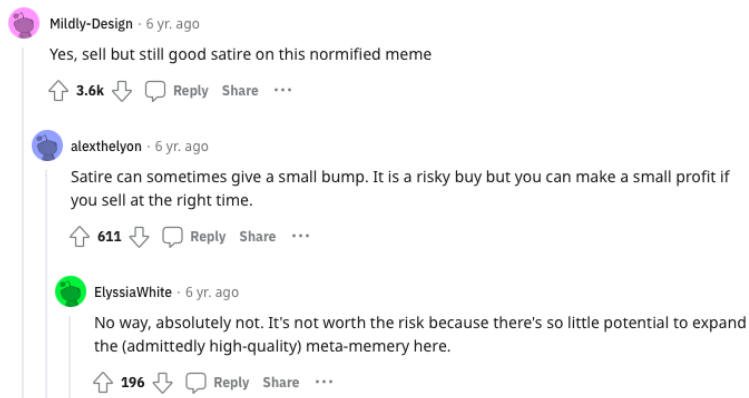


Figure 48. Comments on the post in Figure 47.

This form of community-making does not apply solely to memes: it is also how QAnon works. Through online vernacular criticism, adherents to the cult decrypt and interpret “Q drop” posts. Specific terminology, frameworks, and institutional structures begin to emerge: discussion forums around QAnon have rules, particular influencers and streamers amass followings, and

questions of credibility and trust are negotiated through discussions in the comments section and reference to the tools invented by platforms and communities. A tension with the mainstream also informs discursive practice: in online communities, cultural capital is guaranteed by distance from normies, just as in the real world financial capital is guaranteed by the government.

Covering a Meme: Distracted Boyfriend, Explained

On the afternoon of August 21st, 2017, a solar eclipse swept from South Carolina up through Oregon, crossing the entire United States. Within a narrow band which the newspapers called the “path of totality,” the sun would be 100% covered for a few moments. No event like this had happened since 1918, a century before.¹¹³

That day and night, the internet buzzed with posts and conversations about what was happening in the sky. One meme posted at 2:25 PM, just eighteen minutes before Donald Trump looked at the sun without UV glasses on (and became another meme himself) takes up the same theme.



Figure 51. A Reddit post on /r/meirl from August 21st, 2017, which received over 32,000 likes. [Link](#).

Viral memes are not as rare as eclipses. They are man-made rather than natural, and they tend to stick around longer. But, like the eclipse on August 22nd, a viral meme was an event which everybody who cared to look up would see, a vision which rapidly crossed the country and projected itself on the sky under which everyone lived. The internet in 2017 was a kind of

¹¹³ Melissa Chan, “The 2017 Total Solar Eclipse: Everything You Need to Know,” *Time*, May 1, 2017, <https://time.com/4750899/total-solar-eclipse/>.

sky, full of clouds and stars that hung above the everyday. This sky was shared by everyone but looked different depending on where you stood on the ground below. Memes and other viral phenomena were like astronomical events and weather, flashes and breezes that fill the sky with activity. Journalists and meme researchers were the people charged with interpreting the omens broadcast in this sky — but they themselves were not just observers, but participants as well.

Distracted Boyfriend began life as a stock photo, posted in 2015. It became viral and omnipresent online in late August of 2017. But its first use as a meme occurred much earlier. Thanks to the work of the Meme Documentation Tumblr blog, a project which was active in 2015 and 2017 researching the origins of viral phenomena on Tumblr, the earliest traceable version of a Distracted Boyfriend meme has been traced back to late January of 2017, on a Turkish-language music-themed Facebook group.¹¹⁴ In this original posting, it refers to the English musician Phil Collins and his career shift towards pop music in the 1970s and 1980s.



Figure 52. The original post, retrieved from Meme Documentation. [Link](#).

Meme Documentation’s sleuthing determined that inspiration for the meme format was drawn from a private Turkish political Facebook group, and that earlier versions of the meme (since lost to the sands of time) may have existed. Private Facebook groups are notoriously difficult to search and archive: firstly, because they are closed to non-members and the broader internet, and secondly because they are often small and niche. Know Your Meme at first failed to

¹¹⁴ memedocumentation, “On the Origins of the Man Checking out Another Woman Meme; or, Please Stop Saying It Originates from That Instagram Post,” Tumblr, August 26, 2017, <https://memedocumentation.tumblr.com/post/164625266690/on-the-origins-of-the-man-checking-out-another>.

find the origin, assigning the earliest date to a February 23rd, 2017 Instagram post which did not use the image in an object-labeling context (seen below).¹¹⁵

Tag That Friend



Who Falls In Love Every Month

Figure 53. An early posting of Distracted Boyfriend, on Instagram by @dekhbi. Original page is unavailable. Taken from the Know Your Meme entry.

“There very well could be some earlier origin,” wrote Meme Documentation later on.¹¹⁶ In their research process, they had followed a trail back through earlier posts and posters they communicated with via direct message (some of the same methods used by Know Your Meme) until that trail went dead. It appeared that a series of posts around the end of January using the meme spread widely on a private page called Siyasettin, about Turkish politics, gaining hundreds and even thousands of likes when reposted later on to a public group.¹¹⁷ The Turkish memes eventually inspired a user named Kaan to post a variant of the meme about Phil Collins to a Turkish-language meme page specifically about prog rock with just over 1,300 followers (as of August 2023). But these postings seemed to have started and ended there: the meme was played out on the Turkish page.

Methodologically, it is difficult to find and fix meme origins: there could always be some private Facebook group, some low-follower account on Twitter that has since been deleted, or even some private blog where the meme was first posted but is now inaccessible. But if there’s anything about memes which has been covered in the press, it is the origin. The first section of Know Your Meme articles, after a brief general overview of the meme, is an “Origin” section.

¹¹⁵ Know Your Meme updated the entry, which had been created on August 22nd, 2017, was updated on August 27th, 2017 to reflect the latest findings from Meme Documentation.

¹¹⁶ Meme Documentation. Personal communication to Aidan Walker, August 18th, 2023. E-mail.

¹¹⁷ Six years later, neither group appears to exist.

The first move for journalists covering a meme is also to look back into its origins — in the case of Distracted Boyfriend, several press outlets reached out to the stock photographer Antonio Guillem and his models for comment about the viral meme.

But the focus on Origin, arguably, misses the point. As Meme Documentation wrote to me,

I sometimes feel that there is too much primacy placed on the origin of memes when arguably the whole point of a meme is its viral spread. Isn't it more important to know what a meme looks like or how it is structured than to know where it comes from? Knowing that Distracted Boyfriend came from a Turkish Facebook group instead of an Instagram account doesn't materially change how the meme looks or how people have enjoyed the meme.¹¹⁸

A focus on origin relates back to a sort of print culture fetish for beginnings, for points of authority. Ninety-nine percent of the people who posted Distracted Boyfriend during the week at which it was most culturally relevant had no idea that it came from a Turkish Facebook group, provided it even did come from a Turkish Facebook group. Antonio Guillem and his models never set out to produce a meme when he took his photograph. Since memes are defined by continual transformation and reframing of contexts, the original moment of creation is not necessarily more important than any other. The first version is no more valuable than the thirtieth, no more authoritative than the ten thousandth. The meme has a beginning, but this beginning is not determinative nor particularly relevant for what it later becomes.

The interventions of those covering and describing the meme helped it become what it became. Know Your Meme created an entry for “Man Looking at Other Woman” on August 22nd, 2023 (that Tuesday) and initially tracked the origin back to the August 19th, 2017 posting by @nm161. Know Your Meme entries are dynamic and constantly changing: as more information about the meme and more examples flowed in, Know Your Meme made further changes on the 24th, 25th, 27th, 28th, and 31st of August, most of them by editor-in-chief Don Caldwell.¹¹⁹ On the 24th, “Distracted Boyfriend” was inserted as an alternate name for the meme, as per Know Your Meme’s standard practice of copying the ways in which internet users seem to refer to a meme. On the 28th, the name of the entry itself was changed from “Man Looking at

¹¹⁸ Meme Documentation, E-mail, *idem*.

¹¹⁹ “Distracted Boyfriend,” *Know Your Meme*, August 22, 2017, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/distracted-boyfriend>.

Other Woman” to “Distracted Boyfriend,” and from there the use of that name became more or less standard.

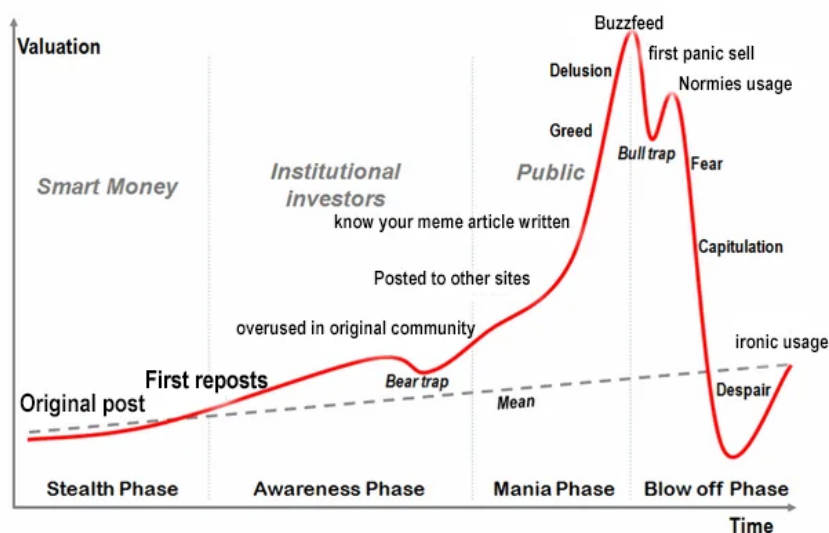


Figure 54. Viral life cycle chart posted to /r/memeconomy by user bogmire, on February 15th, 2017. [Link](#).

This chart, posted in February of 2017 by a user on the subreddit /r/MemeEconomy, theorizes the lifecycle of memes using stock market jargon. In the case of Distracted Boyfriend, the original post on August 19th, 2017, fits into the stealth phase. The Know Your Meme article, at the start of the mania phase, occurred on August 22nd. A first volley of press coverage about the meme emerged on Thursday, August 24th, with articles about it published in Vox, USA Today, Digg, BuzzFeed, The Daily Dot, Teen Vogue and Mashable.¹²⁰ This, for the meme connoisseurs and investors at /r/MemeEconomy, constituted the start of the “Blow off Phase.” Posting of the meme continued through the rest of the week and weekend, with celebrities and brands starting to use the meme. The “Despair” phase mentioned in the graph likely kicked in

¹²⁰ Aja Romano, “Why That ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ Stock Photo Meme Is Suddenly Everywhere,” *Vox*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/8/25/16200526/distracted-boyfriend-other-woman-stock-photo-meme> ; Chloe Bryan, “Meet the Disloyal Man, Star of the Internet’s New Favorite Meme,” *Mashable*, August 23, 2017, <https://mashable.com/article/disloyal-man-meme> ; Brad Esposito, “Everything You Need To Know About The ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ Meme,” *BuzzFeed News*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/bradesposito/distracted-boyfriend> ; Jay Hathaway, “Distracted Boyfriend Meme Is Everyone’s Favorite New Meme,” *The Daily Dot*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/distracted-boyfriend-meme/> ; @jcosco, “Check Out This Hot Meme, Just Don’t Let Your Girlfriend See You,” *Digg*, August 24, 2017, <https://digg.com/2017/guy-looking-at-other-woman-meme-origin#footnote-link-1> ; Melissa Minton, “‘Distracted Boyfriend’ Stock Photo Turned Into a Meme,” *Teen Vogue*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/distracted-boyfriend-meme> ; Brett Molina, “The ‘disloyal Man’ Meme, Explained,” *USA TODAY*, August 25, 2017, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2017/08/25/disloyal-man-meme-explained/600822001/>

around August 31st, as memes featuring Distracted Boyfriend posted to the subreddit started to be captioned with titles like “sorry it took so long.”

Many of the articles were (at least in part) sourced from the Know Your Meme entry and were essentially explainer journalism. A lede paragraph featuring a series of SEO keywords started the piece. Some of the most frequent SEO keywords were “meme,” “boyfriend,” “stock photograph” and the various names under which the meme was titled. The article would then explain the origin of the meme as a stock photo by Antonio Guillem, and a series of examples would be listed, with a few paragraphs of analysis or general reflection on the meme. A core corpus of about ten to twenty Distracted Boyfriend memes continually recur in these explainers: the early famous @nm161 meme which Know Your Meme clocked as the origin in the August 22nd version of its entry is always featured, along with a series of others that were particularly widely spread on Twitter. Some of those which were initially placed in the Know Your Meme entry also make the cut.

In interviews with the journalists involved in creating this first group of articles, a similar method of working emerges: scrolling Twitter to find out about internet phenomena. “Always Twitter,” answered Seth Abramovich, of *The Hollywood Reporter*, when asked about where he discovered memes.¹²¹ “Browsing Twitter,” said Brian Feldman, when asked how he found out about memes.¹²² Distracted Boyfriend was worth writing about because it had “been all over Twitter for at least a week already,” answered Brian Barrett of *Wired* to the same question.¹²³ The majority of embeds seen in articles aggregating examples of Distracted Boyfriend are of Twitter posts, with Reddit following as a distant second.

On August 25th, 2017, the Meme Documentation Tumblr blog posted its updated research and the updated origin for the meme. Know Your Meme went in the same day and changed the entry to reflect this new information. A few more articles about Distracted Boyfriend were published throughout the week, but then a larger crop came about between August 28th and August 30th, after the weekend of August 26th-27th had passed. A group of publications including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Wired*, *Inverse*, *Intelligencer*, and *The Guardian* published interviews and information from Antonio Guillem and the stock photograph models, who had all been contacted earlier in the week. According to Brian Barrett, who wrote the piece

¹²¹ Seth Abramovich to Aidan Walker, “Distracted Boyfriend Questions,” E-mail, August 17, 2023.

¹²² Brian Feldman to Aidan Walker, Personal Conversation. August 9, 2023

¹²³ Brian Barrett to Aidan Walker, “Distracted Boyfriend Questions,” E-mail, July 13, 2023.

in *Wired* about the meme, Guillem replied to all the journalists who separately asked about the stock photo in one big e-mail. “As a reporter this is... not ideal,” Barrett told me.¹²⁴ The goal, for these journalists, had been to get an angle on the story which other publications wouldn’t have, to add something to the conversation and report out some new fact which - for them — would be the perspective of the stock photographer on the situation.¹²⁵

By the end of August, after the publication of this group of articles discussing Guillem and his reaction, attention paid to the meme died down. So did circulation: although there are no numbers on the topic, and no exhaustive registry of memes to consult, by early September, interest had waned. The frenetic pace of edits on the Know Your Meme entry also slowed.

Distracted Boyfriend would continue to see new variations. Through 2018, 2019, and 2020, new versions of the meme would be discovered: old photographs or paintings which depicted the same situation would be labeled as the original stock photograph had been. Different stock photos in the broader series, in particular one which reversed the gender roles by centering on a Distracted Girlfriend with two men — would go viral. In 2019, *The New York Times* would publish the meme on the front page of its Business section, describing a merger between two car companies, and trigger rounds of discourse on Twitter and elsewhere.

The form of internet culture journalism which these writers practiced in 2017 arose from a specific situation with platforms and the distribution of attention. Joey Cosco, of digg.com, described this sort of journalism as an “SEO battle.”¹²⁶ A major goal of all these articles was to appear prominently in a Google search. Thousands of clicks could be drawn from people who saw a new meme like Distracted Boyfriend on social media, wanted to know more about it, and then Googled it. Earlier names for Distracted Boyfriend (like “Man Looking at Woman” or “Three White People Walking”) were in large part inspired by what people would search for when they wanted to know more about the meme. The SEO game was one side of the media business which awarded timeliness and precision more than prestige: as Cosco says, there was “a lot of real estate to mine... it was up for grabs, you didn’t have to be *Wired* or *The New York Times* to win that day.”¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Brian Barrett to Aidan Walker, “Distracted Boyfriend Questions,” E-mail, July 13, 2023.

¹²⁵ Barrett, of *Wired*: “I try to answer the first and/or biggest question I have about something that others haven’t yet.” Abramovitch, of *Hollywood Reporter*: “I would try to find an angle that explained the background.”

¹²⁶ SEO means “search engine optimization,” and refers to the processes and styles of writing (inserting keywords prominently, clustering keywords towards the beginning of copy, backlinking, etc.) which allow posts and articles to be prioritized by Google.

¹²⁷ Joey Cosco, Distracted Boyfriend on Digg.com, interview by Aidan Walker, July 13, 2023.

In 2017, new internet media outlets like digg.com, BuzzFeed, Vox, and Vice were able to compete with the heavy hitters of traditional media—newspapers of record and famous magazines—because of the modes of distribution that online platforms offered. The traditional heavy hitters themselves also found their business models more and more reliant on discovery through social platforms and search engines. The most significant platform was Google, which opened the door for an SEO battle. But other sites included Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and even YouTube—platforms which connected users with content producers, and rewarded producers that made content tailored for circulation on those platforms.

The “explainer” as a journalistic and literary genre grows out of this system and its incentives. The explainer is a brief form, defined visually by its short paragraphs which don’t appear too sprawling on a mobile phone screen, and by its use of multimedia embeds from other websites (most often Twitter). It is direct: what you see in the headline is exactly what you will get in an article. It orients itself around answering specific, clearly phrased questions (such as what a person might Google to learn about a meme). Sometimes these questions are literally the subheadings within the article, and sometimes they are more implicitly stated. Explainers, in essence, do two things: they selectively aggregate a bunch of content (in the case of Distracted Boyfriend explainers, groups of memes posted on the platforms) and then work to contextualize that content.¹²⁸

Explainers are not necessarily reporting in a traditional sense, because there is relatively little research involved and not actually a great deal of writing involved either. Rather, explainers are a kind of summarization and condensation: a writer filters and refines the sweeping tide of internet culture into something digestible. The jungle is pruned, the chaos is neatly folded and filed away. To some extent, writing explainers about internet culture is boring and repetitive: “...this was the eight thousandth meme that says ‘I like this thing, I don’t like this other thing,’” said Brian Feldman, of his explainer on Distracted Boyfriend.¹²⁹ The raw, brainless force of internet culture produces the same patterns over and over again.

In a *New York Times* explainer from 2023 called “Why We Write Explainers: An Explainer,” the *Times* says an explainer is specifically a “mobile-friendly article format,” designed to “break down tricky news topics quickly and clearly—and answer questions that

¹²⁸ Full disclosure: I have written dozens, perhaps hundreds, of explainers and listicles.

¹²⁹ Brian Feldman to Aidan Walker, Personal Conversation. August 9, 2023

readers are searching online.”¹³⁰ The register is “more informal than a traditional article,” and structurally it breaks with previous print journalism stylistic practices such as presenting new information in a descending order of importance: explainers aren’t an inverted pyramid structure, like much traditional reporting, which flows in one gesture from generality to specificity. Rather, they present a staccato series of questions and answers. Web 2.0 considerations—mobile phone and search engine use—are the main factors influencing the form of the article. Seeing form as a compromise between a medium’s demands and a subject or writer’s demands, the explainer emerges as a kind of journalism that exists as a result of a historically contingent negotiation between editors, writers, and algorithms.

In a 2018 article published in *Vox*, the outlet perhaps most representative of “explainer” journalism, David Roberts sees this negotiation more philosophically, arguing that “...the great question of our age is simply, WTF?” by which he means that information online is readily accessible through public records, public social media posts, and the ability to publish anything for free. The question then becomes not “what is going on?” which is readily answerable, but “what does it mean?” Roberts goes on to argue: “these days, it is less about producing new information than it is about gathering information already on the record, evaluating it, and explaining and contextualizing it for an audience, perhaps with some analysis and argumentation for good measure.”¹³¹

Put more bluntly, the explainer is just a thinking person’s listicle. Essentially, the explainer’s function is to put a supposedly final frame and finishing layer on top of an internet phenomenon—to create a standpoint through which, authoritatively, the chaos of an internet phenomenon might be fixed and understood. The explainer aggregates, recontextualizes, and then uses the prestige and authority of a publication or byline to sell the attention that online content draws. This implies an unavoidable tension with the mode of creation favored by meme-makers themselves, who make memes, usually, for free.

¹³⁰Bahr, Sarah. “Why We Write Explainers: An Explainer.” *The New York Times*, June 4, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/04/insider/why-we-write-explainers-an-explainer.html>

¹³¹ David Roberts, “Advice for Journalists: How to Explain Things Well,” *Vox*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/12/7/18117404/advice-for-journalists-news-media>



Figure 55. A post by @dorkusmalorkus_ on Twitter, from August 24th, 2017, which received over 61,000 likes. [Link.](#)

For example, the meme seen here was posted by @DorkusMalorkus to Twitter on August 24th, where it received almost 62,000 likes. That same day, it was featured and embedded inside of a BuzzFeed listicle of Distracted Boyfriend memes.

≡ **BuzzFeed** Quizzes TV & Movies Shopping Videos

15. On that "S":

 **bruce bogbutter**
@dorkusmalorkus_ · Follow



4:50 PM · Aug 24, 2017

♥ 61.9K 💬 Reply ↗ Share

[Read 89 replies](#)

16. On dogs:

 **Reverend Scott**

Figure 56. A screenshot of the August 30th BuzzFeed listicle about Distracted Boyfriend. [Link.](#)

Since the meme was trending and highly visible on the platform that day, it was likely seen on Twitter by the author of the article and aggregated. In comments on the original posting, @DorkusMalorkus_ (Bruce Bogbutter) himself predicted this outcome, and expressed hostility. Bogbutter planned to change their display name to an anti-capitalist message, which would then appear on the embed within Buzzfeed itself. Bogbutter even stated that it was a common practice to change usernames to obscene words once a meme was embedded in an article—until the standard embed code was changed by Twitter itself to stop this form of trolling.¹³²



Figure 57. Comments on the post from Figure 54.

This attitude—which is not exclusive to Bogbutter, but widely shared among other Twitter meme users—mirrors the attitude of admins and posters on the major meme subreddits. The capitalist mainstream, as incarnated by Buzzfeed, is pictured as an enemy. Meme culture positions itself explicitly against the mode of telling about the world and being in the world which algorithmic journalism proposes.

However, the explainer is structurally not very different from the meme itself. The explainer's primary functions are to aggregate and recontextualize, and so are the meme's (albeit on a smaller scale). The reporters cited here, and those interviewed, all wrote essentially the same story based on the same set of facts, but each sought to find their own spin and their own angle — just like memers all working around the same format. The explainer journalists affixed their highly-informed interpretations to publicly available facts just like how meme-makers affixed text captions to a widely-available stock photograph. The explainers circulated on the exact same sites and platforms which the meme circulated on and by the same methods. The

¹³² @DorkusMalorkus, Direct Message to Aidan Walker. September 4th, 2023. X (formerly known as Twitter).

distinction between the explainer and the meme is not like the distinction between the newspaper article (the explainer's ancestor) and the graffiti on the bathroom wall (arguably the meme's ancestor), because they can appear on the same page in the same scroll. Moreover, they perform the same motion mentally: they contextualize, aggregate, and reframe the different voices of people online.

Distracted Boyfriend emerged at a historical moment when this method of contextualization and aggregation was the primary way of doing discourse and communicating online. Rather than going out and saying something, people would reframe things made by other people, add their own commentary, and then post. Their posts would then be indexed, contextualized, and reframed by algorithmic platforms, principally Google but also the social media sites themselves. In its form of layered viewpoint spaces, the meme reflects this process; and in its form of aggregation and contextualization, so does explainer journalism. Individuals from different communities of practice sought to use this system and the content which circulated through it, to do several different things: to make money, to make friends, and to learn about the world.

Conclusion

Going into this thesis, I wanted to write something very specific: a case study of the Distracted Boyfriend meme, looking at it with the kind of focus that somebody writing a thesis about a specific novel or specific author would use to address that text. This is something I felt had not been done before, unless the meme in question was Pepe the Frog. I had read academic articles and books focusing on memes as a general phenomenon or as a form of political action, but nothing that looked at them primarily as pieces of art existing in conversation with other pieces of art. But over time, this has become less about Distracted Boyfriend specifically and more about the *way of thinking* which the form of a meme reflects and suggests to users, viewers, and makers. Marshall McLuhan’s famous adage that the “medium is the message” applies here: the way information comes to us, and what container it is in, affects the way we handle, share, and remember it. The true power of broadcast television at its peak lay less in whatever was on the screen than in the fact that millions of people all separated from each other spatially could watch the same thing at the same time—whether it was the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* or a Presidential debate. Each of these media technologies added new varieties of experience to social life and altered the ways that community-making, cultural exchange, and governance were done.

Media are tools for connecting people to each other and they are also tools for imagining what you cannot directly experience. What shoes are for walking, media are for relating and dreaming. A pair of boots makes you walk differently than a pair of flip-flops, just as a meme moves you differently than a cartoon printed in a newspaper—even if they are about the same subject. What I am trying to get at through an analysis of Distracted Boyfriend are the ways in which memes alter how we understand the world, just as a certain kind of shoe alters the steps we take. Here are some TL;DRs of each chapter and then a conclusion pointing towards future paths for research and things I wish I could’ve done but didn’t get a chance to do here.¹³³

TL;DR of Chapter One

Beginning with a history of stock photography (and of memes based on stock photographs) I introduce the idea of the online platform-archive. Platforms like Getty Images and

¹³³ TL;DR stands for “too long; didn’t read” and is often used to offer a concise summary of very text-heavy posts.

Instagram leverage data and algorithms to channel human actions and creativity into generic categories which can be managed, surveilled, and perpetuated through the market. The aesthetic of these platforms is *genericity*: just like the writing which AI Large Language Models produce, the stock photo is defined by the fact that it is *generic*: immediately identifiable as whatever it is supposed to be, but at the same time weirdly vague and forgettable. I see stock-photo memes like Distracted Boyfriend as a kind of resistance playing against genericity and the platform-archive, by pointing towards how weird stock photos are. But at the same time, memes are rooted in the same discursive conditions as stock photos.

Analyzing the Distracted Boyfriend meme as an image and text, I argue that in August of 2017 the meme was generally used to represent a choice made by an agent (the Boyfriend) between a traditional lifeway (the Girlfriend) and a new option (the Woman in Red). Across postings, the text that captions the Woman in Red is associated with online life, private desires, and personal freedoms; while the Girlfriend is captioned with texts relating to non-online life, public obligations, and social conventions. In some postings of the meme, contextual clues surrounding the post suggest that the Boyfriend should choose to stick with the traditional, “normal” way symbolized by the Girlfriend, while others suggest that he should follow his desire and go with the new woman. However, an ambiguity exists within the memes, where it is often unclear which option is the “right” one. This ambiguity in the meme mirrors the ambiguity we often feel in real life when choosing between a new possibility and an old way of doing things, or when choosing between our own interests and those of the people around us. Distracted Boyfriend was used to discuss many situations and dilemmas that fit this pattern.

I also look at form in image-macro memes, arguing that memes are a lot like other kinds of art. Every Distracted Boyfriend meme is a Distracted Boyfriend meme because it shares certain traits with other Distracted Boyfriend memes, just like how every sonnet is a sonnet because it shares traits with all other sonnets. But what makes the artistic practice of poetry or memes interesting are the actions people take to twist and tweak this repeated structure, playing around and bending it in new ways.

Using Distracted Boyfriend as a jumping-off point, I argue that memes must be considered as image-texts but also as posts. A meme is a performance: a piece of content offered up in real-time to an audience that receives it in a specific online space. Reading memes as performances means reading past just the image and the words. Comments, context, patterns of

user behavior, and the traits of online platforms become a part of the meme as well. In a sense, all of these are issues of interface: how does the computer screen make visible to us very complicated social processes and interactions? What kinds of ideas does the screen or post's organization of information permit us to develop about what it is showing us? What kinds of action does it allow us to take?

Looking at a meme with this in mind led me to consider the role of context and layering. Distracted Boyfriend, and most other memes, present a series of different contexts grafted together onto the same piece of content. In Distracted Boyfriend, a stock photo taken in 2015 lies at the bottom as the first context: it has its own authors, who have their own intentions and were speaking to their own audiences. Then, a meme-maker in 2017 adds text on top of the photo, implicating a different author, a different set of intentions, and a different audience than the one in 2015. Somebody else can then post or repost that meme, captioning it or reframing it and implicating yet another set of authors, intentions, and audiences. From there, an algorithm places the post according to its own preferences and programming. Each of these contexts are malleable, open to reframing and participatory play. Each of them is also preserved underneath the newer ones. The humor of a meme often comes from pitting one context against the other: by using the 2017 captions to make the 2015 photo say something different, or by using a repost to say something other than what the poster intended. Joining linguistics research about memes and "discourse viewpoint spaces" with theory about Early Modern performances on Shakespeare's stage, I argue that this way of treating context as malleable is a way of seeing reality: the meme is a conglomeration of judgments, of representations of other people's representing. There is no final or authoritative context: rather, everything is knotted up in a chain that ends at the viewer's eyeball, and everything presents itself for judgment, classification, and manipulation by a viewer. The real thing being looked at and laughed at in a meme like Distracted Boyfriend isn't the subject represented but the process of various representing acts playing off of each other.

TL;DR of Chapter Two

Chapter Two treats memes as historical sources. The idea is essentially that a meme can be tagged and followed across the internet, just like how a biologist puts a tag on an individual bird to find out about its flock, its migration patterns, and the ecosystem overall. Doing this with

Distracted Boyfriend, I start by discussing different periodizations of the internet and web history overall. Seeking to situate the developments of meme culture over time in the broader context of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, I propose a framework for seeing early image-macro memes as essentially metonymic structures and later image-macro memes as more metaphorical. Early 2010s memes like Advice Animals tend to present a character and a text that is a logical extension of that character, working by *association*. Later 2010s memes tend to follow a logic of *substitution*: the text added on a Distracted Boyfriend meme comes from a totally different context from the photograph. This shift from metonymy to metaphor mirrors the shift in perspective and user behavior between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 — from an internet of more direct connections to one of more indirect and mediated connections.

I then describe the development of object-labeling as a meme genre, tracing it from early examples which mostly featured the image changing while the text remained the same to the period in 2017-2018 when Distracted Boyfriend emerged and the genre saw its peak in popularity. Turning more directly to the historical moment of 2017, I analyze the major platforms that dominated the internet at that time and describe some of the ways in which memes were crossposted between them. The thrust of my argument here is that 2017 was a specific moment in internet history with highly specific conditions for viral spread, one of which was the intermeshing of the platforms all together in an ecosystem.

The chapter closes out with brief studies of two different groups which participated in the viral spread of Distracted Boyfriend in 2017: meme communities on major subreddits and journalists writing explainers about internet culture. For the Redditors, memes like Distracted Boyfriend were a way to generate cultural capital and make community. For the journalists, memes were a way to garner pageviews through a good SEO ranking. Both of these groups interacted not just with Distracted Boyfriend but with the features of the platforms across which it spread. Ultimately, the meme—and the platforms it circulated on—pushed both of these groups to think in different ways than they otherwise would.

Future Directions

One clear direction for future research would be focused case studies on other meme formats. In particular, memes earlier than Distracted Boyfriend, for which the archival record is

even more sparse, should be studied and analyzed before they disappear. An analysis of other memes rooted in other eras of the internet could lead to a broader and clearer picture than the one I have tried to present here.

However, the topic which really demands investigation is the way memes (and other internet media) make us think. As Hito Steyerl suggested in 2013, the internet has “crossed the screen” and our reality is increasingly a consequence of what is done online rather than the other way around.¹³⁴ Real geography shifts to meet the represented geography on Google Maps, online misinformation campaigns turn into real-life movements, and hot takes begin to precede the events they supposedly comment on. Already in 2017 (and even more so now in 2023) what happened on the internet was beyond mere communication or commerce. Memes are a small but significant part of that civilizational shift.

Johanna Drucker writes of a future where “interface, increasingly, will be the experience of being in the world.”¹³⁵ Computers have established themselves as middlemen in our commerce with reality, and most people touch a computer interface more often than they touch any other object besides clothing. Along with these interfaces come the logics and systems which knit them together. These systems, increasingly woven into work, play, and leisure, promise to speak for every moment and from every place—to catch all the world in a digital net.

The study of the ways of thinking that a meme reflects is ultimately the study of these systems and the ways in which cultural production might be structured on them. Memes are complicit in these systems since they are objects that move through them and depend on them, but they are also important sites of resistance and interference.

For phenomenologist Byung-Chul Han, the computerization of our world represents “the end of things,” a condition in which non-human “things” are replaced by human-mediated “infomates,” and more and more of life is integrated into these impersonal, automated systems—eliminating chance, freedom, and unstructured experience.¹³⁶ Rather than encountering a rock or a tree, people will encounter the Metaverse-rendered rock or Metaverse-rendered tree, they will see—instead of the thing itself—the explanatory, objectifying frame which interface has placed around the thing. For Han—and for William Carlos Williams, mentioned in the

¹³⁴ Steyerl, Hito. "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" e-flux journal 49 (November 2013). Accessed March 22, 2023. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.

¹³⁵ Drucker, 220

¹³⁶ Han, Byung-chul. *La fin des choses*. Actes Sud, 2022.

introduction of this thesis—the “thing” has a mystical side to it. Once all is explained, leveraged, and registered, will there be anything left to believe in?

Playing online poker is different from playing real poker because the chance outcomes on which the game depends—like the possibility that such-and-such cards will be drawn and dealt, or that so-and-so will interpret the batting of an eye as meaning this-or-that—are generated by an objective logic rather than a real-life thingness. On a computer, chances are random because they have been programmed to be random, not because they actually are. What formerly would just *happen* is now mediated. This difference between the digital Jack of Hearts and the real Jack of Hearts, materially, is the difference between an object and a thing. Real cards, held in the fingers, can be things other than a poker hand: paper rectangles, drawings of people, a smooth cool surface. The digital cards are harder to separate from the game in which they are involved: they may be, upon closer inspection, pixels or parcels of code, but then every thing else on the screen is made of that too—the digital cards are not distinct from the chips, the table, or the other computer players, the way real-life cards are. Real-life cards are stubborn, singular, and random things.

In a world where the hands we’re dealt are digital—where we must meet reality through a digital interface rather than head on, and where living authentically requires an engagement with these systems—the question of how to make these objectifying systems work for us instead of against us is a really significant one. The study of memes, their spread, and their aesthetics can offer a clue into how these systems push people to think and behave. Paths forward, for subsequent investigations, could turn not just towards a close reading of how a meme moves attention but to broader questions of epistemology and phenomenology: what is the status of truth or knowledge in a meme? How do memes-makers and communities establish the authority to interpret reality? These questions flow into broader political problems. If a republic must use digital media to deliberate, inform, and affirm itself, how can it do so in a way that promotes the dignity and autonomy of citizens? In a world where it is not responsible or even possible to unplug, how can the internet be used to liberate rather than to oppress?

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