





By Means of Memes

Fresh meme of the day



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## By Means of Memes



Fresh meme of the day





## **Bird Box conspiracy**

La prima volta che ho scoperto l'esistenza di *Bird Box* non sapevo si trattasse di *Bird Box*: sulle mie timeline social continuavano a comparire meme di persone bendate. Solo in un secondo momento, quando cioè Netflix mi ha sbattuto il trailer davanti, ho ricollegato le immagini al film, ma continuavo a non capirne i riferimenti e l'ironia. Se ho deciso di guardare *Bird Box*, quindi, è anche perché il fatto che si producessero meme a riguardo certificava in qualche modo la sua importanza, il fatto che fosse degno di essere visto e discusso. Oltre al desiderio di capire quegli stessi meme, di partecipare a una conversazione da cui mi sentivo escluso.

## By Means of Memes

### Archaeology of the present

«I DISCOVERED THE MEMES OF 'BIRD BOX' EVEN BEFORE I KNEW ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF THE FILM ITSELF. [...] I DECIDED TO WATCH THE FILM BECAUSE THE FACT THAT PEOPLE WERE DOING MEMES ABOUT IT MEANT IT WAS WORTH VIEWING AND DISCUSSING. AND ALSO BECAUSE I WANTED TO PARTICIPATE IN A CONVERSATION FROM WHICH I FELT EXCLUDED.»

Emanuele Atturo, 'Meme marketing'  
(“Esquire”, Jan. 25, 2019)

## By Means of Memes



Pervasive memes: they are everywhere, about everything

Definitely a peculiar and yet pivotal object of inquiry

Memes both convey and shape cultural contents

«LONG LIVE THE MEMES! SOME STILL DISMISS THEM AS SMALL THINGS BUT IN VIRAL IMAGES WE CAN FIND THE WHOLE ZEITGEIST.»

258.990 views | Mar.19, 2020, 09:19pm EDT

# Laughing During A Crisis: The Best Coronavirus Memes



Rebecca Bellan Contributor  
Social Media

Laughing at corona memes like



## By Means of Memes

Pervasive memes: they are everywhere, about everything

Definitely a peculiar and yet pivotal object of inquiry

Mememes both convey and shape cultural contents



**“Siate affamati,  
siate folli,  
consumate dai  
trenta ai trentacinque  
Winner Taco al giorno.”**

**Steve Jobs**  
Genio visionario, guida spirituale,  
tachiano insospettabile



“Ridateci il Winner Taco (2011-2014)”

## By Means of Memes

Infomedia, social media and marketing practices are soaked in memes

**Treccani**  
Domenica alle 17:50 · 🌐

Nonostante il fauno che gli suona il corno nell'orecchio, Marte continua a dormire, apparentemente privo di energie. Un altro degli esserini che gli giocano intorno si è infilato nella sua corazza; altri due, che non compaiono nel particolare selezionato, gli hanno preso l'elmo e la lancia. Fuori scena c'è anche Venere che lo osserva, forse con una punta di preoccupazione in vista del momento in cui il dio della guerra si risveglierà.

La tavola "Venere e Marte" di Sandro Botticelli risale al 1482-1483; per vederla dal vivo dovrete recarvi alla National Gallery di Londra, ma la trovate riprodotta anche in "Botticelli", il volume che abbiamo dedicato di recente al maestro fiorentino ([bit.ly/BotticelliOpere](http://bit.ly/BotticelliOpere)).

Italia in recessione, tensioni diplomatiche, povertà, inquinamento, città militarizzate, mancanza di prospettive,



Italia in recessione, tensioni diplomatiche, povertà, inquinamento, città militarizzate, mancanza di prospettive, disagio psicologico dilagante a tutte le età



un concorrente egiziano vince il Festival di Sanremo:

👍👎🗨️ 7,6 mila

Commenti: 721

👍 Mi piace    💬 Commenta    ➦ Condividi

Italian encyclopedia Treccani's FB page (2019)



shareacoke.com (2014)



## By Means of Memes



A screenshot of a Facebook post from Luigi Di Maio. The post includes a profile picture, the name 'Luigi Di Maio', and a timestamp of '5 dicembre 2018'. The text of the post discusses 'navigator' memes and tweets, mentioning a professor from the University of Mississippi and a plan to import such figures to Italy. The post shows 2486 reactions (likes, loves, and funny faces), 778 comments, and 370 shares. At the bottom, there are icons for 'Mi piace', 'Commenta', 'Condividi', and a globe icon.

**Luigi Di Maio**  
Mi piace questa Pagina · 5 dicembre 2018 · 🌐

Oggi ho visto decine di meme fantastici e tweet divertenti sul "navigator" 😂  
In realtà saranno dei tutor esperti in gestione risorse umane. È una figura che c'è negli Stati Uniti ed è molto utile a chi cerca lavoro. Vogliamo importare e utilizzare questa figura in Italia applicando il piano del professor Parisi dell'università del Mississippi per il percorso di formazione dei lavoratori all'interno del percorso del Reddito di cittadinanza. I navigator seguiranno le persone nel percorso di formazione e ricerca del lavoro.  
Entro Natale ci sarà il decreto e conoscerete ogni singolo dettaglio!

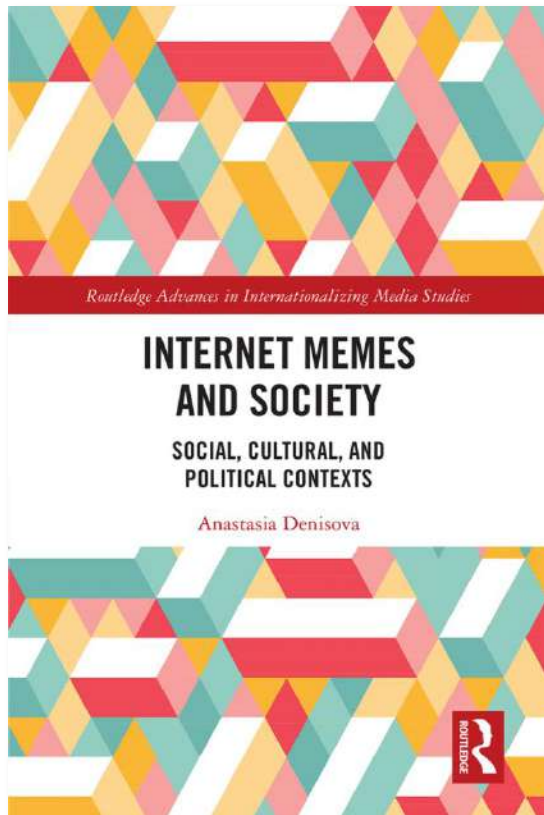
👍❤️😂 2486    Commenti: 778    Condivisioni: 370

👍 Mi piace    💬 Commenta    ➦ Condividi    🌐

«TODAY I HAVE SEEN A LOT OF GREAT MEMES AND FUNNY TWEETS ABOUT THE 'NAVIGATOR'.»

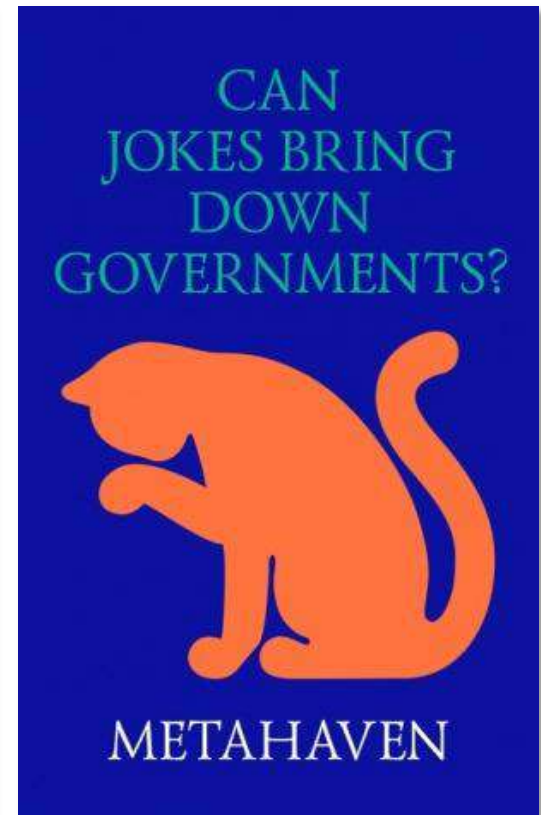
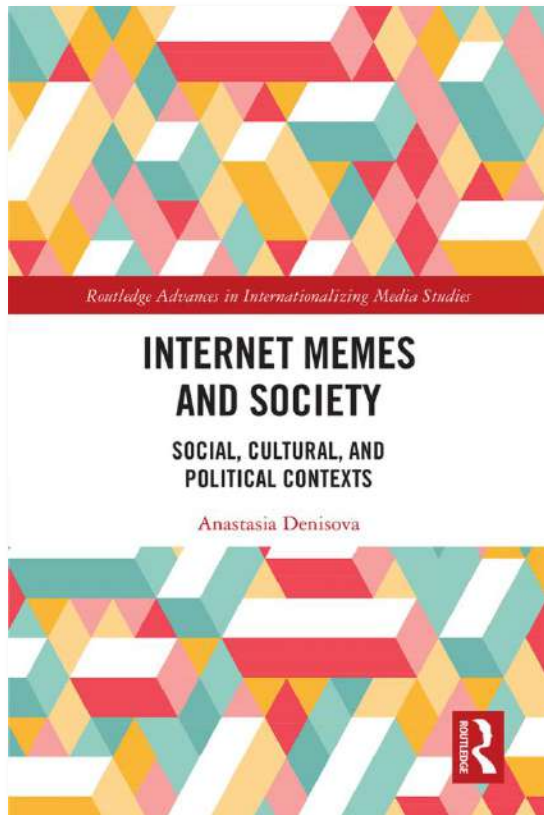
Official FB account of Luigi Di Maio, leader of the Five Star Movement and Italian Minister of Labour, Dec. 5, 2018

## By Means of Memes



As of June 2019, at least 5 books about memes and politics were published by world-class publishing imprints

## By Means of Memes



As of June 2019, at least 5 books about memes and politics were published by world-class publishing imprints

2013



## By Means of Memes



'Troll face', Turin (2014)

**Meaning is obvious.** The problem is meaning-making: signification; how we make sense of things by turing them into signs.

Formalisation

Modelisation

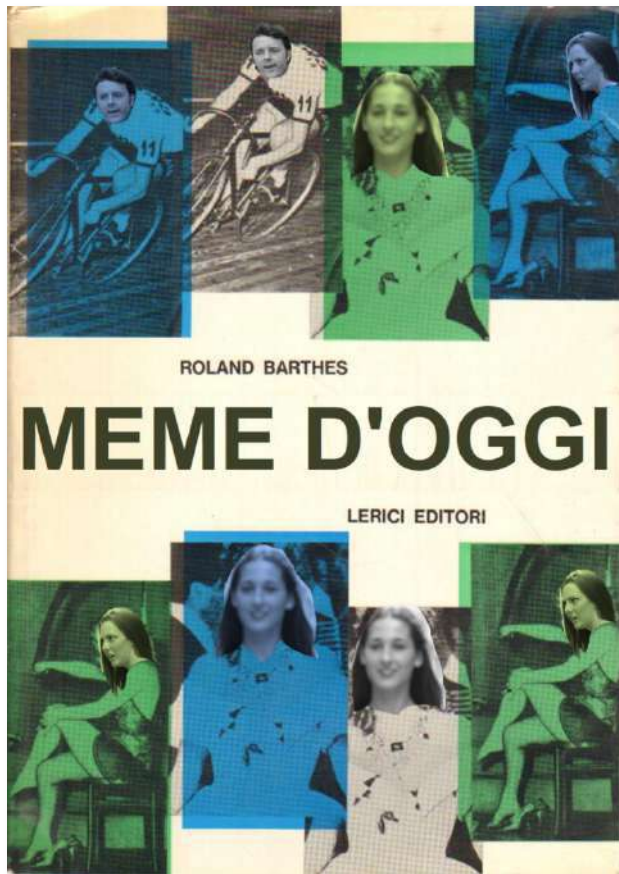
Categorisation

Differences and similarities beyond common sense

Systemic understanding

Cultural understanding

## By Means of Memes

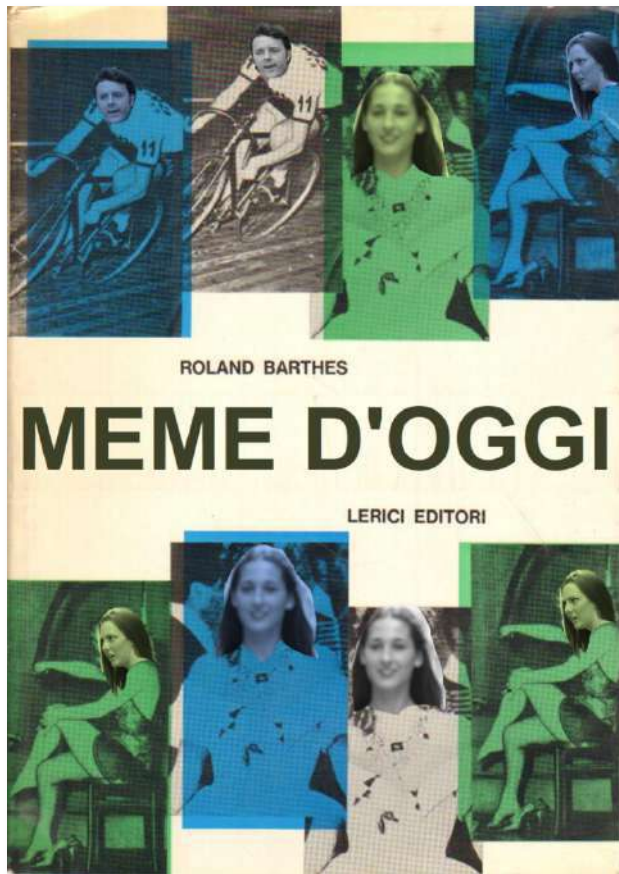


Sociosemiotics and  
the semiotics of  
culture

Saussure, Hjelmslev,  
Greimas, Barthes,  
Eco, Lotman etc.

Any possible object  
of analysis processed  
as a 'text'

## By Means of Memes



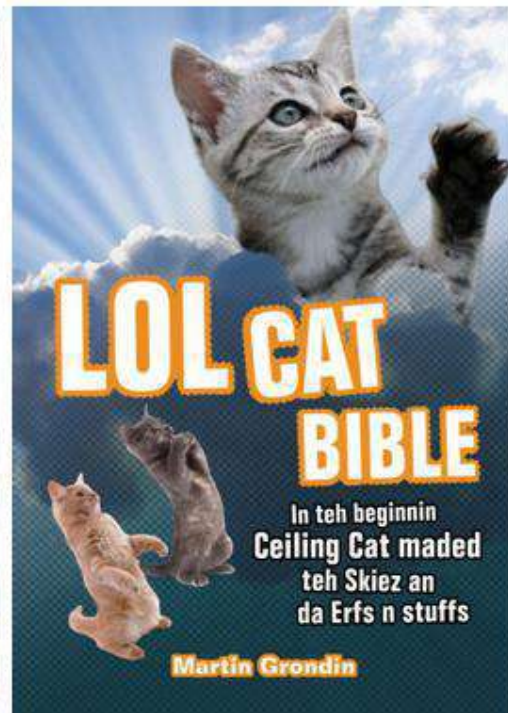
The notion of 'myth'

Lévi-Strauss'  
'bricolage'

Barthes' connotation,  
naturalisation, middle-  
class ideology

Ortoleva's 'low-  
intensity myth'





'Happy Cat' ([2003] 2007) and 'LOLcat Bible' (2010)



Filthy Frank's 'Do the Harlem Shake' (2013)

## By Means of Memes

### Mememes as virality

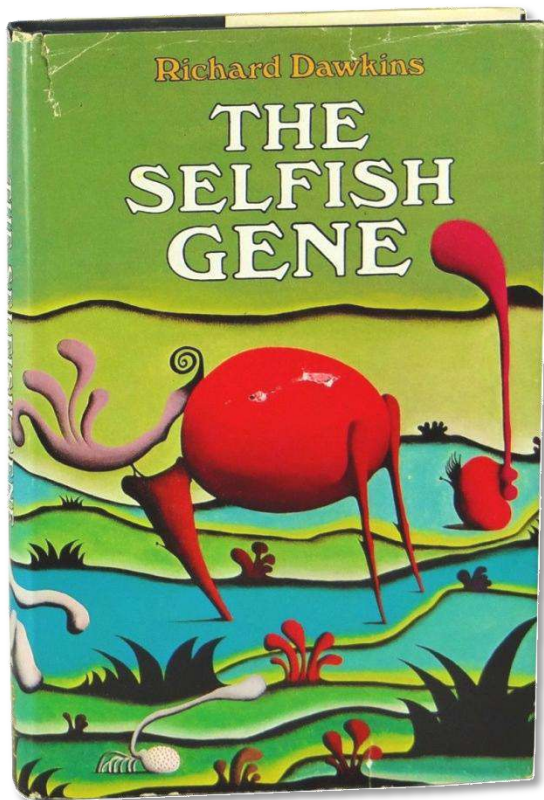
#### 'THE CATTETTA STONE'

Funny pictures of cats (LOLcats) speaking a peculiar broken English (LOLspeak or Kitty Pidgin) [Fiorentini 2013]

#### HARLEM SHAKE

From Baauer's song (2012) to Filthy Frank's video (2013) and beyond, the greatest grassroots phenomenon to date

## By Means of Memes



### Terminology and etymology

Internet phenomena  
Viral contents  
(Internet) memes

A replicable unit of information  
A cultural gene

«Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.»  
(Dawkins 1976)

## By Means of Memes



C. Nolan, 'Inception' (2010)  
'Viruses of the mind' (Dawkins 1991)  
'Language is a virus' (Burroughs 1962)



"Wired", 'La formula della viralità' (2015)  
[wired.it/tv/3nds-formula-viralita](http://wired.it/tv/3nds-formula-viralita)

### Virality and the troubles thereof...

Spreading contagiously, like wildfire, breaking the 'tipping point' etc.

Terminological confusion

Vagueness

Euristical emptiness

Lack of systematic studies

Dispersiveness and ephemerality

The role of chance



## By Means of Memes



Kenneth Goldsmith  
'Printing out the Internet' (2013)

Why...

do we like such (stupid) things?  
do we make such (stupid) things?  
do we waste so much time on the  
Internet?

do such (stupid) things are so  
successful?

Are such (stupid) things  
*actually* stupid?

## By Means of Memes



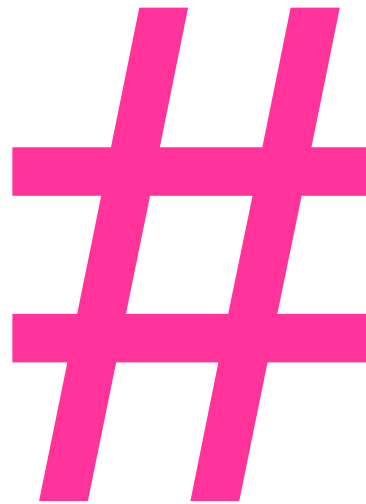
:-) [smile]:  
created by Scott  
E. Fahlman on  
UseNet (Sept. 19,  
1982 )

Can we...

find patters within such a  
heterogeneous realm of  
phenomena?

understand their basic  
mechanisms of functioning?

#hashtag:  
launched by  
Chris Messina on  
Twitter (Aug. 23,  
2007)



## By Means of Memes



'Pepe the Frog' (Matt Furie, 2005)  
appropriated by so-called 'alt-right'  
during the 2016 US presidential  
campaign

Virality as the platform for...

Hoaxes and fake news

Pseudoscience

Conspiracy theories

Hate speeches

Digital legends

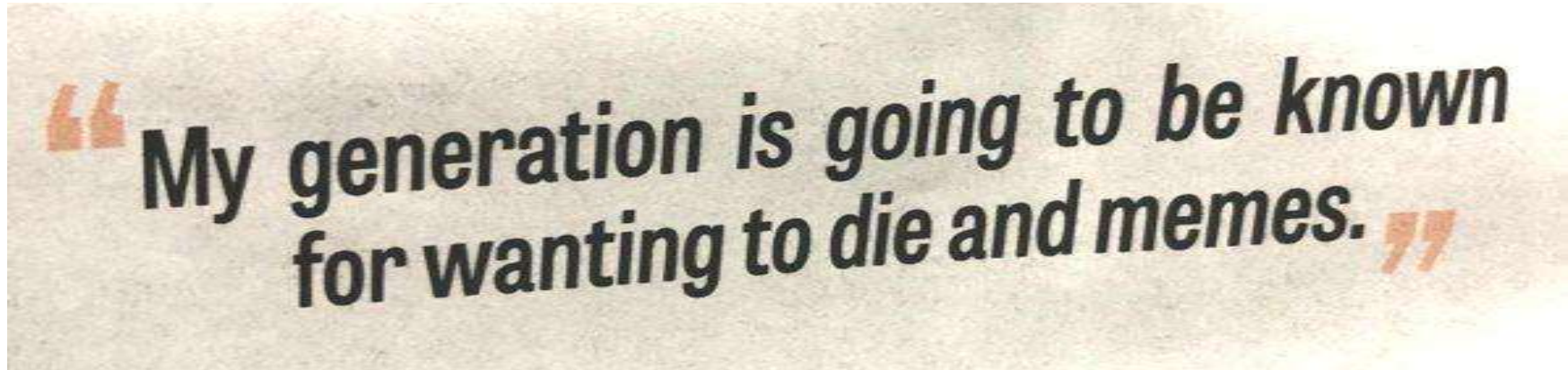
Misinformation

Post-truth (OED WotY 2016)

Post-irony



## By Means of Memes



Tumblr quote, in Katrina David e Kaylen Wittmeyer,  
'Millennials' ("The Vector", Vol. XCIV, Issue 3, Sept. 2017)  
[issuu.com/thenjitvector/docs/f17-3-castro](http://issuu.com/thenjitvector/docs/f17-3-castro)  
[njitvector.com/2017/09/millennials](http://njitvector.com/2017/09/millennials)

Raffaele Alberto Ventura  
and Vittorio Parisi:  
memes as the art of the  
"class with no leisure"  
[It. «classe disagiata»],  
2017



## By Means of Memes

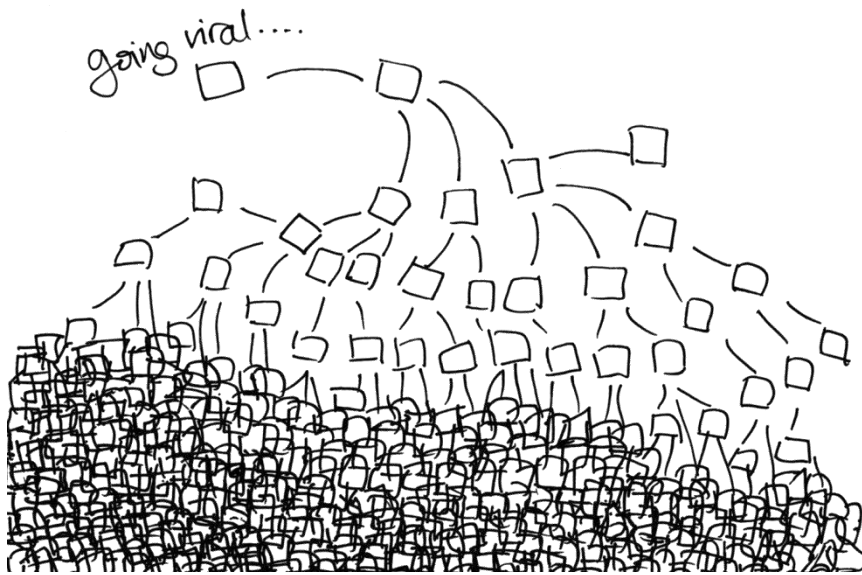
### Two types of virality...

The spread of a given piece of media or text (token) VS. The spread of the practice of creating other ones out of it (type)

Virality proper vs. memeticness / memeticity

«If it doesn't spread it's dead»:  
Stickiness VS. spreadability  
(Jenkins *et al.* 2013)

Replicability VS. customizability  
Copying VS. translating



[bit.ly/going-viral-scheme](http://bit.ly/going-viral-scheme)

## By Means of Memes



Tatia Pilieva for Wren, 'First Kiss'  
(March 10, 2014, [youtu.be/lpbDHxCV29A](https://youtu.be/lpbDHxCV29A))



## By Means of Memes



Tatia Pileva for Wren, 'First Kiss'  
(March 10, 2014, [youtu.be/lpbDHxCV29A](https://youtu.be/lpbDHxCV29A))

"First Sniff" - the canine variety.



'First Sniff' ([youtu.be/026lsHhSupE](https://youtu.be/026lsHhSupE))

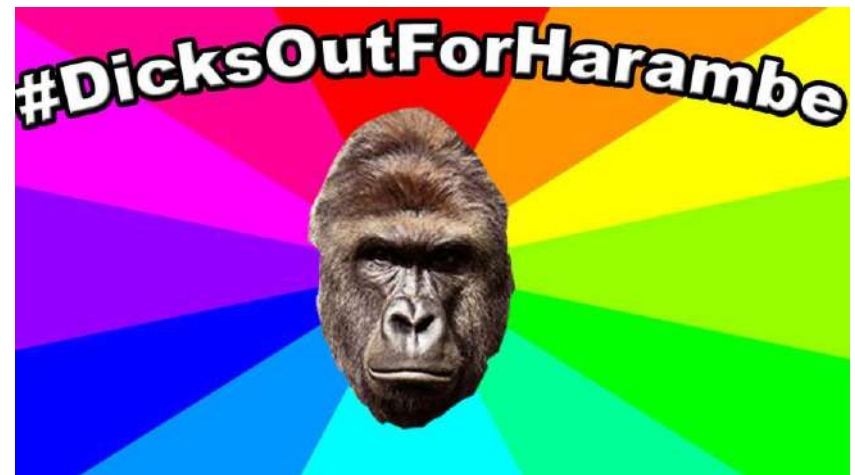
## By Means of Memes

### Virality vs. memeticity

Mememes are viral because they thematise virality: they talk, they mock, they parody virality

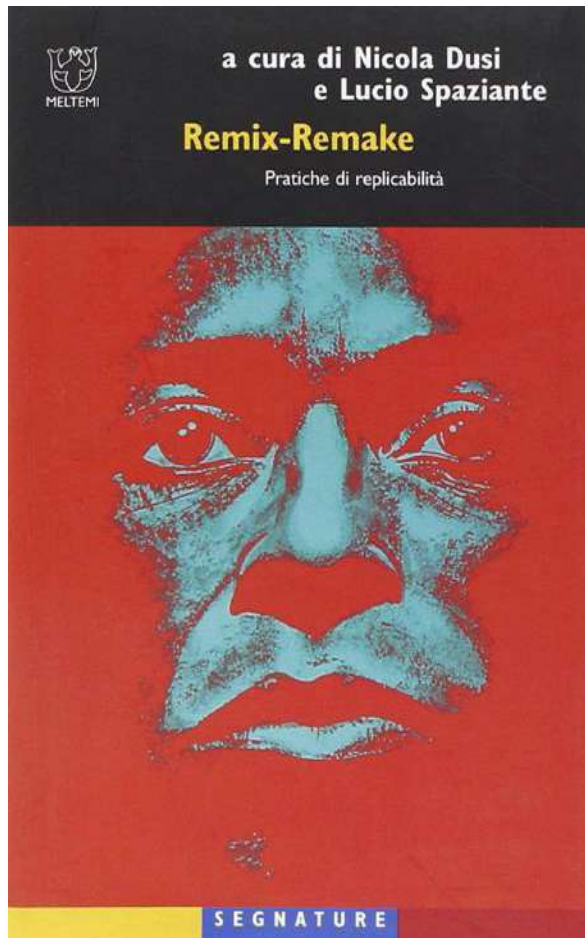


Pharrell Williams, 'Happy' (2013)



Harambe (2016)

## By Means of Memes



### Memetic practices

Re-use, re-semantisation,  
appropriation, negotiation of meaning

Jakobson (neo-vernacular practices)

Lévi-Strauss (bricolage)

Bakhtin (dialogism)

Kristeva (intertextuality)

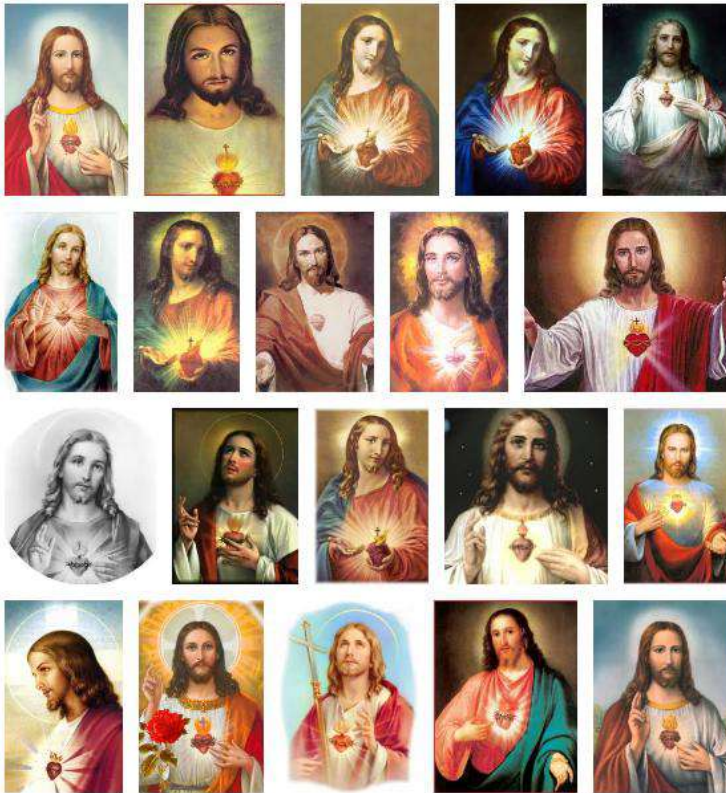
Genette (hypertextuality)

Dusi & Spaziante (replica practices)

Ludic transformation and imitation  
(parodies and pastiches) of pre-  
existing pieces of texts/media



## By Means of Memes

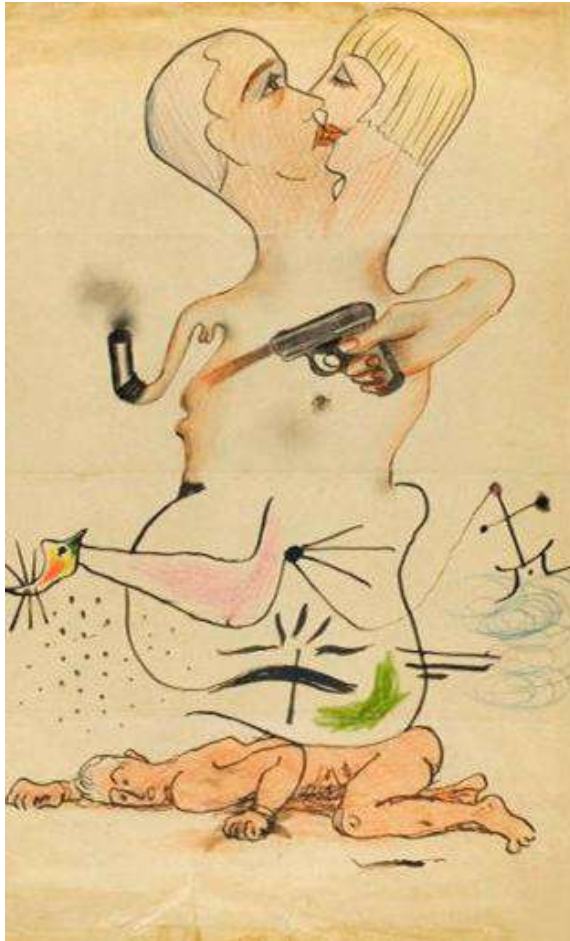


Roelens (2017): the 'propaganda Fides' of Andachtsbilder (devotional images)

### Prehistory of memes

Vernacular religious iconography  
Collaborative and anonymous art  
Political catch-phrases  
Culture jamming

## By Means of Memes



### Prehistory of memes

Vernacular religious iconography  
Collaborative and anonymous art  
Political catch-phrases  
Culture jamming

Exquisite corpse by Man Ray, Joan  
Miró, Max Morise, Yves Tanguy  
(1928)

## By Means of Memes



Riitta Ikonen (2003)

### Prehistory of memes

- Vernacular religious iconography
- Collaborative and anonymous art
- Political catch-phrases
- Culture jamming



## By Means of Memes



### Prehistory of memes

Vernacular religious iconography  
Collaborative and anonymous art  
Political catch-phrases  
Culture jamming

Feminist slogan on the cover of  
“Linus” magazine (Jan. 1974)

## By Means of Memes



### Linguistic prosthesis

«The English language cannot fully capture the depth and complexity of my thoughts, so I'm incorporating emojis into my speech to better express myself. Winkie face.»

Gina Linetti  
'Brooklyn 9/9'  
(S1E22, 2014)

## By Means of Memes

An ontology on its own

FB → Upload → Edit → Alt



Il testo alternativo generato automaticamente per questa foto è:

*4 persone, persone che sorridono, meme e testo*



Il testo alternativo generato automaticamente per questa foto è:

*3 persone, persone che sorridono, persone in piedi e testo*

## By Means of Memes



Tea Falco in the Italian TV series '1992' (2015)



Official Donald Trump's Twitter account (May 31, 2017)

### Semantics

On the figurative level  
A semantic hook which activates users' engagement

Punctum (Barthes 1980)  
A mistake, lato sensu

Something odd, whimsical  
(Shifman 2014), out of place

Polarisation



Pepper Spray Cop vs. Occupy (2011)



## By Means of Memes

### Semantics

On the figurative level  
A semantic hook which activates  
users' engagement

Punctum (Barthes 1980)  
A mistake, lato sensu

Something odd, whimsical  
(Shifman 2014), out of place

Polarisation

## By Means of Memes



“Is this dress white and gold,  
or blue and black?”  
(Tumblr, Feb. 26 2015)

### Semantics

On the figurative level  
A semantic hook which activates  
users' engagement

Punctum (Barthes 1980)  
A mistake, lato sensu

Something odd, whimsical  
(Shifman 2014), out of place

Polarisation



Expo2015  
(Feb. 9)



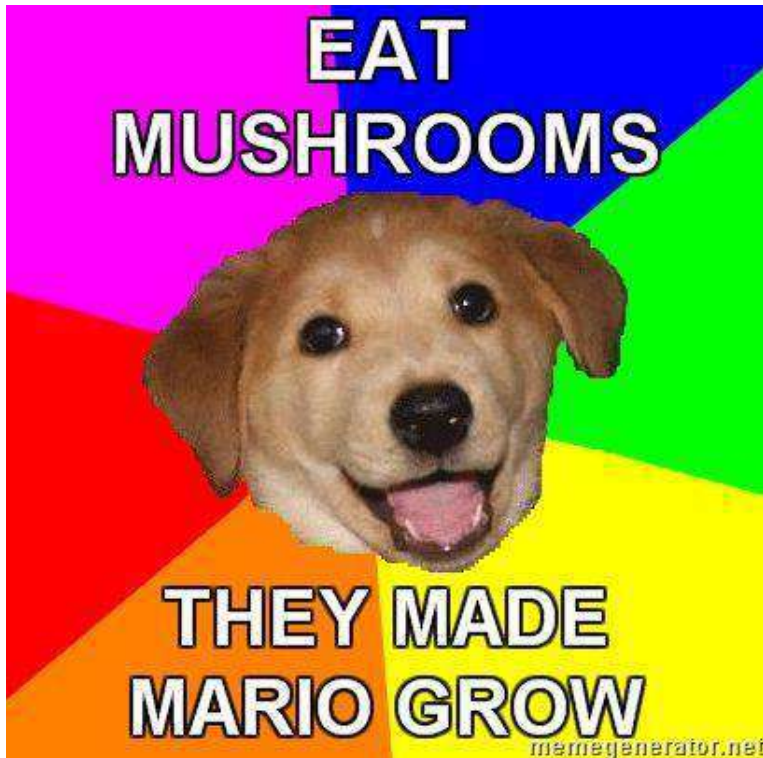


Expo2015  
(Feb. 9)





## By Means of Memes



'Advice dog' (2007)

### Syntax

On the plastic-enunciative level  
A syntactic hook which enables  
users' agency

Modularity, formularity  
Symbiotic memes (Constine 2009)  
Templatability (Rintel 2013)

Eco: ricketiness ('sgangherabilità')  
Geninasca: serial syntagms  
(eg. triadic)



1939




## Syntax

On the plastic-enunciative level  
A syntactic hook which enables  
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Modularity, formularity  
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Eco: ricketiness ('sgangherabilità')  
Geninasca: serial syntagms  
(eg. triadic)

# By Means of Memes

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

The Harlem Shake formula (Feb. 2013)

## By Means of Memes



**Matteo Salvini**

Ora

Stanotte un barcone di ROM ha RIDOTTO A BRANDELLI l'antico vaso che andava portato in salvo.  
A casa!



**Matteo Salvini**

Ora

Un gommone di immigrati ha letteralmente messo a fuoco un BARCONE di immigrati.  
E poi siamo noi i razzisti...

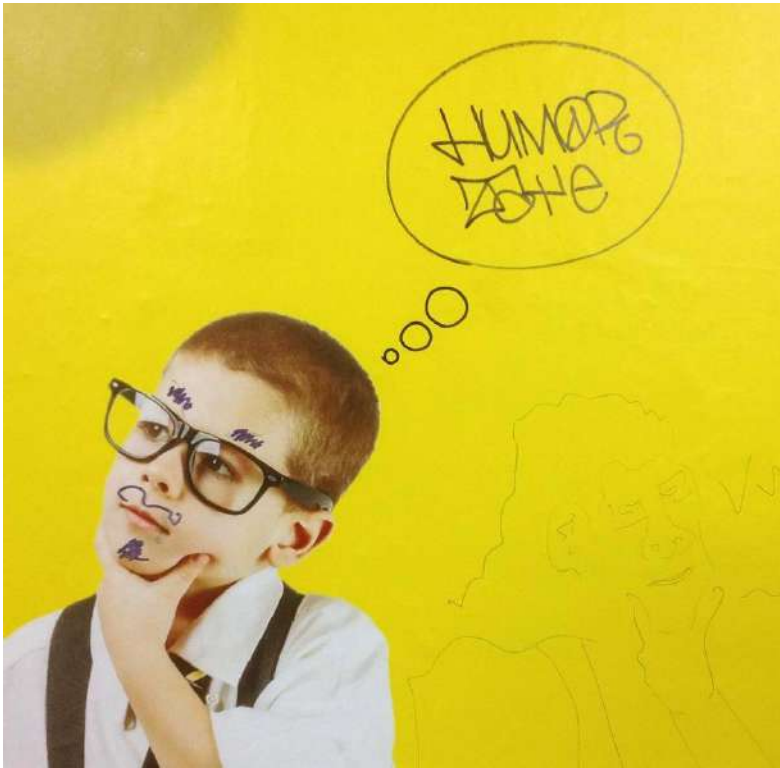
Automatic generators

Eg. 'Generatore automatico di post di Salvini' (Dec. 3, 2014)

[gensav.altervista.org](http://gensav.altervista.org) and [fb.com/gensav1](https://fb.com/gensav1)



## By Means of Memes



The  
blank-spaces-in-the-poster  
effect

## By Means of Memes

YOU DON'T SAY?



Emoticonised Nicolas Cage, 2011  
(from 'Vampire's Kiss', 1989)

### Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

1. **Sharing**  
(ready-made, cliché)

Eg. emoticons

## By Means of Memes



Kim Jong-un

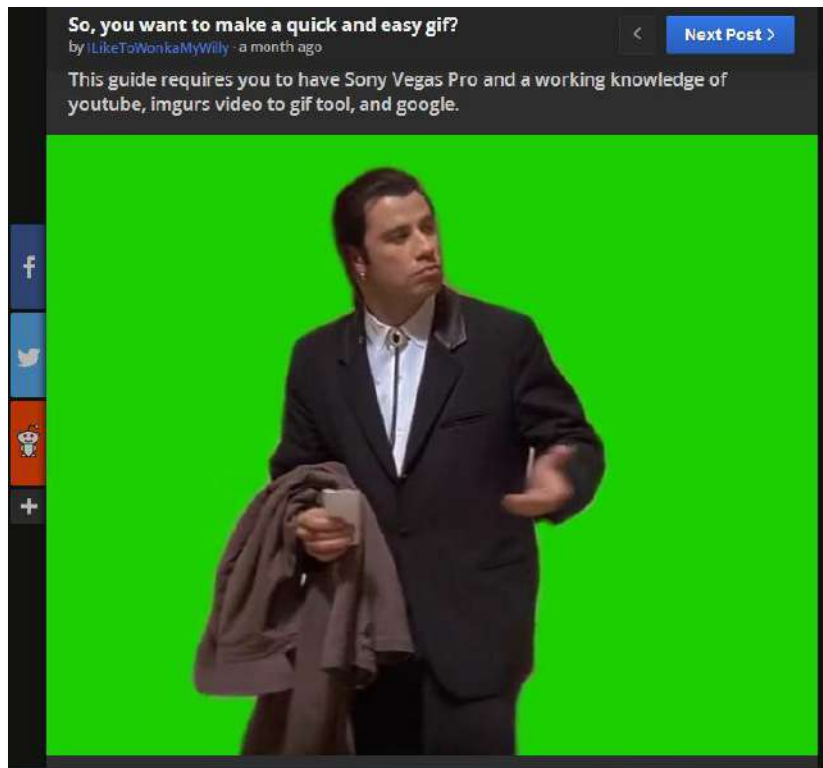
### Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

#### 2. Transformation (sample & remix)

Eg. image macros, caption  
memes, meme icons,  
dubbed & mashup videos

## By Means of Memes



### Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

2. Transformation  
(sample & remix)

Eg. image macros, caption  
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dubbed & mashup videos

'Confused Travolta' (Nov. 2015)  
from Tarantino's 'Pulp Fiction' (1994)



## By Means of Memes



'Hitler reacts' (2006)

Bruno Ganz in 'The Downfall' (2004)

### Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

#### 2. Transformation (sample & remix)

Eg. image macros, caption memes, meme icons, dubbed & mashup videos

## By Means of Memes



'Sellotape' (2014),  
Jim Carrey from 'Yes Man' (2008)

### Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

3. Imitation (remake)  
Mimetic (Shifman)  
Performative (Banks)

Eg. re-enactments, fads,  
challenges, flash-mobs

## By Means of Memes



Miley Cyrus, 'Wrecking Ball' (Sept. 3. 2013) and Steve Kardynal on ChatRoulette

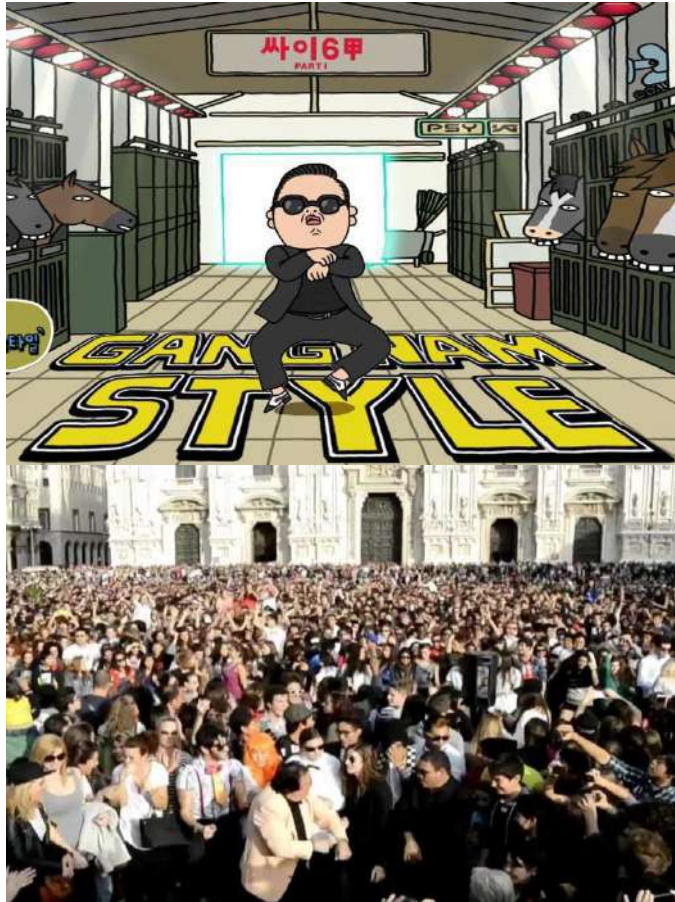
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## By Means of Memes



Psy, 'Gangnam Style' (July 15, 2012)

### Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

3. Imitation (remake)  
Mimetic (Shifman)  
Performative (Banks)

Eg. re-enactments, fads,  
challenges, flash-mobs



## By Means of Memes



Charlie bit my finger (2007)  
youtu.be/\_OBlgSz8sSM

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3 radicals (Frye 1957)

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# By Means of Memes

Charlie bit my finger (2007)  
youtu.be/\_OBlgSz8sSM



## Typology

3 radicals (Frye 1957)

1. **Memes degree zero**  
(ready-made, cliché)
2. **Symbiotic memes**  
(Memes stricto sensu)
3. **Imitation (remake)**

## By Means of Memes



«I WILL GIVE YOU REPETTO BACK»

'Berlusconi restituisce cose'  
(FB page, Feb. 4, 2013, 102k likes)

### Typology

Referential memes

(context-specific)

Double thematisation (no rheme)

Shared knowledge

VS.

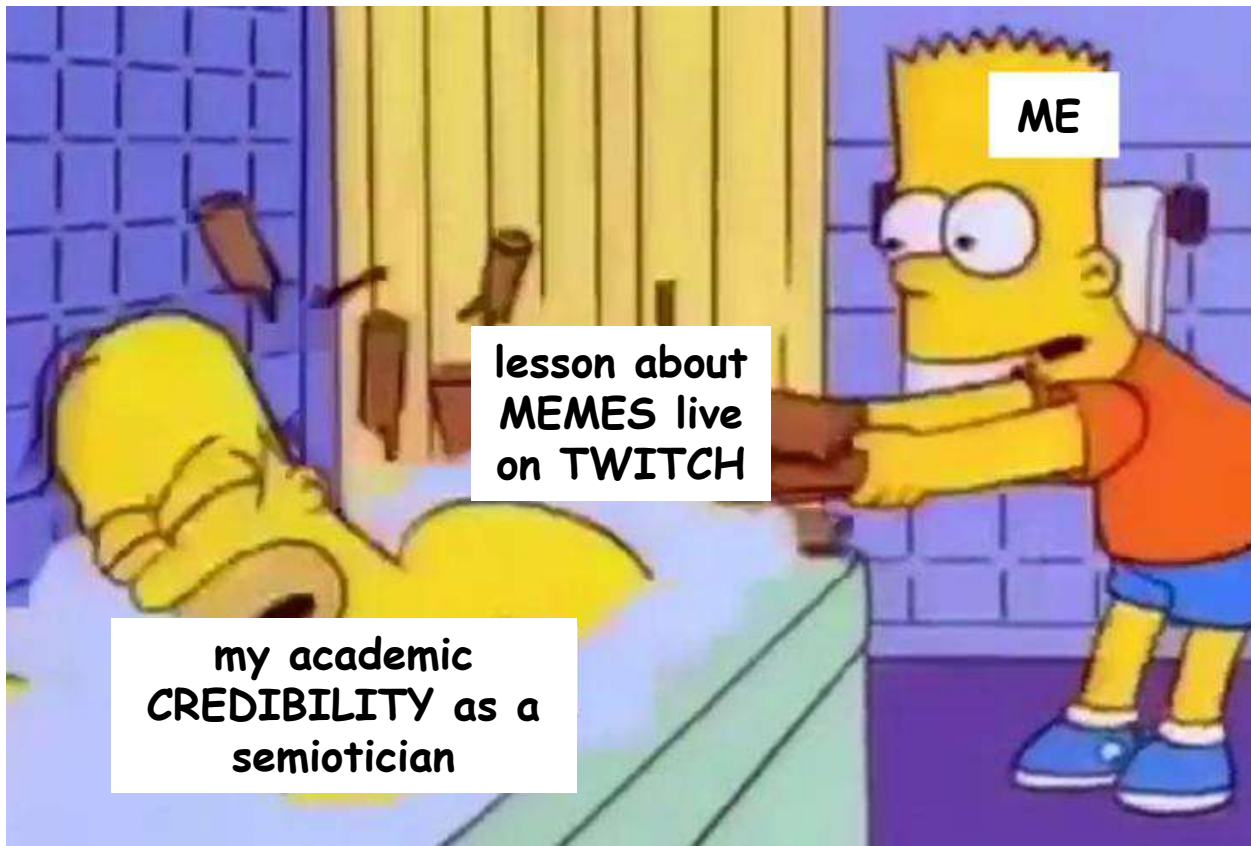
Allegorical memes

## By Means of Memes



'Bart hits Homer with a chair' (2018), from 'The Simpsons' episode 'A Milhouse Divided' (1996)

## By Means of Memes



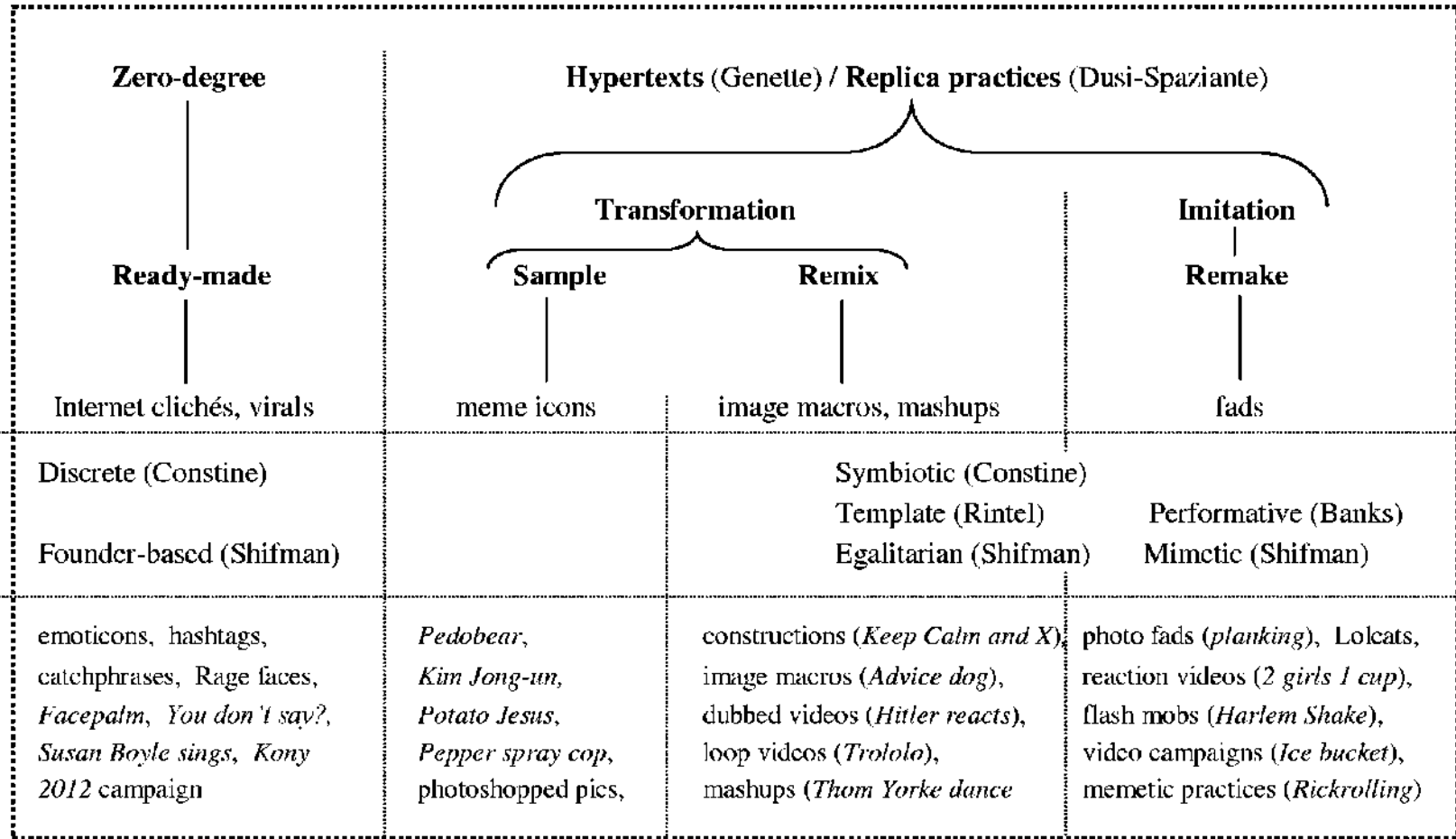
'Bart hits Homer with a chair' (2018), from 'The Simpsons' episode 'A Milhouse Divided' (1996)



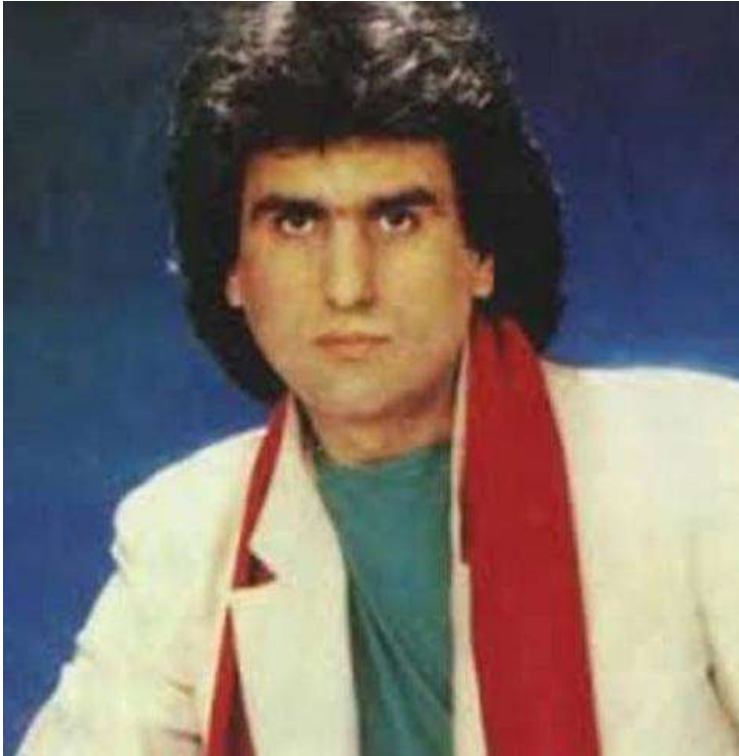
# MEMETIC CONTINUUM

Minimum User's agency / Spreadability (Jenkins) Maximum →

Once-and-for-all manipulation Ad libitum manipulation  
 Spreader-user Creator-user  
 Virality Performativity  
 (Focus on the) Semantics (Focus on the) Syntax  
 (The text serves as a) Comment / Rheme / Focus (The text sets the) Topic / Theme



## By Means of Memes



'La stessa foto di Toto Cutugno ogni giorno' (FB page, Aug. 20, 2014, 76k likes)

### Pragmatics

Standard & plugging (Adorno 1941):  
Gatekeepers, opinion leaders,  
influencers

Communities based on stylistic  
practices

Not a means of communication  
(channel) but rather a meta-language  
(code)

Phatic, identity value

New forms of conviviality

Broad perlocutivity (Blommaert 2013)

# By Means of Memes



Aylan Kurdi on “il manifesto” (Sept. 3, 2015)

Pragmatics

Meme literacy  
(Lankshear & Knobel 2003, 2007)

Competences  
Rules of “well-formation”

Meta-macro-discourse  
Im-pertinency (ie. NON-pertinency)  
De-generation

Aesthetic drift  
Pragmatic irresponsibility  
(Leone 2017)



## By Means of Memes



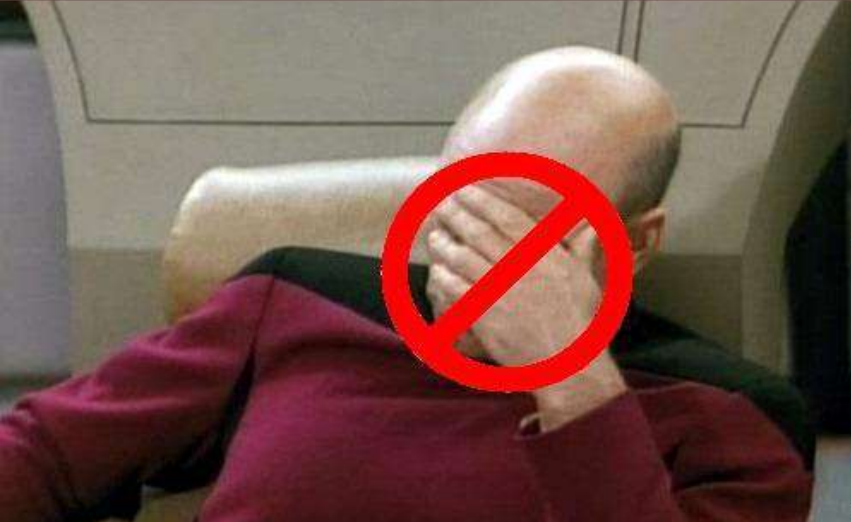
'Potato Jesus' (2012), a failed attempt of restoration of a 1930 'Ecce Homo' fresco kept in the Sanctuary of Mercy, Borja, Spain, by a 80-year-old parishioner



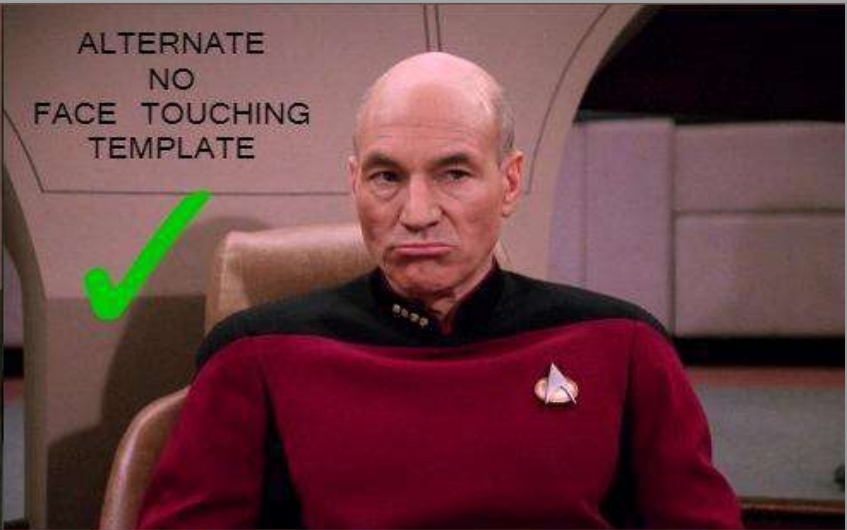


## By Means of Memes

**ATTENTION IMGFLIP COMMUNITY:**  
UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE,  
USE OF PICARD FACE  
PALM TEMPLATE IS SUSPENDED



ALTERNATE  
NO  
FACE TOUCHING  
TEMPLATE



**PLEASE USE THE ABOVE  
IMAGE AS AN ALTERNATE  
UNTIL THIS CRISIS PASSES  
THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION!**

imgflip.com

Picard's facepalm (1990, 1996, 2007) 'in the time of Coronavirus' (imgflip.com)





