

Glorianus

**The Meme Shift from the Postmodern to the Metamodern:
'Something's Wrong' as a Case Study.**

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Introduction

One cannot deny the fame and influence of internet memes on contemporary culture. They have been of great significance in mapping out the highs and lows of all the events in the past fifteen years or so. It is, then, of importance to pinpoint what they try to say about the age to extract enough information through which we can predict the future of our culture.

The term “meme” was first coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* as he attempted to apply the theory of evolution to culture. He believes that the ever-growing collective consciousness necessitates a new replicator to participate in a new form of evolution, not in the biological, but in the cultural sense. Thus, memes were suggested as cultural analogues to genes, which are units of *biological* information that are passed down through generations via imitation, whereas memes are units of information passed down *culturally* among people by means of oral or written transmission, cultural phenomena and human behaviors. Dawkins writes that “[e]xamples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* 192), as well as abstract concepts. He notes how the idea/meme of God, for example, has a “high survival rate” in the meme-pool due to its “great psychological appeal” because it “provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence” (Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* 193). Similar to genes in a gene-pool, memes are subject to natural selection in the socio-cultural meme-pool, where their survivability depends on their elasticity and ability of reproduction (or “fecundity”, as Dawkins calls it).

Following the Dawkinsian concept, the science of memetics emerged as “the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes” (Heylighen and Chielens 1) and the research on memes as cultural tools has been proliferating ever since (such as Blackmore; Blute; Brodie; Dennett). Nevertheless, memetics has been subject to criticism due to the ambiguity of the concept of memes and its ineptitude to explain the complexity of human behaviors (Shifman). Shifman ascribes three main characteristics to memes: first, memes are shared within the microlevel of society, but they shape it on a macro level; second, they reproduce and propagate through of imitation; lastly, “they follow rules of competitive selection” (Shifman 372) where the survival of the meme depends on its adaptability in the ever-changing meme-pool.

Shifman notes that these characteristics make memes helpful tools in exploring digital culture, which leads to the digital relics of internet memes.

Having Dawkins' concept of memes in mind, we can define internet memes as units of cultural information that pass from one person to another through the internet. They are, then, digital pieces of content shared online that propagate through imitation and mimicry; however, the ambiguity of the term makes a distinction between cultural memes and internet memes necessary. The first point of distinction is that cultural memes are non-corporeal: going back to Dawkins' examples, the pots or the arches are not the meme in themselves, but rather "the culturally shared knowledge that enables the creation of a pot or arch" (Wiggins 12). On the other hand, internet memes exist within the digital sphere and have become a unique form of communication. This is because of their ability to convey complex messages through simple reaction images or videos; one can simply send a picture of TV personality Nick Cannon¹ to a friend who is announcing pregnancy as a playful implication that they need to start using contraception. Moreover, a cultural meme can be recognized based on shared human experience and does not require knowledge of cultural jargon; the act of kissing, for example, is understood by members of any culture regardless of the specific cultural context (Wiggins 10). As opposed to that, producing and understanding internet memes requires the knowledge of a specific kind of system of code, varying from the structure of memes in general or of a specific genre of memes, to the popular culture references that a meme might convey. The reference to Nick Cannon mentioned above is unintelligible to someone who does not know Cannon's infamy of having 12 children. As a matter of fact, even Dawkins acknowledged the discrepancy between cultural memes and internet memes in 2013. He noted that internet memes are an altered form of memes that introduced the element of creativity and human agency, something that has been missing from the field of memetics (Shifman). He states:

[T]he very idea of the meme has *itself* mutated and evolved in a new direction. An internet meme is a hijacking of the original idea. Instead of mutating by random chance, before spreading by a form of Darwinian selection, internet memes are altered

¹ This is a reference to the 2022 Nick Cannon Kids memes that poke fun at Cannon's large number of children and his supposed high sex drive.

<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/nick-cannon-kids>

deliberately by human creativity. In the hijacked version, mutations are designed – not random – with the full knowledge of the person doing the mutating. (Dawkins, “*Just for Hits*,” 4:09)

With all this in mind, and to avoid confusion, I will be using ‘memes’ to refer to the content created and shared in the digital space, whether it be images, films, music, YouTube videos, etc.

The relevance of memes in cultural discourse has shown itself in how memes are shaping, and being shaped by, the sociopolitical landscape. The #MeToo movement in 2017 is an online social campaign that shed light on and raised awareness to the issues of rape culture and sexual harassment; unfortunately, the hashtag was banned in China by state censorship, but an alternative was invented to avoid this censorship and give voice to discuss the topics of the campaign, namely the rice bunny, a series of emojis and pictures of a rice bowl next to a rabbit whose combination phonetically read as ‘mi tu’ in Chinese (Zeng). The rice bunny is, by definition, considered a meme as it was being transmitted from one person to another through digital means. Another example is that of the 2016 presidential elections in the United States and the candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Memes were used extensively by individuals to mock or ridicule members of the opposing party or the candidates themselves; jokes, image remixes, and GIFs were shared everywhere to express several – often opposing – political views (Miranda). Some right-wing members even went as far as to say that memes were the reason that Trump had won (Spencer). The two previous instances are not exhaustive examples as they only scratch the surface of the real-life influence that memes can have on culture.

It is of importance at this point to touch upon how generations interact with this digital landscape, seeing that different age groups have varying attitudes towards it. Unlike Millennials, who spent some of their childhood without internet, Generation Z (those born between the mid-1990’s and the early-2010’s) and Generation Alpha (those born in 2010 and after) (Vogels et al.) grew during the inceptions of the Wide Web and are oblivious to what the world was before it; they witnessed it as it prospered into a full-scale lived-in digital space with which they are fully engaged both mentally and emotionally. They are much more aware of its social codes, its language, and even its impacts on them (Katz et al.). They do not simply see the digital sphere as a separate place where they passively and occasionally log in and out whenever they want, but

rather they perceive it as a physical space where they integrate a big part of their time and attention; consequently, the digital nature of the lives they lead on the internet and the content they consume does not make their reactions and interactions with them less real. This generational distinction between people born post-internet as opposed to pre-internet is fundamental in understanding how such “artifacts of participatory digital culture” (Wiggins 40) as memes can be interpreted. Being born as ‘meme-natives’, Generations Z and Alpha have a deeper understanding of the jargon and structure that go into memes, and therefore can adapt much more quickly to the ridiculously fast pace with which the internet moves.

Indeed, memes themselves are fast paced. A meme can exist for a mere few days before dying so it can be replaced with better, more durable memes, or quickly rise to the top and remain relevant for a long time. This is in direct relation with Dawkins’ perception of a cultural meme within a meme-pool. The relevance and virality of a meme depend on its ability to be used in several contexts and iterations. The *Mr. Incredible Becoming Uncanny*² meme has proven to be a very successful format since its rise to popularity in June 2021 due to its high elasticity and ability to warp through endless contexts by simply drawing humorous contrast between two things, one favorable, and the other not so much so (Figure 1). The meme, eponymous of the character from the film *The Incredibles* (2004), does not necessarily draw its humor from knowledge of the character, but the familiarity with Mr. Incredible gives a sense of belonging to a larger community that recognizes the character, possibly from early childhood. In their video essay on *Critically Analyzing Memes*, CJ The X state:

“Although part of what source material becomes a meme is completely random and ironic and meaningless, and that’s part of the joke, the dearth of meme fodder found in some of these older pieces of media *does* reveal something about our cultural memory. These images and movies and shows are familiar to us and invoke a sense of camaraderie, as we decontextualize our past into representations of the present. It adds to the sensation that we’re all winking at each other.” (CJ The X 11:26)

² <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mr-incredible-becoming-uncanny>

So, it can be said that memes act as digital connectors to our shared cultural consciousness. They allow us to identify past experiences through present forms of communication.

Garlic bread Garlic breath



Figure 1

Postmodernism and Memes

“[P]ostmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past.” (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 180)

Hutcheon’s passage acts as a link between postmodernist art forms and memes as both aim to decontextualize the past through the lens of self-aware commentary, and although postmodernism has become well-trodden territory by now, it is nevertheless vital to mention it when discussing memes. This paper does not try to provide an overview of postmodernism as an era, but to see how memes shift back and forth from postmodern aesthetics to something new and more sincere. However, in order not to speak of postmodernism in its broadest sense, it is useful to specify what is meant by the term. Paula Geyh’s article *Assembling Postmodernism* argues for three meanings of it: (1) *the theoretical*: pertains to the works of such authors as Lyotard, Derrida, Barthes, etc. It is mainly characterized by skepticism towards metanarratives as well as the emergence of poststructuralism. (2) *the historical*: a period – that began roughly from the 1960’s – distinguished by its political, economic, social, cultural, and aesthetic features from other eras.

(3) *the cultural*: relates to “the emergence of new formal features in our cultural productions: in literature, film, art, television, music, dance, and architecture.” (Geyh 4)

For the purposes of this study, my focus will be on the cultural aspect of postmodernism, as it encapsulates the features that relate memes to the era; namely, the features of postmodern aesthetics. The features I will be discussing are irony, intertextuality, metafiction, dadaism, historiographic metafiction and the use of glitches. This list is by no means exhaustive, but merely works as a guideline through which I will analyze ‘Something’s Wrong’.

Irony

Perhaps one of the most notable characteristics in the postmodern era, even though the term’s origin can be traced back to the ancient Greek (Britannica). According to Hutcheon, irony is a “...semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings - and doing so with an evaluative edge” (*Irony’s Edge* 89). In its broadest sense, irony is when someone says something but means the opposite, usually for humorous effects. Related to irony is sarcasm, which utilizes irony to mock or ridicule. The two terms perfectly capture the spirit of the age, as they delineate the disenchantment towards the Western metanarratives, and are used as a means of “signaling ironic difference at the heart of similarity” (Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism* x). Hutcheon explains that postmodern art employs these tools to self-consciously point out the incongruities in its conventions (*Poetics of Postmodernism*). Memes – if we are to see them as pieces of postmodern art – also use them to satirize sociopolitical issues, and we will later see how *Something’s Wrong* uses them to subvert its own genre.

Intertextuality

The term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva, who defines it as “a mosaic of quotations” (Kristeva 66). She adds that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity” (ibid.). So, it is a reference of one text to another, whether this reference is compositional or thematic. More recently, the term has been re-examined by the poststructuralist to denote a relationship between different texts; texts

refer to each other like signs in an endless chain of signification (Caselli). Likewise, some theories have emerged claiming that the World-Wide Web is also a space of decentralized intertextuality where texts float freely (Mitra). This decentralization is essential in understanding the referentiality of memes; a meme, too, exists within a chain of signification that covers everything from popular culture references to sociopolitical issues, to other genres of memes, to different iterations of the meme itself, etc.

Metafiction

In speaking about fictional writing, Waugh defines metafiction as a tool which is self-conscious about the tropes and conventions within a text and aims to exploit them in order to undermine such conventions and blur the line between fiction and reality. She also maintains that the increased awareness of the ‘meta’ levels is due to individuals being self-conscious to the sociocultural narratives within contemporary culture and the way language functions to define our sense of reality (Waugh 2-3). Many meme formats, too, use metafiction to distort our understanding of what makes a meme. In the meme below, the character can transcend the limits of the image she is in and looks beyond into the borders of the meme. (Figure 2).³ Similarly, the YouTube video *Too Many Cooks*⁴ by Adult Swim, in which we see a sitcom opening sequence being repeated until it reaches a point of absurdity, is a perfect example of a how a piece of art can be aware to its own tropes to utilize them for critique; in this case the critique being against the repetitiveness of stock television programs. This repetition of the theme song makes it meaningless, and so we, as viewers, begin to deconstruct what we see and analyze it critically.

³ <https://9gag.com/gag/ar5Ar3K>

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrGrOK8oZG8&ab_channel=AdultSwim

When you look up and see text above you
and realize that you're actually trapped
inside of a meme...



Figure 2

Dadaism

Although not entirely a postmodern notion, but a conceptual and aesthetic precursor to postmodernism, Dada encapsulates much about memes and the way they function within postmodernist aesthetics. Ihab Hassan writes “if dada allows contradiction, it never permits compromise. Its challenge to the Western consciousness is meant to be complete” (Hassan 59). This “challenge” is very much in line with postmodern thought. The movement in literature and art that started during World War One was characterized by cynicism towards the prevailing social values of the time and aimed to reflect this cynicism in artistic expression by questioning the very idea of what art should be and was even a self-proclaimed movement of ‘anti-art’ (tate.org.uk). One of the main figures related to Dada is Marcel Duchamp, who introduced the concept of the readymades; they are everyday objects that can be elevated to the status of art and have the ability to “collapse the distinction between art and non-art.” (Hopkins 90). Wiggins argues for structural similarities between Dada and memes in that a meme is a digital readymade that “seeks to collapse the distinction between reality and alternative reality, truth and fantasy, critique, and joke. The more darkly connotative the internet meme, the more of a relationship it has with the impetus behind Dada and also Surrealist art approaches.” (Wiggins 137). Evidently, memes also rely on the collage of several visual or textual items to reach the final product, which lies in the spirit of Dada movement.

Historiographic Metafiction

Coined by Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction mainly aims to reconsider historical discourses and narratives. Hutcheon writes that it “refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction.” (*Poetics of Postmodernism*, 93). Examples of historiographic metafiction in visual culture are time travel films, where characters interact with figures and events from history. Here, the line between the past and the present are again muddled, or in Hutcheon’s words “the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand.” (ibid. 114). Similarly, memes that include notions of time travel can be seen to deploy historiographic metafiction as I will shortly discuss.

Glitches

The rise of digital audiovisual media and their integration into our lives and cultures in the past few decades meant that it was only a matter of time before new ways of expression could emerge, and so they did. Digital art has given us fresh perspectives on art and on technology; however, in a postmodern age where all modes of thought and expression were being questioned, so was our faith in technology. Thus, glitches were born as a reminder of its vulnerability and unreliability. Glitch artist and theorist Rosa Menkman defines a glitch as an “(actual and/or simulated) break from an expected or conventional flow of information or meaning within (digital) communication systems that results in a perceived accident or error.” (Menkman 9). A glitch then is a deviation from digital normalcy, and an error in technology which, as Kemper argues, signifies three phenomena: First, it “draws attention to the process of mediation” (Kemper 3) and break the user’s immersion with the piece of technology; second, it “reveals the fragility of technology” (ibid. 4) because it reminds us that the technology we use is prone to deterioration; third, it “reveal[s] the underlying complexity and opacity of technology” (ibid.) and opens our eyes to how little we know about the technology at hand.

Additionally, glitches can be described as “the ghost[s] in the machine” (Cubitt 3), which relates to Derrida’s concept of hauntology. Generally speaking, hauntology refuses centralization

of ontology and argues for a fluid sense of presence and “examine[s] that which is no longer a reality in this moment of time but instead leaves traces to complicate that very reality” (Jones 2). Just like the tools of postmodern aesthetics mentioned above, this concept aims to blur the lines between binaries such as presence and essence, past and future, reality and fiction, etc. to reach a decentralized understanding of the world. This decentralization is further emphasized in Mark Fisher’s writing on *The Shining* (1980) by Stanley Kubrick. Fisher states: “Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time.” (Fisher 19). Indeed, glitches fit the hauntological definitions as their presence seems to be always looming around technology. I will return to *Too Many Cooks* in discussing how these concepts relate to digital culture. The video can be looked at as a meme, following our definition.

As the repetitions of the opening sequence in *Too Many Cooks* become more and more absurd, we see a character lurking in the background of several scenes. The character of the man (we will call him The Killer) gives an eerie atmosphere as the absurdity progresses, and in the climax, he goes on a killing spree, wiping out most of the characters we were introduced to, until he takes the part of the characters themselves. At this point, the character’s chyrons⁵, as well as the theme song, are experiencing multiple glitches and distortions. The Killer can be read here as a ghost or a virus that haunts the structure of a stock sitcom opening, causing the glitches to occur. By doing so, The Killer draws our attention to the absurdities that lie within this structure and offers a way of oscillating between the nostalgic past of the sitcom and the digitally corrupted future.

Metamodernism and Memes:

A Shift from the Post- to the Meta- modern

⁵ a text-based graphic overlay displayed at the bottom of a television screen or film frame, as closed captioning or the crawl of a newscast (dictionary.com). In the case of *Too Many Cooks*, it refers to the names of characters captioned as the character is shown on screen.

Now that we are coming closer to the quarter of a new century, it is safe to say that the age of postmodernity has long been over and replaced by something different that, perhaps, has been difficult to define during its inception. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (not to be confused with her essay of the same name mentioned above), Linda Hutcheon writes:

“The postmodern moment has passed, even if its discursive strategies and its ideological critique continue to live on – as do those of modernism – in our contemporary twenty-first century world. Literary historical categories like modernism and postmodernism are, after all, only heuristic labels that we create in our attempts to chart cultural changes and continuities. Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own, and I conclude, therefore, with this challenge to readers to find it – and name it for the twenty-first century.” (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 181)

Fortunately, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker seem to have accepted this challenge with their *Notes on Metamodernism*, in which they propose metamodernism as the ‘heuristic label’ of the new age. They argue that it is “characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, par. 3). The word “oscillation” is vital here, as it captures with precision the spirit of what is called “a structure of feeling” (Vermeulen and van den Akker). In a word, metamodernism embraces the aspects of postmodernism but seeks for finding meaning and sincerity.

Within the sphere of visual culture, we find reflections of the metamodernist sensibilities such as ‘quirky’ cinema. According to James MacDowell, the term refers to a trend in some films to adopt “a tone that balances ironic detachment from, and sincere engagement with, films’ fictional worlds and their characters” (MacDowell, ch. 2). Moreover, quirky films balance comedy and melodrama, wit and slapstick, and cynicism and sincerity while maintaining a sense of child-like innocence (ibid.) with such directors as Wes Anderson and Benh Zeitlin whom MacDowell believes are filmmakers of the ‘quirky’. Other examples of metamodernism in visual culture are the Netflix comedy special *Bo Burnham: Inside* (2021), a one-man musical anthology that explores, among several other things, isolation and human interaction – or lack thereof – in the digital age, and oscillates between cynical detachment and sincerity; Netflix’s television show *Bojack Horseman* (2014-2020) that pokes fun at Hollywood and the film industry while presenting

a genuine and nuanced viewpoint on mental health issues; and NBC's *Community* (2009-2015) whose characters are first introduced as stiff sitcom tropes that can only spew jokes and popular culture references, but are then portrayed as three-dimensional humans with sincere desire for connection. Those pieces of media seem to have grown tired of the postmodern irony; they now seek connection and meaning while remaining self-reflective and conscious not to fall back into grand narratives.

A Shift from Irony to Post-irony

As stated above, irony has become one of the main staples of the postmodern era, and a tool to reflect the era's cynicism, nihilism, and rejection of grand narratives (De Mul). Nevertheless, the change of the cultural landscape necessitated new modes of expression to emerge. One of the most prominent writers on how irony has become outdated is David Foster Wallace, who states in his article *E Unibus Pluram* the television culture has transformed the postmodern rebellion into a stale cycle of advertisement and empty popular culture references. He writes:

All U.S. irony is based on an implicit "I don't really mean what I say." So what *does* irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That maybe it's too bad it's impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already? Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: "How very *banal* to ask what I mean." Anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for end up looking like a hysteric or a prig. (Wallace 183-184)

Thus, post-irony was chosen to replace the detachment of irony with more earnestness, affect and sincerity. Especially when talking about memes, post-irony aims for a type of humor that carries emotion but manages to filter this emotion through irony. Wholesome memes are perfect examples of this; they consist of images usually used in contexts of ironic jokes, but the punchline here is not deconstructive and carries a note of positive affirmation or sentiment to the viewer of the meme or to someone/something the author cares for (Figure 3)⁶. We can see this in relation to the metamodern 'quirkiness' of cinema that MacDowell suggested. It is no surprise,

⁶ <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1185300-wholesome-memes>

then, to know that this kind of memes have been popular for the past few years (knowyourmeme.com).



Figure 3

This leads me to my argument that memes, as pieces of visual culture and new means of communication, are in a stage of evolution from a postmodern aesthetic to a more metamodern one. *Something's Wrong* (Appendix) is a sequence of memes (henceforth referred to as a *meme flow*) posted on Facebook by the page Gutterbeef⁷ on the 19th of October 2022. Consisting of 51⁸ images, the flow depicts a loose narrative of two characters, a man and a woman, and their journey through time, where The Man tries to give a can of the caffeinated beer Four Loko to Napoleon Bonaparte and The Woman tries to stop him. The methodology of my analysis will be to go through the images of the flow and point out some of the textual and artistic elements that relate it to the

⁷ It is not likely that Gutterbeef themselves created the flow, as the Facebook page seems to be concerned with posting as much humorous content per day as possible, perhaps favoring quantity over quality. Therefore, I am not concerned here with the authorial intentions of the flow's creator.

⁸ Some of the images in the meme flow are repeated blank images. I have kept them for two reasons; the first is to remain faithful to the original flow posted by Gutterbeef, and the second is that I believe the repetition of the blank pages is telling, as they expand the spatial and temporal aspects of the flow. For the complete memeflow, see the Appendix.

aesthetics of postmodernism, then discuss some elements that relate it to metamodernist sensibilities as well.

Something's Wrong

Origin

Memes depicting time travel have been circulating around the internet for some time. The *Time traveler: *moves a chair** meme, for example, shows some absurd consequences to even the slightest change in time such as moving a chair in the past (Know Your Meme). Another example is the *Men with a Time Machine* meme genre that compares the behavior of girls and boys in the hypothetical scenario of the invention of time travel. This genre originated in 2020 with the *Running Arnold Schwarzenegger* meme, that shows a still image of Arnold Schwarzenegger from the film *Hercules in New York (1970)* (Figure 4)⁹ while sprinting (ibid.). ‘Time travel: is invented’ is usually the prompt that the meme begins with. Then, a highly gendered comparison is made between how girls versus boys would react to this hypothesis and what priorities they would have; the girls’ priorities are usually seen as having little to no impact on the world and thus frivolous in nature (such as visiting their grandmother), whereas boys’ priorities include rescuing historical figures from death or danger, or preventing a terrible historical event from occurring (such as saving Julius Caesar or preventing the destruction of the Grand Library of Baghdad).

⁹ <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1879720-time-travel-is-invented-men-with-a-time-machine>

Time travel: *is invented*

Girls: Yes, I can relive the best moments with my ex.

Boys:



Figure 4

It is important to note that the choice of the masculine-looking image of Schwarzenegger is deliberate, as it portrays the stereotypical Chad caricature. A Chad is an internet term used by the incel community¹⁰ to describe a hyper-masculine and popular ‘alpha male’ character (Dictionary.com). It is worth mentioning, however, that the majority of internet discourse views this type of characters ironically, or as a way of poking fun at toxic masculinity, whereas the incel community takes the term very seriously and assigns physical, psychological and socioeconomic traits to what makes a Chad (Putra Aulia and Rosida) and thus the implementation of such a character in the *Running Arnold Schwarzenegger* meme implies that having a similar set of priorities as the ones pertaining to the character in the meme makes one a true ‘Chad’ and therefore worthy of respect and admiration.

As it is the case with all memes in the meme-pool, the *Running Arnold Schwarzenegger* meme was bound to be morphed to ensure its own survival. Thus, in August of 2020, a meme with the same concept surfaced on the social platform Reddit; however, it deviated from the classic format of the meme by employing *Wojak* characters and separating the meme into two units, as

¹⁰ *Incel* stands for ‘involuntary celibate’, it is used in internet jargon to describe people who have “a deep mistrust of women and misogynistic and anti-feminist beliefs and rhetoric.” (Daly and Reed 14)

opposed to the single-unit text of *Running Arnold Schwarzenegger* (Figure 4)¹¹. Those units are: ‘girls/women with a time machine’ and ‘boys/men with a time machine’. We will refer to them as Unit A and Unit B respectively. Unit A occurs first and usually carries the same message (that girls will do something as inconsequential as visiting their young grandmothers). Unit B portrays the Chad character using time travel technology ‘properly’. The distinction of units will be of use in analyzing *Something’s Wrong*.

Something’s Wrong makes use of the notions of referentiality and parody to poke fun at the genre in which it is presented and criticize the underlying sexism that is inherent in the *Men with a Time Machine* genre.

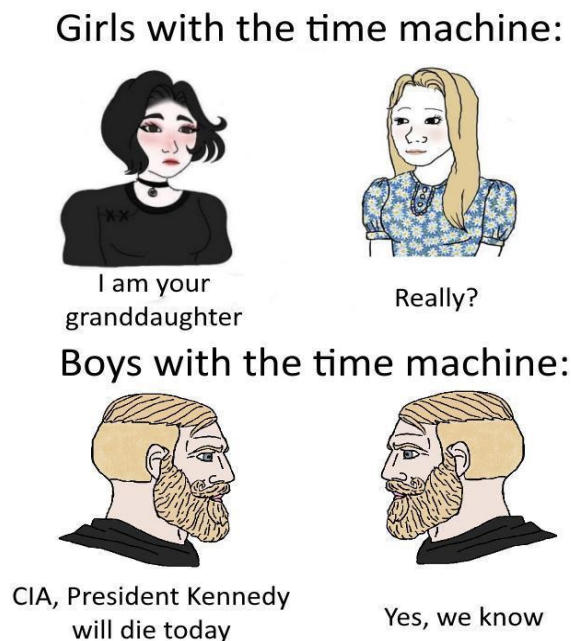


Figure 5

In order to understand the world of the flow properly, I will divide it into three spaces: (1) *The meme realm*: this realm pertains to the first ten images of the flow. It follows – though very loosely as we shall see – the format of the *Men with a Time Machine* type of memes. It is characterized by a smooth white background and several temporal loops. This realm is destroyed by the time it

¹¹ <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1883109-time-travel-is-invented-men-with-a-time-machine>

reaches image 10, but some aspects of it leak through into the next realm. (2) *The meta realm*: the realm where the concept of the meme no longer exists, the fourth wall is broken between the meme and the reader, and an attempt to fix the timeline is made. The background of this realm is grainy and slightly grayish. However, we can see how the characters in this realm are bounded within their separate white backgrounds that relate to the previous realm. The meta is the largest realm, occupying images 11-40. (3) *The void*: a non-realm, characterized by its black background. It is a space born from the destruction of the previous two realms. The void resides in images 41-51.

The Meme Realm

The very first thing we notice in the flow is how the order of units is changed. The punchline of the meme is normally associated with Unit B, where the Chad character performs a selfless act that benefits history, but since there is no inherent punchline to ‘Something’s Wrong’, Unit B marks the inception of the narrative, and the units are thus flipped. This is the first instance of implicit deconstruction in the flow. The Man goes back in time to offer Napoleon Bonaparte a can of the caffeinated alcoholic beverage Four Loko, but The Woman does the same to take it back from Bonaparte. The significance of the Four Loko can and the reason that The Man jumps back in time to offer it to Bonaparte are not mentioned, and perhaps this lack of information is part of the humor that the flow tries to deliver.

Image 2 shows the first time-loop of the flow. Unit B is repeated, but Unit A is where another implicit deconstruction of the meme occurs, this time a deconstruction of gender; The Woman disguises herself as Bonaparte á la the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, and The Man is in a Unit different than his own, playing the role of The Woman in Unit A.

In image 3, the third time-jump starts making cracks in the fabric of the meme realm. The Man offers the can of Four Loko to The Woman instead of Bonaparte in Unit B, and The Woman threatens her/self from another time-jump in Unit A.

Images 4 and 5 have Napoleon Bonaparte as an active participant in the meme realm, burning the Four Loko recipe to prevent further time-jumps and therefore erasing the beverage from

history. The Woman arrives too late, and the recipe is burned. From this point on – except for Image 7 –, the flow abandons the structure of units in favor of a looser one. The implementation of Bonaparte’s character here brings us back to Hutcheon’s notion of historiographic metafiction and how the play on such historical characters subverts the authority of history. Bonaparte is satirized and utilized in the flow as a passive character at first (as it the case with most historical characters in the *Men with a Time Machine* genre of memes), but his involvement later invokes a change in both the narratives of history and the narratives of the meme genre and invites us to question the structures within which they operate. Bonaparte’s role, however, is then reduced to a painting on the wall in the meta realm, which will be discussed later.

Image 6 is similar to Unit B in Image 3 but shows The Man offering The Woman a can of Joose – another caffeinated alcoholic beverage – since the Four Loko is no longer part of history. The Woman is horrified, as opposed to when she merely pointed out that “something’s wrong” previously. This initiates the explicit deconstruction and subsequent annihilation of the meme realm, as the narrative begins to melt, and the glitches start.

Image 7 returns to the structure of the flipped units but portrays the concepts of ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’ as abstractions, or ghosts that haunt the flow. This is emphasized when both characters are seen glitching in their respective units. As per Menkman’s definition that was mentioned earlier, we identified glitches as deviations from the norm, errors in technology, and reminders that this technology is often imperfect and defective. In the context of *Something’s Wrong*, and particularly in the meme realm, the glitches convey an error in structure, initiated by The Man and The Woman’s tampering with time. We later find out that the characters are trapped in a cycle, one that has possibly been repeated endless times, and therefore even the implicit deconstructions of the meme genre discussed earlier can be seen as glitches in structure.

Image 8 shows one unit out of place, and the caption is only the name “Napoleon”. Next to it we find *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*, the 1812 neoclassical painting by Jacques-Louis David, experiencing glitches. The corrosion, it seems, has also affected Napoleon, both as the character in the flow and the piece of art depicting him. This piece of art will be present again in the meta realm, haunting the characters and reminding them that what they are experiencing is not reality.

Image 9 is where the abstraction reaches its peak within the meme realm. Units B and A seem to be in place, but are substituted by a declaration that “the concepts no longer exist”. The flow becomes self-conscious of its own existence and tropes, and presents a Brechtian, epic theatrical reminder that what we are reading is an internet meme; that we ought not engage with the events and characters as they are fictional.

Image 10 is where the meme realm ceases to exist autonomously. The glitches have become so pervasive that the text is almost incomprehensible and the characters/caricatures are now unrecognizable. The scene invites aspects of dada art with its collaged images and anti-art stances. Similarly, the elements in the image include a character similar to those of the Japanese animated films of the 1990’s; two cans of yet another energy drink, namely Bang; and what looks like a character from an ancient mural. All of these elements are stitched together in the image to create a Dadaist work of art and put under a distorted and glitchy filter to emphasize the corruption that brought an end to this realm.

The Meta Realm

If we were to measure the spatiality of realms based on how many images in the flow they occupy, then the meta realm is by far the largest, consisting of 30 images, as opposed to 10 and 11 images for the meme realm and the void, respectively. The gray background is the main characteristic of the realm. It looks similar to what one would see if they removed the background from a picture in an image-editing application to make it transparent. We are given access to something that we are not supposed to see, like a backdoor to the laboratory where the meme was conceived, where all memes are conceived, and it feels invasive. The blank background communicates a prolonged silence that lasts for five images as the meme realm is being mourned and the meta realm is being introduced. Then, the voice of the omniscient entity speaks to us – the viewers – and invites us to “sit in peace” as “it is all that remains”. They propose that a new chance can be given to the characters since the concept itself of time no longer exists, and therefore it is no longer a burden. Thus, a new cycle, or a reboot, so to speak, begins.

Image 21 acts as a line between pre-reboot and post-reboot, then we are presented with the first and only piece of information regarding time and space; namely Image 22 with the caption

“France 202X”. We instantly notice a drop in the quality of the images. The poor quality is our first hint that this reboot might not be real (‘real’ here pertaining to reality in the world of the meme). Another hint is that while the background of the post-reboot remains that of the meta realm, we see the characters exist and interact within the white squares that prevail in the meme realm. I argue that there are two possible reasons to that: either the meme realm is leaking to the meta realm as a result of the fracture between the two, or that the characters are not allowed to exist in the meta realm on their own, and thereby are forced – by an outside force – inside the white squares to justify their trespassing on it.

In Images 23-33, The Man and The Woman appear to be in a museum or an art gallery, admiring *The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries*. The meme flow here challenges the Chad stereotype and our original assumptions about The Man’s character. As mentioned earlier, a Chad is over-masculine, and often this masculinity is seen as toxic in the way he disrespects women and is apathetic towards their emotions. The Man, on the other hand, shows that he is caring and sensitive when he memorizes information about the artwork, and that he is capable of vulnerability and sincerity. Moreover, the characters engage in healthy communication regarding their relationship, which is usually an uncommon behavior from a Chad.

The quality of the images then improves dramatically when The Woman says “we’re ok now” in Image 31, and in the following two images we feel a sense of momentary relief that they are indeed “ok”. Yet, the flow pulls the curtain once more and again reminds us that we are looking at an internet meme through our screens, that we are interacting with impassive, imperfect, and indifferent technology. The glitches return and the white background around The Man stretches within the meta realm until it covers the entire image. Of course, that is not to say that the flow completely loops back to the meme realm at the very end, but that it oscillates between meme and meta, muddling the boundaries between the two. “Something’s wrong” is repeated once again through glitching text, and we see The Man and The Woman’s images glitch for the last time before the flow cuts to black, thus entering the void.

The Void

Now that both realms are annihilated, the void is where nothing is left, except for the reader and the omniscient being. If the meta realm is meant to be the place we are not supposed to be in because we are not allowed, then the void is where *no one* can be in because it is an unnatural place for life to exist. The voice admits the impossibility of redeeming The Man and The Woman and promises that they will suffer an eternity inside the cycle of their own making. The flow ends with a self-appointed deity saying how “terribly human” it is to interfere with cosmic forces, and warning from the dangers of “Hubris”.

Images 41-44 of the void carry a sense of self-reflection, both literally and metaphorically. After the destruction of the meta realm, we are presented with a black image, or more accurately, a black screen, in which we see *ourselves* within the void. Not only are our perceptions of a regular meme questioned, but so is our relationship with the very medium through which we are viewing memes, and the longer this darkness lasts, the more our sense of unease grows.

Then, images 45-51 present us with a text unlike the ones before it. It is cold, monotonous, and authoritative, and the font used invokes the archaic nature of a typewriter. The voice in this text can be that of a wrathful and disdainful god who wanted to showcase his power by subjugating his followers to misery for the “single mistake” that they make/made/will make. As we read the text, our reflection can still be visible on our screens, and we get the feeling that the characters might not be the only ones the text refers to. Perhaps it is we who are under trial for our “Hubris”, and perhaps it is “terribly human” of us to meddle with higher forces and repeat history through an endless cycle of transgression.

Metamodern Implications in Something's Wrong

From what we have seen so far, we can say that *Something's Wrong* is quite the postmodern text. Its worldview is cynical and detached, especially in the final moments of the flow. However, I argue that there are elements of metamodernist sensibilities within the flow. My prime examples of this are images 22-33 of the meta realm.

The images feel as if a real reboot to the timeline has occurred, but we realize at the end that this might have been a flashback, an error in the timeline occurring due to the glitch, or simply a cycle of past events that have happened before. Even though there is a sense of artificiality due

to the low quality at the beginning, the quality significantly increases as The Woman asserts her sentiments towards The Man and gives him positive affirmation by saying “[w]e’re okay now silly. You did great!” (Image 31). We see how the entire realm shifts as she says this and we catch a significant, yet brief, hint of reality.

Similarly, and as we saw earlier, our understanding of the Chad caricature – as represented by The Man – is challenged. The Man is capable of being vulnerable and candor, despite his stumbling and awkward behavior. Likewise, The Woman finds his gestures and the effort he has done for her indicative of his sincerity towards her and becomes equally vulnerable and open about the future of their relationship. This is quite rare to see in memes, and especially in the *Men with a Time Machine* genre. Here, we see an oscillation between the cynical and detached irony of postmodernism, and a more heartfelt emotion and need of human connection and meaningful interaction.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that we have come a long way from Dawkins’ definition of a meme and our contemporary understanding of it. Memes are novel forms of communication and interaction that work perfectly with the new era, but they, too, seem to have been aiming for more. *Something’s Wrong* is a very recent product of the age, and therefore we can discern much about it from reading the flow. It is evident that this piece of media reflects the prevalent rhetoric of fluctuation between a detached postmodernist viewpoint and another that aims for meaning and truth. Having that in mind, we can use this knowledge as a tool to map out the future of internet memes and, by extension, the future of digital culture.

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