MEMETIC SUPERPOSITION

EVALUATING THE PARALLELS BETWEEN MEMES AND RENAISSANCE EMBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that our understanding of Internet memes can be enhanced by a comparison with Renaissance emblems as an historical precursor. By incorporating an analysis of visual themes and production contexts, it notes striking parallels around form, conceptions of invention, in-group/out-group dynamics, uneven reception, and exploitation of maturing new media environments. In both cases, a combination of conventionalised stylistic formats and borrowed referential content free the maker to focus on invention based upon incongruous multimodal juxtaposition.

KEYWORDS

Invention; Juxtaposition; Memes; Emblems.

I. Introduction

It has been estimated that approximately 2 billion images are shared daily on the Internet.[1] Many of these are memes, visual artefacts that are assembled, widely shared, and compared online. Whilst the exact number of shared memes is unknown, the figure is undoubtedly large – administrators at Instagram for instance estimated that its platform alone serves at least 1 million memes per day.[2] Often dismissed as "media snacks", Internet memes are both pervasive and even rhetorically persuasive.[3] They have acted as everything from the amusing distractions of anthropomorphised cats to weaponised, extra-rational propaganda shaping voters' perception of political candidates and policies in recent elections.[4]

This article employs tools of visual analysis – focusing on components of formal presentation, thematic approaches, and production context – alongside observations on gesture and pose adopted from Aby Warburg's form of iconology. Warburg's interest in mixing "high art" and "low art" registers will also be central to this article. Such an approach is common to the iconological work of art historians and theorists, but not to meme theorists. Mixing these registers directs attention to important characteristics of the Internet meme as a visual artefact, which are worth exploring in their own right.

Understanding the present through analysis of the past is a by-product of iconological analysis. Whilst memes are often considered a distinctive feature of digital environments, there are surprising and meaningful parallels to an earlier phenomenon – the Renaissance emblem. They include multimodality, interreferential connections of conventional and familiar content, and a juxtaposition of these connections as a vehicle for invention to produce new meanings. These meaningful parallels operate beyond the abstracted confines of the meme, suggesting that a confluence of parallel production patterns gives rise to their similarity. It is demonstrated that fundamental components of memes, and emblems for that matter, include more than communicative function. Comparing emblems to Internet memes demonstrates the importance of key aspects of Internet memes that have been neglected in most discussions. This,

[1]
Mary Meeker,
Internet Trends 2016, 7 June 2016 (31 October 2023).

[2]
Instagram, *Instagram Year in Review. How Memes Were the Mood of 2020*, 10 December 2020 (15 September 2021).

[3]
Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge, MA 2013, 11.

[4]
Chris Peters and Stuart Allan, Weaponizing Memes. The Journalistic Mediation of Visual Politicization, in: *Digital Journalism* 10/2, 2022, 217–229 (4 November 2021).

in turn, demonstrates the importance of looking beyond standard definitions of "meme".

This paper will begin by reviewing the current understandings of memes. I will use a somewhat narrower definition, more focused on their visual qualities. This narrower definition allows us to appreciate historical parallels between visual forms and their adoption during specific periods of technological change – specifically, the maturity of the book-publishing market and the development of more personalised "Web 2.0" tools for content production and distribution.

II. Internet Memes

Richard Dawkins defined the term "meme" as a "unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation".[5] Offered in a book on genetics, the meme shares the fundamentals of genes: longevity, fecundity, and copying fidelity. The focus on the outset was thus one of communicating a replicable code of information. Whilst it is more variable than genetics, Dawkins nevertheless posited the meme along the lines of a biological model: unavoidable and fundamental to human cognitive experience, something we "just do". As such, Dawkins's memes cover an extraordinarily wide variety of cases, from whole concepts – such as the notion of god – to discrete artefacts, such as the song "Auld Lang Syne".

Dawkins's definition was adopted widely to refer to Internet memes due to its invocation by the journalist Mike Godwin in *WIRED Magazine*. Godwin called upon the concept to refer to the new "infectious idea" of imagery that resonated with, and was spread by, Internet users, at the time through email.[6] Since then, meme theorists have adopted similarly all-encompassing notions of the meme, even whilst contesting the fundaments of Dawkins's definition. Geert Lovink thinks Dawkins's definition is "outdated", yet nevertheless accepts the inevitability that memes "mimic this biological instinct".[7] Taking a posthumanist approach, Dominic Pettman still adopts a biological metaphor, stating that memetic desire is born via "infection or contagion".[8] Limor Shifman shifts the focus to Internet memes as vehicles for communication, emphasising the

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[5]
Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford ²1989, 192.

[6]
Mike Godwin, Meme, Counter-Meme, in: *Wired*, October 1994 (27 November 2023).

[7]
Geert Lovink, Memes as Strategy. European Origins and Debates, in: id., *Sad by Design. On Platform Nihilism*, London 2019, 119, 24.

[8]
Dominic Pettman, Memetic Desire. Twenty Theses on Posthumanism, Political Affect, and Proliferation, in: Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow (eds.), *PostMemes. Seizing the Memes of Production*, Santa Barbara, CA 2019, 29.

dynamics of group participation in their creation.[9] Following suit, Ryan Milner emphasises the meme as the ground for public discourse.[10] Kate Miltner emphasises the meme as a fulcrum for social engagement in online social circles – "for their own entertainment and to make meaningful connection with others".[11] Describing the meme as a "genre of *communication*" and thus "in essence inescapable", Bradley Wiggins states it offers "some form of visual argument".[12] And Xiao Mina focuses on the power of the meme to impact the real world, particularly on its ability to amplify political movements.[13]

The idea of the meme has thus shifted from a biological and informational model to a communication-based model. This slight shift allows for a degradation of copying fidelity, important since a standard characteristic of Internet memes is not making exact copies of the same meme, but a proliferation of variations. Nevertheless, for these theorists, the meme conveys very broad varieties of content, reflecting Dawkins's profound impact. Overly broad definitions lead to overly broad presentations of memetic examples and categories.[14] The meme covers a spectrum of video, audio, and still imagery presenting re-creations such as planking, impersonations such as lip-synching, re-cut video trailers, Photoshop memes, rage comics, and rather a bit more. Ryan Milner memorably stated that "a shared joke between friends can be a meme – their meme".[15] So many disparate items are covered as memetic that they cannot share visual commonalities: it reduces the visual to "a sort of visual 'action verb'".[16] Their attempts to identify antecedents are thus impacted by focusing on communicative functions rather than formal visual characteristics, such that antecedents are kept to general

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[9]
Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 40–41.

[10]
Ryan Milner, *The World Made Meme. Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, Cambridge, MA 2016.

[11]
Kate Miltner, There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats. The Role of Genre, Gender, and Group Identity in the Interpretation and Enjoyment of an Internet Meme, in: *First Monday* 19/8 (16 May 2015).

[12]
Bradley E. Wiggins, *The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture*, London 2019, 6, 4.

[13]
An Xiao Mina, *Memes to Movements. How the World's Most Viral Media Is Changing Social Protest and Power*, Boston 2019.

[14]
Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production, in: eid. (eds.), *A New Literacies Sampler*, New York 2007, 217–219; Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 100–113; Wiggins, The Discursive Power of Memes in Digital Culture, 11, 45.

[15]
Milner, The World Made Meme, 38.

[16]
Ibid., 68.

categories of popular, vernacular expression. Shifman cites "Kilroy was here" graffiti from the Second World War, and Milner contemporary caricatures of the Egyptian Pharoah and the symbolism employed in medieval heraldry.

Meme theorists are thus caught in a definitional superposition: as fundamental aspects of the human communication, Internet memes are in some sense universal. Yet, simultaneously, by focusing on the dynamics of group participation and online discourses, they are viewed as tightly bound by the specific and particular affordances of networked digital culture: made by intentional agents engaging in participatory environments of ad hoc publics using familiar, core content within pervasive networks.[17] This broad approach prioritises messaging and social dimensions over the formatting of the visual, or indeed the malleability of that formatting. Presenting memes as fundamental to human experience, they are also ahistorical, and so bypass deeper explorations of antecedents and what such explorations may uncover.

This paper will focus on still-picture Internet memes, particularly those that pair a visual image with another referent, be it visual and/or textual. This reduces the gamut of possibilities forwarded by the informational/communication model, but these examples nevertheless represent a very broad spectrum. By avoiding a model whereby "a shared joke between friends may be a meme", this focus also seems to align more closely with the model of Internet memes as commonly described by those who make and forward memes – still pictures are at the centre of an effective canon. It is only by adopting this narrower idea of the Internet meme that we can identify closer antecedent parallels and thus uncover different avenues of exploration to understand the characteristics of memes. This move allows us to note important parallels with Renaissance emblems. Exploring these sheds important light on Internet memes.

III. Memetic Types, the Psychology of Humour, and Image Theory

Some common examples of memetic presentation types are described below. They include imagery sandwiched between text in set-up/punchline joke format – i.e., the "macro" ["Not sure if" featuring *Futurama*'s Fry, Fig. 1]; a multi-panel meme contrasting different pictures [Fig. 2]; a picture with subjects turned into personifications by "object labels" [the "Distracted Boyfriend", Fig. 3]; and a "Photoshop meme" that inserts a graphic element from one source into an entirely different context ["Sitting Bernie Sanders", Fig. 4]. Formatting details alter over time. [Fig. 1] employs a layout common a decade ago in which the text, broken into two components, is placed directly on the picture with the image sandwiched

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[17]
This paradigmatic view was most clearly posited by Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture.

[Fig. 1]
Author unknown, Macro Internet meme ("Futurama Fry Not Sure If"; 27 November 2023).

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between them, and it uses "Impact", the archetypal "meme font".[18] The rest of the examples containing text are representative of more up-to-date styles, familiar on platforms like Instagram, in which the maker's textual imposition is minimised through white labels attached to objects in the picture or captions adjacent to it.

These examples operate by calling upon common expectations. Their presentation formats are likely very familiar, even if the specific examples are not: they employ stylistic conventions, such as pairings of text and picture, comparisons between pictures, and mixtures of pictures from different sources. These conventions set up the viewer's expectations for the meme, such as personified abstractions or visual contrasts. The specific imagery used in the meme exploits pop-cultural literacy and contemporary subject matter, thus adding another layer of viewer expectations: the meme's maker assumes the viewer's familiarity with, for example, the photograph of Bernie Sanders sitting at the 2021 US Presidential inauguration and its subsequent exploitation.

However, these assembled expectations and assumptions are violated with the imposed juxtaposition of new elements – which can be textual, visual, or both. The introduction of this unexpectedly juxtaposed element is the mechanism that changes the potential interpretation of the source image, and sets apart the particular "Sitting Bernie Sanders" example in [Fig. 4] from others. The act of the maker's imposition inclines an interpretation of an otherwise ambiguous source in a particular direction. For example, Philip Fry's "Not sure if" is based upon the *Futurama* character Fry's facial expression as attempting to distinguish between two options ("not sure if x or y"): by pairing it with the lyrics to Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody", it re-codes the meaning of the expression [Fig. 1]. In the other examples, a straightforward medical illustration contrasts an activity to relieve stress headaches with a photograph of a distorted doll's head [Fig. 2]. The "Distracted Boyfriend" is based upon the interaction of a trio of figures – a man looking back at a passing woman whilst ignoring the woman by his side, meant to be his outraged girlfriend. According to the labels attached to them, the figures play out the changing political views of Generation Z with a fixing of their perceived expressions onto political stances [Fig. 3].[19] Finally, Bernie Sanders is placed into the dream sequence from David Lynch's 1990s television show *Twin Peaks* [Fig. 4].

The moves made by the makers of these memes – conventional expectations alongside unexpected juxtapositions – reflect strategies explored in humour, psychology, and image theory. The violation of expectations through the introduction of an incongruous element is one of the central components of humour: it is

18
Kate Brideau and Charles Berret, A Brief Introduction to Impact. 'The Meme Font', in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 13/3, 2014, 307–313 (16 November 2023).

19
Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnik, *Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues*, Pew Research Center, 17 January 2019 (23 January 2019).

"different enough from the norm to be remarkable", in which the viewer approaches the subject with "normal" expectations that are subsequently upset.[20] It "violates a rationally-learned pattern", and the resulting surprise creates humorous delight.[21] The violation of expectations has also long been explored in the psychology of learning as "reward prediction errors" which pull the experience out of the ordinary and make a greater impression upon the viewer.[22] Incongruity and reward prediction errors are often mixed in the meme as the mechanism of humour. The violation of expectations makes the subject more remarkable – and thus more impactful precisely because it differs from the individual's anticipations.

A prime motivation for violating a viewer's expectations is to redefine the viewer's interpretation of a representation – playing in particular upon the malleable interpretability of facial expressions and gestures, as in the "Distracted Boyfriend" [Fig. 3]. This occurs through the imposition of the maker, and has long been used in the process of making images. The art historians Aby Warburg and Edgar Wind demonstrated Renaissance artists' wilful re-use and adaptation of expression and gesture from classical works.[23] Warburg observed that artists made rational decisions to trigger irrational, affective responses by using "a traceable inventory of pre-coined expressions" that he called *Pathosformeln*.[24] This familiar, "pre-coined" imagery was then used for very different purposes. For example, Renaissance artists might use the dishevelled hair and fluttering dress of the classical Maenad in Dionysian ecstasy to render an entirely different mood and subject: the extreme grief

[20]
Lambert Deckers and John Devine, Humor by Violating an Existing Expectancy, in: *The Journal of Psychology* 108/1, 1981, 107–110 (14 March 2019); Thomas C. Veatch, A Theory of Humor, in: *Humor. International Journal of Humor Research* 11/2, 1998, 161–215 (5 May 2019); John C. Meyers, Humor as a Double-Edged Sword. Four Functions of Humor in Communication, in: *Communication Theory* 10/3, 2000, 310–331, here 313 (5 May 2019).

[21]
Meyers, Humor as a Double-Edged Sword, 310; Ted Cohen, *Jokes. Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*, Chicago 1999.

[22]
Robert A. Rescorla and Allan R. Wagner, A Theory of Pavlovian Conditioning. Variations in the Effectiveness of Reinforcement and Nonreinforcement, in: Abraham H. Black and William F. Prokasy (eds.), *Classical Conditioning II. Current Research and Theory*, New York 1972; Esther De Loof, Kate Ergo, Lien Naert, Clio Janssens, Durk Talsma, Flip Van Opstal, and Tom Verguts, Signed Reward Prediction Errors Drive Declarative Learning, in: *PLoS ONE* 13/1, 2018, 1–15 (16 November 2023).

[23]
Aby Warburg, Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring* (1893), in: id., *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. by Julia Bloomfield, Kurt W. Forster, Harry F. Maligrave, Michael S. Roth, Salvatore Settis, and Steven Lindberg, transl. by David Britt, Los Angeles 1999, 89–156; id., Dürer and Italian Antiquity (1905), in: ibid., 553–558.

[24]
Aby Warburg, The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past, in: *Art in Translation* 1/2, 2015 [1929], 273–283, 280 (8 November 2016); id., Francesco Sassettis letztwillige Verfügung [1907], in: id., The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, 249. NB: Warburg considered the use of *Pathosformeln* as activating ancient energies, for example of ferocity, and that these energies could be channelled into different expressions in different eras. This component of Warburg's thought is not pursued in the current paper.

of Mary Magdalene during the Crucifixion, or the rendition of a servant in a hurry.[25] Used for radically disparate purposes, these "pre-coined" poses provide a form of thematic tracing used by image-makers throughout the Renaissance and indeed throughout the history of art as a compositional strategy. The re-use of familiar poses also has strong parallels with the assemblage strategies of meme makers as they take familiar imagery and poses and radically reinterpret their intent.

Meme makers take advantage of presentational conventions and familiar imagery, and then resituate the interpretation of that imagery with a new element. In each case, meme makers make use of two or more items: image and text, image and image, images and text. Such intertextual and multimodal references are long-understood features of memes, using shared cultural touchstones; alongside jarring juxtapositions, they can impose unexpected connections between disparate referents, some well known, and others perhaps understood only by a minority.[26] One might readily understand the Distracted Boyfriend example, but the captions in the four-panel meme [Fig. 5] featuring Anakin and Padme from *Star Wars II* may be more deeply obscure. This meme depends upon interpreting the sequence as Padme's dawning realisation of Anakin's true nature. The text, however, refers to the Akkadian Ea-Nasir, recipient of the world's oldest surviving business complaint for the inadequate quality of his copper ingots.[27] Many memes make use of labels or captions to fix interpretative possibilities opened by the picture's "exploitable" content – that is, content with understood references, made exploitable by isolating the work from contextual referents that fix the subject matter. By isolating the work from its original context, meme makers frequently forge connections through the interpretative malleability of gesture or expression.

The complex interplay of multimodal elements, the juxtaposition of elements spanning across modalities, the violation of expectations through incongruity, and the use of knowing, in-group referents are all initiated by the maker's wilful imposition and reinterpretation of familiar content. These are common characteristics of memes, but they are also common characteristics of a wildly popular format birthed in the Renaissance: the emblem.

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Edgar Wind, The Maenad under the Cross, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 1/1, 1937, 70–71 (18 November 2023); Warburg, Francesco Sassettis letztwillige Verfügung.

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Knobel and Lankshear, Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production; Limor Shifman, The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres, in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 13/3, 2013, 340–358 (16 November 2023); Miltner, There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats.

27

See A. Leo Oppenheim (ed.), *Letters from Mesopotamia. Official, Business, and Private Letters on Clay Tablets from Two Millennia*, Chicago 1967, 82–83.

[Fig. 5]
Author unknown, Multi-panel Internet meme with captions and object labels ("For the
Better, Right?"; 27 November 2023).

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IV. The Renaissance Emblem

Emblems appeared in 1531 in a book that came to be known as the *Emblematum libellus* (*Little Book of Emblems*) by the humanist Andrea Alciato (in Latin: Andreas Alciati). For over a hundred years, the *Libellus* went through dozens of editions.[28] Alciato initiated a blossoming of interest that endured and evolved over several centuries by dozens of other authors whose subsequent volumes focused on specialised subjects, such as classical history and literature, alchemy, religious sentiments, hieroglyphs, and iconography.[29] It has been estimated that, by the end of the nineteenth century, when the format morphed into narrowly moralising children's literature, nearly 1,500 authors had penned over 15,000 volumes of emblems.[30] Despite its once vast popularity, however, the format is almost completely forgotten by the non-academic public; now, the term "emblem" merely refers to something that symbolically encapsulates its subject.

Whilst there are many variations, Alciato's emblems adopted a format of a visual "game": they combined picture and a brief text to form an interwoven whole, often with a moralising subject, presented with references that only some would understand. There are multiple antecedents, only some of which paired picture with text, but almost all of which contained moralising content. Aesop's *Fables* and Greek epigrams, for example, were originally text-only series, and were only later illustrated; medieval illustrated bestiaries are another distant relative, in which different animals' characters are described in a moralising manner; proverbs like "big fish eat little fish" were frequently illustrated; there were also textual glosses, or *tituli*, appended to imagery for moral instruction.[31] In 1500, Erasmus published the *Adages*, a textual collection of pithy statements that referenced classical antiquity. The closest antecedent may be Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494), which contained both woodcut imagery and text together to tell its stories; these, however, were more earthy and had fewer classical references. The 1499 publication of Franceso Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, alongside the 1517 publication of the *Hieroglyphica* introduced the reading public to Egyptian hieroglyphs as cryptic and fanciful pictographic encap-

[28] John E. Moffitt, Introduction, in: id. (ed.), *A Book of Emblems. The* Emblematum Liber *in Latin and English*, Jefferson, NC 2004, 4.

[29] John Manning, *The Emblem*, London ²2004.

[30] Moffitt, Introduction, 10; Wendy R. Katz, *The Emblems of Margaret Gatty. A Study of Allegory in Nineteenth-Century Children's Literature*, New York 1993.

[31] William S. Heckscher and Karl-August Wirth, Emblem, Emblembuch, in: *Reallexicon der deutschen Kunstgeschichte* V, Stuttgart 1959, 85–228 (9 May 2023).

sulations of wisdom, again pairing pictures with text.[32] Presented in Latin, Alciato's text combined Erasmus's classical focus with Brandt's moralism, mixing in some fashionable Egyptomania.

IV.1 Creative Juxtaposition as Central to the Concept of the Emblem

Erasmus's adages – such as *Festina lente* ("Make haste slowly") or a "living corpse" – employ a rhetorical strategy of juxtaposition, identified by the humanist as a "contrast of opposites" (*enantiosis*), which had "an aggregable touch of the riddle" about them.[33] *Enantiosis* depends on the incongruity between the assembled expectation – "make haste" – with its opposite – "slowly", and Erasmus constrained the expression into a purely textual domain. In contrast, picture and text paired in Alciato's *Libellus* do not oppose one another, but instead confound the viewer's expectations to invent something new. This juxtaposition of picture and text thus places multimodality at the centre of his strategy. The emblem reveals its moral by containing an interreferential mix of textual and visual imagery closely connected to one another. By employing this strategy, the emblem maker had the opportunity to present "some elegantly-chosen significance" to the subject.[34] The emphasis on *chosen* significance provided an opportunity for emblem makers to impose themselves upon their subject matter, "with whatever violence" to the source material.[35] By this imposition, the emblem could be a "bearer of unsuspected meaning, a metonym for a previously hidden reality".[36]

The emblem, then, was not necessarily true to its source material. The source material was employed for a display of personal invention, a central characteristic of the art and literature of the period, pertaining to the ability of the writer or visual artist to create a compelling work through creative use of multiple source materials.[37] For many artists of the period, invention often took shape by the use of interreferential juxtaposition, which could create a form of meta-commentary on the subject matter: for instance, Raphael's *Entombment of Christ* makes heavy use of poses taken from classical depictions of the death of the young hero Meleager, weaving

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[32] Ludwig Volkmann, *Hieroglyph, Emblem, and Renaissance Pictography*, Leiden 2018.

[33] Desiderius Erasmus, *The Adages of Erasmus*, selected by William Baker, Toronto 2001, 132.

[34] Andrea Alciato, *Le lettere di Andrea Alciato giureconsulto*, Florence 1953, Letter 24.

[35] Manning, The Emblem, 49.

[36] Ibid., 48.

[37] Sharon Bailin, Invenzione e Fantasia. The (Re)Birth of Imagination in Renaissance Art, in: *Interchange* 36, 2005, 257–273 (18 September 2020).

an intimate connection between the painting's biblical subject, its visual source material, and the given names of the family that commissioned the panel.[38] By creative imposition, the artist could create unexpected interpretations arising from a juxtaposition of source elements. The emblem maker employed the same mechanism. One emblem from the *Libellus* [Fig. 6] illustrates the point.

IV.2 Interreferentiality in Alciato's Emblems. An Example

The formatting of the emblem is standard throughout Alciato's book: a *lemma* or title introduces the emblem, an *icon* or framed picture is placed in the centre, and text of varying length (called the *subscriptio* or epigram) explains the subject whilst drawing the moral lesson.[39] "In Silence" [Fig. 6] features then-familiar iconography of the scholar in long robes and academic cap examining a book in his study. Unusually, the scholar places a finger to his lips. The epigram reads:

> In silence, he is indistinguishable from his wise friends; tongue and voice indicate his folly. By placing a finger on his lips and keeping silent, a Pharian may turn himself into a Harpocrates.[40]

The juxtaposition hinges upon interreferences between four elements: the scholar, a reference to Harpocrates, a comparison to a "Pharian", and a finger placed to the scholar's lips. The first has already been explained. "Harpocrates" is the Hellenic name for the Egyptian god Horus, the son of Isis: when depicted as a child, Horus was depicted with his finger in his mouth wiggling a loose tooth. During their centuries-long occupation of Egypt, the Greeks and Romans interpreted the gesture as related to the modern "shh", and therefore the figure was made manifest as a god of silence [Fig. 7]. As the son of Isis – and as a god of silence – Harpocrates became an important figure associated with the late-antique Isis mystery cult – and placing the finger over his lips indicated not just silence, but a keeper of wise secrets.[41]

A "Pharian", in contrast, is a lighthouse-keeper, referring to the Lighthouse of Alexandria on the island of Pharos; a "Pharian" thus illuminates the surrounding environment and makes everything plain to the eye. Alciato's epigram depends upon these connections:

38
Nigel Spivey, *Enduring Creation. Art, Pain, and Fortitude*, Berkeley, CA 2001, 113–117.

39
For a classic formulation of the emblem's components, see Heckscher and Wirth, Emblem, Emblembuch.

40
Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum libellus*, Paris 1534 [1531], 7 (1 April 2021).

41
Emily Swan Hall, Harpocrates and Other Child Deities in Ancient Egyptian Sculpture, in: *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 14, 1977, 55–58 (31 October 2023).

EMBLEMATVM LIBELLVS.   7

In Silentium.

Cùm tacet haud quicquam differt sapiĕtibus amĕs,
Stulticiæ est index linguaq; uoxq; suæ:
Ergo premat labias, digitoq; silentia signet,
Et sese pharium uertat in Harpocratem.
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[Fig. 7]
Left: Artist unknown, Horus the Child, c. 1976–1425 BCE, faience and glaze,
4.32 × 2.65 × 1.55 cm. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum. Right: Artist unknown, Harpocrates,
c. 200 BCE, marble. Salonica, Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum. Both Creative Com-
mons license.

the finger on the scholar's lips does not indicate his wisdom – like Harpocrates – but rather his lack of it. Were he to speak, he would place his thoughts into a glaring light, and make his foolishness visible to all.[42] The emblem maker's invention is revealed only by understanding the references and by the juxtaposed connection between visual and textual imagery: indeed, the incongruous expectations laid out by the lips on the finger, what it usually means and what it means in this example hinges upon a type of interpretative malleability remarkably similar to that of the memetic examples above.

IV.3 The *Impresa*

An important variant of the emblem was the *impresa*, popularised by Paolo Giovio's *Dialogo dell'imprese* (1559).[43] The *impresa* was an evolution of the personal motto used by the nobility in the fifteenth century, an individualised variant of family or clan mottos and insignia meanings embodied in a coat of arms. As such, the *impresa* was conceived as a device conveying personal meanings; with the popularity of Giovio's book, it came to be employed by broader swathes of the public, for instance artists, publishers, and scholars.[44] As both precursor and variation of the emblem, the *impresa* is a hyper-focused, paired-down form of emblematic content that reveals an equal interest in symbolic invention. Its format consists of the visual device accompanied by a brief, enigmatic motto displayed on a ribbon. The juxtaposition of the two creates a device for both self-expression and self-presentation, and often the individual associations and referents were more personal, and therefore more obscure, than those of the standard emblem. The importance or meaning of the *impresa*, then, was veiled from public view without insider knowledge: whilst Giovio's book extends one's understanding of *imprese* by explaining them, when encountered out in the world, any such explanation would be absent. Like Alciato's emblems, then, a degree of "insider knowledge" was required to decipher the subject – but perhaps to a greater degree in the case of an *impresa*, since its content was not elaborated due to the lack of a *subscriptio*.

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[42] A pithier variant of this epigram is attributed to Abraham Lincoln (*inter alia*): "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt" in: Leonard Roy Frank (ed.), *Wit and Humor Quotationary*, New York, 2000, 159. There is a similar variant in the Old Testament: "Even a fool, if he will hold his peace shall be counted wise: and if he close his lips, a man of understanding" (Prov. 17:28). These variations suggest that the general sentiment was well understood.

[43] Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell'imprese militari et amorose*, Lyon 1559 (1 April 2021).

[44] For more on the expansion of the impresa, and its consideration as an emblematic form, see Peter M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem. Structural Parallels between the Emblem and Literature in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Toronto 1979, 29.

ſte da queſto, come da coſa, che v'hà portato eſtremo honore, e pe-
culiar reputatione. Ond'egli ciò confeſſando eſſer vero, tornò à
dirmi; guardate voi, ſe in eſſo trouaſte alcun propoſito, ch'io ne
ſarò contento. Io perche alcuni ſcriuono, che lo ſtruzzo non coua le
ſue voua ſedendoui ſopra come gli altri vccelli, ma guardandogli
co' raggi efficaciſſimi del lume de gliocchi, figurai lo ſtruzzo ma-
ſchio e la femina, che mirauano fiſſamente l'voua loro, vſcendo lor
da gliocchi raggi ſopra le dette voua; e'l motto era queſto; D I-
VERSA AB ALIIS VIRTVTE VALEMVS; Eſpri-
mendo la ſua vnica laude e peritia dell'inuentione di quei ma-
chinamenti ſotterranei, che con la violenza del fuoco ſono aggua-
gliati all'effetto delle furie infernali. Piacque aſſaiſſimo l'impre-
ſa al Conte Pietro, & accettolla.

DOM. Certamente Mons. queſti voſtri ſtruzzi con la lor

The following example is representative of the form and explanation within Giovio's book [Fig. 8]. Presented in an oval surrounded by an ornate frame, the *impresa* depicts a shield with the phrase *Aut cum hoc aut in hoc* ("Either with it or on it") emblazoned on the ribbon. Giovio's text explains that the *impresa* was that of Fernando of Pescara, a cavalry captain wounded and captured at the Battle of Ravenna in 1512. This *impresa* is a projection of Fernando's martial self-image via the motto, which as Giovio explains refers to the Spartans' military moral code: that the soldier will either be victorious in battle and return with his shield, or his body shall be carried home on it.[45]

Internet memes present strong formal and conceptual parallels with the Renaissance emblem and the *impresa*. Both are multimodal, often pairing picture and text (or, in the case of Photoshop memes, merging multiple images). Both are founded upon interreferential contexts, be they familiar, obscure, or simply relatable. Both use juxtaposition of references to produce new meanings – including very personal meanings, whether in the case of the martial *impresa* [Fig. 8] or the anxiety/stress meme above [Fig. 2]. Even framing conventions can approximate one another: the familiar top text/picture/bottom text format of the old-school macro meme [Fig. 1] and emblem [Fig. 6] and the use of captions or labels to fix meaning to an otherwise ambiguous picture [Fig. 3 and Fig. 8]. Indeed, the *impresa*'s pared-down presentational structure is conceptually similar to the "Advice Animal"/"stock character" macro, a form that featured specific figures, roles, and colour schemes.[46] In total, the emblem, its *impresa* variation, and the meme use conventional formats and familiar imagery as a vehicle for invention.

A brief comparison clarifies the parallels between emblems and memes in detail [Fig. 9]. The comparison is between the "In Silence" emblem presented above [Fig. 6] and a meme created by a student after a lecture referring to the saturation of the "Alegría" style in digital illustrations [Fig. 9].[47] The two examples below employ clear formatting conventions: top text/picture/bottom text to frame the works. Both exploit imagery that is familiar to their respective periods: a single picture of the scholar in his study and a two-panel scene of the celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay mistreating another chef (as in his unkind performances on the reality TV show *Gordan Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*). The invention hinges upon the mixing of referents and the violation of expectations in the respective

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Giovio, Dialogo dell'imprese, 86–87. For the origin of this story and the motto, see, Plutarch, *Moralia, Ancient Customs of the Spartans*, LCL 245, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson, transl. by Frank Cole Babbitt, Cambridge, MA 1931, 464–465. Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *De re militari*, Antwerp 1585, Book II (ed. by Godescalcus Stewechius), 129 (11 May 2023).

46

Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 112–113.

47

Rachel Hawley, Don't Worry, These Gangly-Armed Cartoons Are Here to Protect You from Big Tech, in: *AIGA Eye on Design*, 21 August 2019 (3 April 2020).
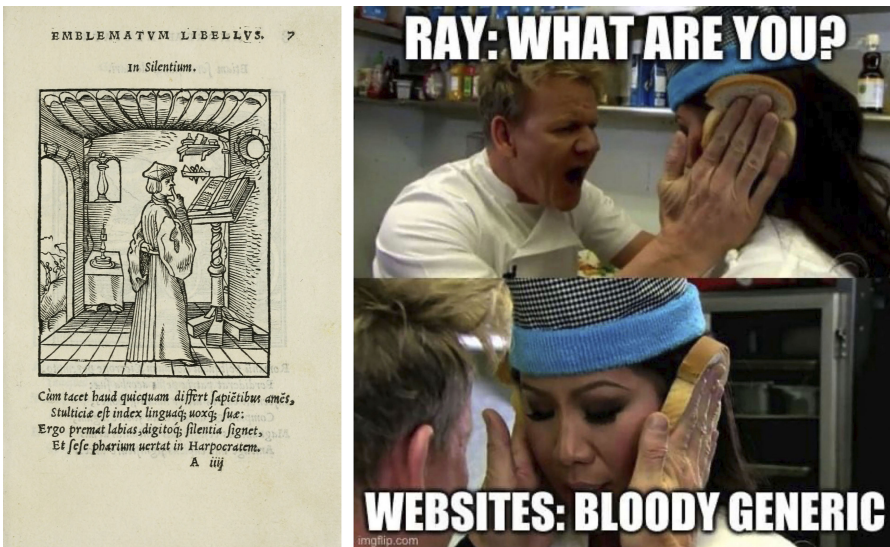
[Fig. 9]
Left: Artist unknown, "In Silence" (as in [Fig. 6]); Right: Student meme shared with the
author.

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pictures, particularly intended gestural interpretation: in the case of "In Silence", Alciato references medieval iconography, gesture, an Helleno-Egyptian deity, and geography; in the case of the meme, the student references Gordon Ramsay, gesture and expression, and a lecture on Alegría.

IV.4 Beyond Form and Concept. Other Important Similarities

The parallels between emblems and Internet memes extend beyond form and concept.[48] There are also striking structural similarities in production, targeting audiences, reception, and development in their respective rapidly maturing new media formats. These are briefly reviewed below; in aggregate, they suggest that the underlying similarities between memes and emblems extend beyond any definition of the memetic, but are bound together by a mechanism that rewards invention rising out of convention.

Production/Sharing and In-/Out-Groups

Emblems and memes both benefit from an intense examination of hyperspecific subject matter for the express purpose of exploitation for one's own interests. Even though both have proven to be popular, they were not intended for outside audiences: they are loci of invention for in-groups of viewers who understand the references and appreciate the maker's efforts, often with a very clear snub to out-groups who cannot understand the references. Emblems mined subjects such as Roman virtues or Egyptian hieroglyphics popular among an educated elite. Alciato's subject matter and their rendition in Latin create a gatekeeper effect that only allowed a rarefied group of people who could read them, "get" the references, and thus appreciate the inventive intent.

In turn, many memes focus upon niche subjects such as specific games or anime; they are often created in hothouse environments such as 4chan; and only a few meme types "break out" to the mainstream.[49] They gatekeep mainstream "normies", understood as people who cheapen the subject matter with mawkish sentimentality and who simply do not "get" the dynamics of in-group creation.[50] Indeed, these in-groups frequently reinforce their separation from

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[48] For other contemporary parallels, see Peter M. Daly, The *Nachleben* of the Emblem in Some Modern Logos, Advertisements, and Propaganda, in: id. (ed.), *Companion to Emblem Studies*, New York 2008, 489–518. Daly makes a convincing case in particular for parallels between logos and emblems.

[49] Savvas Zannettou, Tristan Caulfield, Jeremy Blackburn, Emiliano de Cristofaro, Michael Sirivianos, Gianluca Stringhini, and Guillermo Suarez-Tangil, On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities, in: *arXiv* (24 November 2018).

[50] Miltner, There's No Place for Lulz on LOLCats; Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things. Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*, Cambridge, MA 2016.

the rest of society by creating and sharing increasingly outrageous or baffling memes that the broader public would either not understand or find deeply offensive.[51] A comparatively gentle example reproduced here represents an emerging series of surreal memes drawing on "Gen Z" humour that emphatically avoids relatability – and thus broad shareability [Fig. 10].

In-group dynamics depend upon rules that structure behaviour and language to enhance affinities within the group and police its borders, whilst differentiating them from the out-group.[52] The appropriate application of both emblem and meme has thus been a matter of debate, and the propriety of any particular example has been hotly debated in both circles.[53] Several of the rules offered by Paolo Giovio could easily apply to memes:

1. There should be a good balance between image and text.
2. The result should be neither too obscure nor too plain; as he writes: "It should not be so obscure that it has the mystery of Sibylline interpretation, but nor should it be so clear that the plebs could understand it."
3. The imagery should not use the human form.
4. The accompanying text should be brief and its applicability should not be related directly to the image's subject matter.
5. Use pretty imagery to create a pleasing appearance.[54]

The first, second, and fourth rules could equally apply to Internet memes. The third and fifth rules do not. People frequently appear in memes. More importantly, the creation of a pleasing appearance runs counter to the Internet aesthetic, in which according to one member of the community, the shared artefact is "supposed to look

51
Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies. Online Culture Wars from 4Chan to Tumblr and the Alt-Right*, Winchester 2017; Dale Beran, *It Came from Something Awful. How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Memes Donald Trump into Office*, New York 2019.

52
Marilynn B. Brewer, In-Group Bias in the Minimal Intergroup Situation. A Cognitive-Motivational Analysis, in: *Psychological Bulletin* 86/2, 1979, 307–324 (15 February 2018).

53
Ioana Literat and Sarah van den Berg, Buy Memes High, Sell Memes High. Vernacular Criticisms and Collective Negotiations of Value on Reddit's Meme Economy, in: *Information, Communication & Society* 22/2, 2019, 232–249 (4 March 2019); Michele Coscia, Competition and Success in the Meme Pool. A Case Study on Quickmeme.com, in: *arXiv* (15 June 2015).

54
Giovio, Dialogo dell'imprese, 9. Daly, Literature in the Light of the Emblem, 28, *inter alia* traces the influence of Giovio's rules upon other emblem makers, notably Georg Philipp Harsdörffer. The parallels are of course not exact. The rule prohibiting the human form has no formal parallel to memes, except for the strictness of the largely defunct Advice Animal macro, a highly formalised meme with stringent rules regarding the usable character (often an animal), a specific kaleidoscopic background colour scheme, and specific subject matter (e.g., cat-business crossovers for Business Cat or embarrassing moments for the Socially-Awkward Penguin).

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like shit".[55] Memes play to usually humorous, sensibilities, that dramatically differ from emblematic sensibilities. But in short, both emblems and memes are governed by rules, and the specificity of the format raises specific expectations that the inventor must meet. The boundaries of these rules are policed by a community of informed and interested parties; the makers of either form are not free to do whatever they wish. Both share the same mechanism, however: to avoid any literalness between the image and text and rely upon invention to make something that requires shared knowledge between maker and viewer to kindle appreciation. These rules act as a practical, constraining guide for violating the viewer's expectations, whether the purpose be to amuse or to teach.

Dismissed, Yet Popular

Both the emblem and the meme have been regarded with disdain. Each has been dismissed as simplistic and childish, ephemeral trifles with little to no lasting merit. Memes, for example, are routinely dismissed as having contributed to the degradation of public discourse by the crude hot-takes offered in their fruit-fly lifespan. They stand accused of assisting in the election of Donald Trump, no less by meme makers themselves.[56] Indeed, organisations of the "alt right" in the United States specifically use memes to spread white separatist and white supremacist talking points.[57]

Emblems were subject to similar criticism. "Extraordinary" emblems were created for ephemeral festive or funereal occasions – i.e., events literally outside the scope of the ordinary – and as such their appeal was limited.[58] Others dismissed the emblem as it became a favoured pedagogical form for the moral instruction of children: the humour in them was considered indicative of vulgar sentiment and was "only fit for Women and Children", as Roger l'Estrange wrote in 1669.[59] The Dutch humanist Jacob Cats obliquely

[55]
Nick Douglas, It's Supposed to Look Like Shit. The Internet Ugly Aesthetic, in: *Journal of Visual Culture* 13/3, 2014, 314–339 (29 May 2015).

[56]
The powering of the Trump campaign by political memes has been covered widely. See, e.g., Ryan Milner and Whitney Phillips, Dark Magic. The Memes that Made Donald Trump's Victory, in: Darren Lilleker, Daniel Jackson, Einar Thorsen, and Anastasia Veneti (eds.), *US Election Analysis 2016. Media, Voters and the Campaign. Early Reflections from Leading Academics*, Bournemouth 2016, 84–86 (30 May 2023); Nagle, Kill All Normies; and Beran, It Came from Something Awful.

[57]
For many examples of this, see Andrew Marantz, *Antisocial. How Online Extremists Broke America*, London 2019.

[58]
Henry Green, *Andrea Alciati and His Book of Emblems. A Biographical and Bibliographical Study*, London 1872, ix (20 April 2021); Manning, The Emblem, 186–192.

[59]
Manning, The Emblem, 152–153. Roger L'Estrange, *Fables, of Aesop and Other Eminent Mythologists. With Morals and Reflections*, London 1669, 32 (5 June 2022). See also Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad, In Four Books*, vol. 1, London ³1744, 98 (5 June 2022), who dismisses the

referenced this criticism and inverted it in *Kinder-spel* (*Child's Play*): the piece opens with a complex full-page emblem of children engaging in various games – playing house and soldier, playing with pinwheels and kites, performing gymnastics – and uses the Erasmian adage "*Ex nugis seria*" – "From trifles, serious things" – as a motto, suggesting that though the forms of expression may be simplistic, they nevertheless reflect the interests, concerns, and anxieties of their culture [Fig. 11].[60] Yet, despite the dismissal of both emblems and memes in certain quarters, both have enjoyed wide popularity. Thousands of emblem volumes were published over three centuries, and few today need to be reminded of the popularity of memes.[61]

New Media. Maturation and Democratisation

A notable parallel between emblems and memes is that both emerged in an early maturation period for their respective media. Emblems emerged not in the days of *incunabula*, but rather following that period: after the establishment of a robust market for printed books, with the onset of more standardised layouts and illustration formatting. No longer did books display illustrated marginalia as in illuminated manuscripts; elaborately decorated initials as in Gutenberg's Bible also decreased in number in a move towards simpler, cheaper layouts defined in part by the mechanisms of production. Illustrations were integrated within the borders defined by the wooden furniture keeping the body text in place, but visually separated from the text by a border.[62] The development of such conventions made it less expensive to print books, streamlining the layout process in favour of the press' constraints. And as a cheaper, more replicable communication medium than the illuminated manuscript, the printed book allowed for the publication and amplification of ephemera and alternative voices – as indicated not only by the development of niche interests such as emblems celebrating trifles, but by the printing of contrarian and inflammatory content, again mirroring claims levelled at memes in the current era.[63] Paradoxically, then, the economy of increasingly standardised presentation of content in printing's early maturation period con-

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emblem maker Roger Withers *inter alia* as one of the "dull of ancient days" and "wretched", ibid., 98.

[60]
Jacob Cats, *Alle de wercken van den Heere Jacob Cats; Ridder, Oudt Raadtpensionaris van Hollandt etc.*, Amsterdam 1712, 237 (2 April 2021).

[61]
For the volume of emblematic publications, see Peter M. Daly, *The Emblem in Early Modern Europe. Contributions to the Theory of the Emblem*, London [2]2016, 193.

[62]
Christopher de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, London [2]1994; Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge [2]2005; David McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript, and the Search for Order 1450–1830*, Cambridge 2003.

[63]
Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Cambridge [3]1982; Tom Standage, *Writing on the Wall. Social Media, the First 2,000 Years*, London 2013.

tributed to a proliferation of voices and interests not previously possible.

Likewise, the explosive development of Internet memes occurred not during the Web 1.0 era, but during the second wave, with user-generated content and asynchronous uploading techniques that significantly eased the ability to upload, share, and interact with content. Like the maturation period of the printing press, the easier publication tools of Web 2.0 platforms – from 4chan, Reddit, and QuickMeme to Instagram – have reduced the friction for communicating and amplifying one's interests. Coupled with multiple consumer- and prosumer-level tools for capturing and manipulating existing content, these platforms have provided fertile ground for individual invention.[64]

To borrow a biological metaphor, the early maturation periods of both printing and social media platforms are like rock pools: each has acted like a "protected area" conducive to developing conventions, forms, and accepted parameters that promote new life forms. Particularly successful examples of these life forms burst out of these isolated circumstances and populate the world more widely. Accordingly, books were published in low quantities intended for like minds, and only enjoyed more expansive print runs if they captured the public's enthusiasm – such as Alciato's *Libellus*. Likewise, memes are frequently created and shared in isolated communities such as 4chan or Reddit until a few, resonant examples leak out to the broader public.

In short, both forms exploit the affordances and circumstances provided by their respective environments. They take advantage of the possibilities offered by increasingly democratised media: more people contribute to the production of content, the content enjoys greater dispersal, and more are able to consume that content, even when that content ostensibly pertains to niche interests.

V. Differences

Of course, there are significant differences between emblems and memes; this paper can only focus on major differences. Whilst both forms feature in-group/out-group dynamics, the form of gatekeeping for the consumers of each differs considerably. The emblem was presented in an educated register: often in Latin, and usually with references to classical antiquity. In contrast, Internet memes focus on popular content and current events. Gatekeeping in meme making does not privilege education or refinement – indeed, it has been suggested that the rough quality of many memes is an impor-

tant stylistic indicator.[65] And even though the mode of distribution became more democratised for each format, in the case of emblems, the scale of that democratisation can be overemphasised.

Emblems and memes likewise differ in terms of dispersal and recognition. The creators of emblems are usually identifiable; meme makers are usually anonymous. Their respective media platforms work on different timescales. Emblems were published in multiple editions and compendia, and despite the fact that many were ephemera, measuring the impact of an emblem maker can entail a lifespan of decades or even more. In contrast, memes are often "published" individually, although they can be found in batches during moments of intense concentration as makers and sharers trade examples as they test (and exhaust) the boundaries of the subject matter, as they did of the "Sitting Bernie Sanders" meme in January 2021. They can also be found in compendium-like batches on subject-oriented sites such as Know Your Meme. In their "native" form, however, the vast majority of memes have very short lifespans and reflect accelerated news cycles and media consumption.

VI. Conclusion

By exploring unexpected parallels between Internet memes and Renaissance emblems, a vista opens up that allows us to appreciate several complex issues regarding presentational forms, devices of expectation and juxtaposition, insider and outsider reception of these artefacts, and ultimately the desire to express oneself even – or perhaps especially – within the constraints of tightly bound rules. Both forms have exploited conventionalised formats and imagery, and both have borrowed referential content that has been altered to free the maker to focus on invention. Both have also exploited the early maturity of their respective media formats and have enjoyed widespread reception, even as they have been subject to disdain. By examining the visual, thematic, and production components of these two formats, along with their contexts of production – common features of visual analysis – we can appreciate different dimensions of Internet memes in a way that may otherwise escape us.

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Raymond Drainville is a specialist in the use of imagery on contemporary digital media. He has published works examining viral imagery arising from viral events and political demonstrations.

[65] Douglas, It's Supposed to Look Like Shit.

In addition, he has published works analysing the use of artificial intelligence in studying visual media, particularly common errors in content identification and methods for effectively using AI. Together with the philosopher Jennifer Saul he has co-authored studies of visual and linguistic dogwhistles, and with her was recently awarded a research grant on the study of rhetorical fig-leaves in social media. He teaches digital media and digital cultures at the University of Waterloo.