THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MEMETIC REPRODUCTION

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Mike Watson (2019): *Can the Left Learn to Meme?*
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From wojak to bloomer, chad to trad, 4chan to Reddit, the internet today is ground-zero in a full blown culture war that insists on the autonomy of a freewheeling system of creativity with memes at the top of the semantic pecking order. But at what cost? What can memes tell us about the state of visual culture today? And are memes, as some have suggested, the new institutional critique of the 21st century?

As a starting point, it is useful to consider the title of a recently published book: *Can the Left Learn to Meme?* by art critic and philosopher Mike Watson. The question seems simple and symmetrical enough. Yet, upon closer inspection, the book reveals a sophisticated theory of meme culture markedly further afield than traditional political binaries between left and right, asking to what extent memes are able function as an expression of the avant-garde's seemingly endless preoccupation with horizontally-inclined cultural content.

Meme

Noun

1. An element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation of other non-genetic means.
2. An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations.

Memes, at their best, are accessible to millions of people and allow creators to bypass traditional gatekeepers of culture by offering new path towards creative distribution. At the same time, they upend longstanding beliefs around authenticity, art originality and authorship, political orientation and the economics of a bloated art system, basically, Richard Prince's wet dream.

To start, Watson dispels a common misunderstanding that memes are solely the domain of edgelords spreading alt-right content on 4/chan imageboards. Nevertheless, Watson claims that more recent incarnations of the left -- such as the Sanders or Corbyn movements -- find it difficult to participate in meme wars where it is absurdity that predicts virality. Oftentimes, the memes that achieve viral-status lack credence, accountability and truth, mostly by way of provoking obnoxious comparisons strictly for the lulz - internet parlance for content that generates laughter through unruly juxtapositions of text and image. ance for content that generates laughter through unseeming juxtapositions of text and image.

Incumbent to this conundrum, Watson turns to Adorno, who recognized much earlier that critiquing the rationality of a dominant system is useless without a strong materialist analysis. As early as the 1950s, Adorno observed how the empirical limitations of our own lived experience stem from culture, or what he dubbed the "culture industry." Not to be confused or conflated with the vast gaslighting of cultural Marxism today, which is paradoxically mostly thanks to alt-right trolls without even a modicum of understanding of materialist analysis, Watson segues into a soft critique of capitalism through its own rationality and ideology.

While the essence of any culture is arguably subjective, a matter of individual consciousness, not based on any single or universal truth, the book leans heavily into Adorno to insist that while there is an instrumental rationality that dominates late-capitalist logic today, it is also this rationality that in turn assimilates the working classes from Toronto to Timbuktu, denigrating art and aesthetics with it. According to Watson, the art industry that survives today, even in the post-pandemic era, is still mostly concerned with a capitalist logic that is used to prop up the status quo of existing capitalist relations. Watson takes stock of the culture industry as really nothing more than a field that has become rife with financial speculation and market manipulation, thereby limiting the symbolic potential of art to that of commodity fetish.

Moreover, Watson correctly conveys Adorno's paradox, which is twofold: that culture holds within it the contrapposto of truth and anti-truth, a shadowplay of extremities that make for an altogether disorientating abstraction at best, pure political propaganda and disinformation at worst. In terms borrowed from Adnoro, who was writing in the shadow of European fascism and all the horrors that came along with it, there is a dialectic at play within the culture industry that allows art to critique existing power relations, while remaining firmly implanted within it at the very same time.

These issues are certainly not unfamiliar to anyone adjacent to the current state of art discourse and criticism today, to which Watson is certainly purview. As a writer for *Artforum, Frieze, Hyperallergic* and others, Watson has long since examined elsewhere how the institutions, capital, markets and concepts that underlie art idioms create unequal power dynamics within the culture industry, despite often grand proclamations otherwise. Whether within the global circuit of contemporary art, or cinema, media or whatever, Watson argues without trepidation that financial interests ultimately determine what is and isn't art. This relationship, according to Watson, gives credence to transcultural processes that elevate conceptual and socially engaged art to the new holy grail of culture par excellence, while at the same time supporting a revolving door between art historians, museums, galleries, wealthy donors, art collectors, tax havens and off-shore storage facilities. According to Watson, the prevailing system of culture today is one that uses social engagement to assimilate critique. The culture industry, as such, refracts into self-referential microcosms that offer little by way of actual radical change or upheaval. The sub-status-quo of the art market is thus rendered mute by armies of PR pay-to-play driven content. Biennales and non-profit cultural spaces and events are hardly exempt; leading to what Watson describes throughout his art criticism career as a milieu that ensures the elongation of evermore subtle entanglements of cultural elitism and financialization that continue with unabated impunity.

Crucially, one should remember that this makes meaningful political action or resistance from within the culture industry either futile or naive, more often than not a little bit of both. The culture industry is, after all, an *industry* like any other. So long as artists are willing to propose ever more ambitious social projects for an ever smaller chunk of the proverbial cultural pie; the once transcendental hope of art to hedge against social injustice has become mostly a farce, a subject to which Watson devotes a considerable portion of his earlier book *Towards a Conceptual Militancy* (2016).

Against the spectrum of widespread and more systemic social injustices, even the most poignant critiques from the likes of Claire Bishop, Hannah Black or the Guerilla Girls remains infinitesimal to the mighty task of many avowed leftists. Today, with the march of right-wing populism the world over, it appears less and less likely that the realm of art world incubated critics will produce any meaningful resistance.

Today, Watson argues, the leftist-indoctrinated art world has become a cause célèbre for micro-feuds that do little to advance class consciousness, much less any meaningful social reform or change. While the art world still maintains an avowed surface tension and interest in commodifying identity politics and turning the art industry into some sort of Olympics of Otherhood, the real ability it has to institute meaningful social or political reform is becoming more

diluted by the day. It seems that we have become indoctrinated into a system where cultural exchange value is measured not by form, but instead by proximity to identity politics, be it anti-colonial, feminist or queer theory, often at the expense of underlying class critique. Though proponents of intersectional theory may wish to argue otherwise, the communal experience of socially engaged art offers but a short relapse, a minor detour from the otherwise unabating shock doctrine of disaster capitalism.

Enter a genuinely subliminal counter-hegemonic art form -- such as memes, Watson argues -- which by their very form necessitate that they exist outside the realm of high art because memes do not play within the existing power structures or the dynamics of the culture industry. Memes do not follow the novel and elitist infrastructure of contemporary art, nor any other culture industry for that matter. Memes are self-referential, infinitely reproducible, often authorless, sometimes semi-anonymous, viral, symbolic and dank. Memes have become the modern-day icons of intersectional class criticism, forgoing the charlatans who act as gatekeepers of blue-chip galleries, editors of art magazines, academia and the biennale-circuit all in one fell swoop, to which the younger generations from the millennials all the way on down are naturally more inclined.

Resistance in meme-form offers outsiders and art world adjacents with only a computer and internet access a slew of potential avenues to march forth with new icons of proto-institutional critique, Watson argues in his book. However, at the same time, memes also contain the same negative tropes that shore up class, racial and gender divides. One quick perusal through 4chan's infamous /pol/ image board reveals no shortage of anti-semitic, sexually explicit, or unabashedly racist and/or offensive images.

Regardless, the premise of Watson's book and the question it then attempts to answer is what makes the cultural capital of the left so blighted and unable to respond to the rise of right-wing, conservative, anti-identitarian streams of contemporary political discourse. The easy answer is that populism engendered by the internet creates a cause and effect that upends *some* existing power relations, while paradoxically reinforcing other power relations at the same time. It is precisely why, on top of the imperial infrastructure of the internet, what Shoshana Zuboff elsewhere describes as 'surveillance capitalism', that a site like Wikileaks could proliferate. But memes also serve the interests of the dominant class, particularly in a world where propaganda and disinformation are now part and parcel of states' ever growing cyber arenal; warfare and memes have become ever more entangled synonymous.

As with most viral content, a meme can and often does play into the hands of keyboard warriors eager to push a political agenda. Case in point being a recent Joe Biden meme, which portrayed the presumptive Democractic nominee for the Whitehouse alongside a photo of him smiling along with the phrase "His Brain? No. His Heart." However, after the meme went viral,
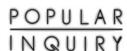
artist Brad Troemel claimed credit for it, suggesting that "the ad is real, not in the sense that it was officially released by the Biden campaign," Troemel said in a later video explaining his logic, "but in the sense that this is truly their message to you—that Joe Biden is a mentally and morally defunct candidate whose folksy and centrist charm will lead him to victory." By the time the Biden presidential campaign caught wind of the ad, it had accrued over 10,000 retweets and 62,000 likes, thought it was later flagged and removed from Twitter for violating its terms of service, the damage had clearly already been done.

So while many consider memes simply off-handed jokes and side-swipes at well-known tropes or stereotypes, memes have also come to encompass an all out organ of fake news and disinformation. As such, Watson rightly nuances how today there are numerous examples of internet censorship and surveillance, but ultimately the sheer veracity of culture being produced on the internet obviates the need for elitist cultural gatekeepers, which allows for dissident voices and content to also take root, alongside a cacophony of just about everything else, leading to Watson's central thesis:

> Adorno's complaint that an ostensibly democractic system uses mass-produced cultural products to numb the minds of an unsuspecting public loses traction given the vast range of choice interactivity offered by the internet [...] Or put otherwise, Adorno's worst fears regarding the homogenising effects of the culture industry have been realised, yet at the expense of the autonomy of high art, which has contradictorily migrated to mass culture in the form of internet memes. (p.51)

Yet, where exactly this leads us is to a bit of an impasse. By leaning into a systemic analysis of memes, the book also drifts into an array of spuriously related cultural references, including the obscure internet music genre vaporwave, gaming culture (mostly *League of Legends),* Netflix's television series *Stranger Things,* through to the reality TV show *Keeping up With the Kardashians.* This slightly obfuscates the title of the book (or perhaps it is the other way around, with the book's title obfuscating the content). Regardless, *Can the Left Learn to Meme* gives little justice to Watson's otherwise interesting and important thesis: that the left, either wittingly or not, is losing the culture war and the battle of ideas to an army of mostly uneducated, dumb, right-wing trolls.

In the final chapter, Watson offers several nuanced thoughts as to why video games and millennials - and by extension memes and new media forms of institutional critique vis-a-vis the web - are often "unwitting acolytes of the new far right." (pp.) Watson claims that new media, despite a surface connection to so-called 'woke' millennials, is not void from the same crude

political binaries and hyperpolarizations that define our contemporary political arena. Is it possible to simultaneously see the 21st century new media landscape as both positive and negative? To some extent, Watson argues that yes, the meme wars are naturally privy to the same polarizations taking place across the political sphere. Returning to Adorno, Watson reiterates that "the flood of precise information and brand new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once."[1]

Accordingly, other aspects of the book may be instructive to some in the online left, in particular the sections in which he analyses the impact of Steve Bannon, Breitbart News and gamergate, which for more seasoned readers with knowledge of these topics the book will not offer much by way of new information, but potentially add new insight into an already well-trodden history. All told, *Can the Left Learn to Meme* examines with fevered pace the outstripping of all manner of online activity, all the while offering a cautionary tale to those on the precipice of an antiquated culture industry. With punkish attitude and gingerly panache, the book makes a sincere attempt to chart the rise memes and with it the defining tragi-comedy of 21st century culture, riddled with twists and turns and calls for art's emancipation beyond the stoic gallery and museum walls.

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[1] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2002), xxvii.