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A Perfect (Shit)Storm: *On Memes, Movements and Geopolitics*



It all began with a sentence: "the internet is for everyone." But now we're living with the reality, it's not quite what we expected.¹

The Coriolis Effect is the name of a phenomenon caused by the earth's rotation which makes tropical cyclones swirl clockwise in the Southern Hemisphere and counter-clockwise in the Northern Hemisphere. No tropical cyclone has been known to pass the equator since the storm would have to work against its initial direction of spin, but the theoretical possibility of a crossover has not been ruled out.² The idea of a storm that is strong enough to turn direction once it moves from one side of the world to the other came to mind when thinking about Pepe the Frog: the first meme to be classified as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League in 2016 due to its appropriation by the U.S. alt-right, which resurfaced as a mascot for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement in 2019.

Pepe is an anthropomorphic frog with a long and winding narrative arc. He debuted in 2005 as a character in Matt Furié's comic series *Boy's Club*.³ As the story goes, a specific panel launched the Pepe meme, circa 2008, in which Pepe says "Feels good man" after peeing with his trousers down.⁴ "By 2010," writes media anthropologist Gabriele de Seta, "the character's stylised expression had already become one of the most distinctive examples of American digital folklore... circulating in relatively unknown bodybuilding forums."⁵ The meme was then "picked up by users of larger discussion boards like Something Awful, 4chan, and Reddit," becoming something of a mascot for these communities, with Pepe's image "quickly spun into an endless series of self-referential variations."⁶



Pepe reached peak mainstream in November 2014 when American singer Katy Perry posted about Australian jetlag on Twitter with the image of a crying Pepe, followed by a bootylicious Pepe featured on singer/rapper Nicki Minaj's Instagram that December. This is when things took a dark turn. Devout members of the Pepe-verse, centred around the frankly terrifying 'incel' communities of 4chan, began to sabotage their meme in order to reclaim it, flooding the online space with offensive versions of Pepe to deter any 'normie' from using his image.⁷ Still, "Pepe's popularity continued to soar," and "his hateful side began to grow," reported Dani Di Placido, "as both harmless trolls and genuine racists continued to pump out Nazi-themed Pepe memes."⁸

Then came the 2016 US presidential elections. A May 2016 *Daily Beast* article quotes anonymous Twitter users who described an organised effort around Pepe—later denied in a *Daily Caller* article, whose author conceded that he couldn't tell if his sources were trolling him or not⁹—to "push white nationalism into a very mainstream position," thus "setting up... a massive cultural shift."¹⁰ That shift was solidified in autumn 2016, when Hilary Clinton described Trump supporters as "a basket of deplorables" to which Donald Trump Jr. responded by sharing an image of the movie poster for *The Dependables* with the title changed to 'The Deplorables' and the film's characters replaced by Trump allies, Pepe included. Shortly after, Clinton's campaign published a primer outlining Pepe as a hate symbol. Even still, Trump, who retweeted an image of himself as 'President Pepe' in 2015, won.

Trump's election was declared a victory for "meme magic" in which memes are capable of influencing real-world events. (One *Washington Post* article quoted a 4chan user, who proclaimed: "We actually elected a meme as president."¹¹) At the time, journalist Douglas Haddow, who describes memes as "Molotov jpegs," reflected on the "meme warfare" he waged as a staff writer at the anti-capitalist, "culture-jamming" publication, *Adbusters*. "Back in 2010, the idea of using memes to political ends was still housed within a fairly slim leftist-activist corridor," Haddow wrote.¹² It was around this time that "political events started to become 'memetic',"¹³ with Obama's 2008 and 2012 election campaigns lauded for their "tech-savvy, data-heavy use of social media, voter profiling, and microtargeting,"¹⁴ the so-called Arab Spring launching a flurry of movements across the world, and *Adbusters* tweeting #occupywallstreet for the first time.¹⁵

“Never in our most ironic dreams,” Haddow continues, “did we think that the spirit of our tired, lager-fuelled pissstrokes would end up leading to a resurgence of white nationalism and make the prospect of a fascist America faintly realistic.”¹⁶ Buoyed by Trump’s success, the alt-right became increasingly visible as the Overton Window definitively expanded, and the world “seemed to have taken on the... quality of a message-board fight.”¹⁷ Shortly after the election, the president of the white nationalist National Policy Institute, Richard Spencer, boldly echoed the infamous ‘heil Hitler’ salute when he opened his speech at a Washington conference. In 2017, he was filmed getting punched in the face as he was about to explain the symbolism of his Pepe badge.

Meanwhile, Pepe’s creator, Matt Furie, attempted to rehabilitate his character, launching a #SavePepe campaign with the Anti-Defamation League, writing a *TIME* op-ed titled, ‘I’m Reclaiming Him. He Was Never About Hate,’ and embarking on a legal crusade against Pepe’s use by the alt-right. In 2017, Furie had the author of a self-published Islamophobic children’s book featuring Pepe donate all profits from the book’s sales to the Council on American-Islamic Relations, while in 2018 he made the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* remove Pepe’s images.¹⁸ In June 2019, Furie reached a settlement with Infowars, which had been selling merchandise with Pepe’s image. He even tried killing Pepe off, staging his funeral in a one-page strip released on Free Comic Book Day in May 2017. But Pepe would not – could not – die. Versions showed him arisen as a zombie. Earlier in 2017, the Russian Embassy posted a Pepe on twitter to troll the UK government, while images of Pepe Le Pen, named after the leader of the far-right National Front Party in France, began circulating around the French presidential elections.

“The harsh truth is that Furie’s latest gambit to change Pepe’s legacy isn’t likely to be any more successful than his previous attempts,” wrote Aja Romero for *Vox*; “Remix culture is a double-edged sword.”¹⁹ As “a class of media that has emerged with distributed, platform-based networks”²⁰ internet memes are open to a decentralised process of mutation through their virulent circulation, which renders ownership and authorship void. When an image on the internet strikes a chord it takes on a life of its own, evolving through an ever-growing, non-linear chain of connections that strike out to form new paths as they develop in a rhizomatic state of constant flux. “Networks of memes never reach a moment of stability,” says internet culture researcher Marley-Vincent Lindsay; “there will always be another remix, on top of the remixes of the remixes, creating a seemingly endless tree of variation that snakes back on itself,” continues An Xiao Mina.²¹ To quote Haddow, the internet can be “weird like that” – “It takes things and twists them.”²² Cue Pepe’s reincarnation in Hong Kong.

“Tropical cyclones are like giant engines that use warm, moist air as fuel,” states a NASA explainer. While not known to have crossed the equator, they form near its line, where warm surface waters can evaporate to make cumulonimbus clouds, with the resulting low pressure pulling more air in. In short, a tropical cyclone is a movement: when enough air has accumulated, a storm is created that draws more molecules into its spin. This is one way to think about Pepe’s ascent: a history that “has for the most part been narrated as a thoroughly American story,” writes de Seta, even though the meme was circulating in China well before the US presidential elections as a *biaoqing*, “a term that describes a broad category of digital content including emoticons, reaction images, animated GIFs, and stickers.”²³

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In *Pepe the Sad Frog Coloring Book and Chinese Language Guide*, Fei Liu suggests that Pepe emerged in China in 2008, becoming “a go-to sticker for vocalising complaint on the internet” or “fighting with pictures,” which Fei Liu interprets “as using memes for a ‘battle of wits’ not unlike what happens on American social media.”²⁴ Pepe’s appearance in Hong Kong is thus not as surprising as some would believe. Even before the historic June anti-extradition marches in 2019—as early as 2014, according to the Hong Kong-based Rare Pepe Party Facebook page moderator—Pepe was already a common emoticon, appearing as an overworked office worker, for example.²⁵ As the protest movement grew, so new Pepe identities emerged, including a frontline protester with distinctive yellow hard hat; appearing on storefronts to signal allegiance with the so-called Yellow Movement, “Post-its decorating the city’s many Lennon Walls,” and “backpacks of peaceful airport protesters, inviting tourists to scan a QR code that led to details of the movement’s five demands.”²⁶

None of the Hong Kong protestors seemed to know of Pepe’s hateful associations in the West; for them he was a benign symbol of the movement’s youthful energy.²⁷ (Indeed, the Anti-Defamation League cautions that not all Pepees are signs of white supremacy.²⁸) That energy was on full display on the night of 1 July 2019, the 22nd anniversary of the former British colony’s handover to China, when a tense day-long stand-off with police climaxed with protestors storming the city’s Legislative Council building and brandishing Hong Kong’s colonial flag in the main hall. The gesture was an uncomfortable detournement, as problematic as the sight of protestors waving UK and US flags on Hong Kong’s streets, or the strong support for the movement from US neo-conservatives, particularly when looking at such events through a decolonial lens and with Pepe’s ominous Western spectre in mind.

But these optics point to Hong Kong’s double bind. Having been brought to the edge of democracy by its former coloniser, its freedoms are being taken away by a new one, which complicates any kind of decolonial reading of the city, not to mention the global superpowers that have a stake in it. By aligning with the international community with which Hong Kong’s Basic Law associates (and which should protect Hong Kong’s international system through to 2047)—whether petitioning G20 countries to “liberate Hong Kong” from “Chinese colonisation” or requesting, as pop star Denise Ho did in July 2019, a special session on Hong Kong’s autonomy at the United Nations Human Rights Council²⁹—the Hong Kong movement has played into, or on, an old Cold War axis, whereby liberal democracy is pitted against communist totalitarianism. This narrative suited Trump, who in November 2019, amid a US-China trade war, signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act (HKHRDA) into law.

For scholars Ellie Tse and Chris Chien, the bipartisan support among US politicians for the HKHRDA “highlights the re-emergence of a Cold War model of antagonistic geopolitics that imagines a battle between two superpowers—except this time between the US and the PRC.”³⁰ And things have only continued to heat up. After a US-China ‘phase one’ trade deal was signed in January 2020, Beijing announced a fast-tracked National Security Law to be passed over Hong Kong in May that year, prompting Trump to declare Hong Kong no longer autonomous enough to uphold the United States-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, which considers the territory separately from China. What followed was unanimous US Senate approval for a bill laying out sanctions on Chinese officials undermining Hong Kong’s autonomy.³¹ Once again, the Cold War analogy was raised, this time by pro-democracy lawmaker Claudia Mo: “Hong Kong is being made a new Berlin,” she said, “We are caught right in the middle of it.”³²

But while it is true that Hong Kong is caught in the middle of an ongoing trade war between two global superpowers while simultaneously negotiating political and civil autonomy in the context of post-colonial assimilation and/or de-/re-colonisation, Tse and Chien point out how unhelpful the Cold War rhetoric is when taking into account the “binary nationalist worldview” this framing supports, which both the US and China seem to play up in order to support their geopolitical agendas. As they write, “The US’ penchant for political reversals, in addition to mutual US-PRC interest in putting open markets ahead of workers, should be a clarion call to sceptics and protesters alike to refuse a retrenchment in binarism and the use of entire peoples as bargaining chips.”³³ To quote writer Wilfred Chan, “When it comes to the question of Hong Kong’s autonomy, I think that neither China nor the United States desires Hong Kong to truly be free.”³⁴

Chan is a member of the Lausan Collective, a platform for decolonial left perspectives that resists Western and Chinese imperialisms by building trans-national and trans-social networks of anti-capitalist solidarity. In 2019, he interviewed Avery Ng, chairman of the League of Social Democrats, a left-wing political party in Hong Kong, about the city’s “broad-spectrum movement against a totalitarian government.”³⁵ Ng pointed out that Hong Kong’s struggle is not “a purely leftist fight” because a unified stand is crucial. Despite their differences, the movement includes centrists and right-wingers, some of whom reflect a rise in recent years of “an anti-migrant, right-wing ‘Hong Kong first’ sentiment,” echoing a general resurgence in nativist, nationalist politics across the world.³⁶

This divergent diversity speaks to Hong Kong’s contextual particularities. Ng concedes that “most people do not know how to distinguish between right and left because of [Hong Kong’s] historical context,” with the city historically developing to the right of China, under the wing of a neoliberal, Western coloniser.³⁷ Leftist positions are often “labelled as pro-Communism,” Ng explains, which in short means “pro-CCP,” a confusion that becomes more complicated when considering the Chinese State often appears communist only in name, since it has evolved to become something of a hybrid of neoliberal and totalitarian state capitalism with neo-imperialist characteristics.³⁸ This all feeds into the complexity of Pepe’s evolution as a meme that has become a political symbol in two very different contexts, and which contains a spectrum of meaning as a result – something that resonates with Lausan’s statement regarding the complexity of their own position: “Though what constitutes ‘the left’ in Hong Kong is far from clear,” they write, “we hold the multiple meanings of this term and political category together in tension.”³⁹

The idea of a political term holding together divergent positions resonates with Ernesto Laclau’s definition of an empty signifier, whose ‘emptiness’ unifies diverse groups – a unity made possible in the establishment of “a frontier of exclusion” that institutes an antagonism with a repressive power (in short, a common enemy).⁴⁰ The empty signifier represents an incommensurable totality, Laclau explains: “a body split between the particularity which it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer.”⁴¹ This incommensurability relates to the function of a politicised internet meme as an image that facilitates “what [Chantal] Mouffe would call a ‘libidinal bond’ in the formation of an ‘us’.”⁴² As Paul Torino and Adrian Wohlleben write in relation to the yellow vest as a meme for the grassroots *gilets jaunes* movement in France, “The fluidity of the meme makes it possible to join a march, a blockade or a roundabout occupation without having to buy into a ‘common interest’ or the legitimising ‘beliefs’ of a movement. It does not solve, but simply defers the question of a common grammar of suffering to a later point.”⁴³



To contain an ever-expanding multiplicity is all part of a meme’s magic. What Scott Wark and McKenzie Wark consider as fetish: not simply because of “what it says about our ‘consciousness’ of heterogeneous value systems,” but because of the anthropological fetish as “a physical object that mediates values that are otherwise ‘incommensurable’.”⁴⁴ As they explain, it is the continued circulation of the internet meme that constitutes it as a collectively produced object. This in turn facilitates a meme’s ambiguous oscillation between the seeming incommensurability of the ‘instance’ and ‘plurality’, in which it can be taken as both a specific instance and as a “gesture towards an envisaged totality of related instances of it.”⁴⁵ This simultaneous expression relates to Limor Shifman’s understanding of an internet meme as “cultural information that passes along from person to person,” which “gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon.”⁴⁶ Returning to Wark and Wark, “Circulation smooths the ambiguity between the Internet meme’s instance and its plurality into something that net culture works with intuitively,” mutating “through acts of collective production that stretch and mould [its] features to affect the plurality through the instance.”⁴⁷

Pepe’s stretch and mould continued in Hong Kong in December 2019, when a pop-up store appeared selling non-political Pepe merchandise, including T-shirts and phone cases—the kind of bootleg Pepe items that have been sold across China for a while. Rumours circulated about a suspected link “to a shady mainland Chinese Amazon storefront, diluting the revolutionary iconography of Pepe with tacky garbage.”⁴⁸ But it soon emerged that a Hong Kong firm Best Crew PR officially licensed Pepe’s trademark from Furie, and registered with the Hong Kong Customs and Excise Department as the exclusive official licensed partner of Pepe in Hong Kong.⁴⁹ The twists and turns continued. Ahead of the 2020 Lunar New Year, Best Crew PR’s Facebook page, which features Pepe among hearts and a text bubble reading “peaceful frog”, announced a second pop-up store in Hong Kong. The post, in part, read: “What kind of weird character will Pepe become this new year?”⁵⁰

In October 1991, an anticyclone, a low-pressure system and a hurricane collided in the North Atlantic Ocean off the coasts of New England, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland.⁵¹ Described as “a ferocious anomaly,” the deputy meteorologist of the NWS Boston office at the time called it “The Perfect Storm.”⁵²

It is interesting to think about tempestuous convergences in Hong Kong, a city where a swirl of Pepes meet, and whose conditions, “bound by the unprecedented confluence of neoliberal capitalism and state capitalism,” are somehow mirrored in Pepe’s absorption of different movements in two different parts of the world.⁵³ In Hong Kong, writes Professor Yiu-Wai Chu, “The conflicts as well as collusion between two capitalisms have generated a persistent storm, which may well usher in a new era of ‘one world two systems’ global order.”⁵⁴ This murky geopolitical tempest is complicated by a binary historical Cold War narrative that, while unhelpful, comes into play in propaganda deployed through the same computational networks and platforms in which Pepe circulates—at its core, the context in which the meme emerged and has developed as a form of propaganda. One example is the CCP-affiliated tabloid *Global Times* reporting on the presence of Ukrainian neo-Nazis with alleged support from the CIA in the Hong Kong protests⁵⁵—an angle echoed by Russia, an old enemy in the Cold War redux narrative, to discredit the Euromaidan movement in Ukraine as “Western-backed regime change” executed by “Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites,” and justify the annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁵⁶

Journalist Leonid Ragozin describes Crimea’s annexation as “a triumph of political manipulation.”⁵⁷ Cognisant of the memetic spread of popular protests across the world sparked by the so-called Arab Spring, the Kremlin reportedly launched a “manipulation campaign” to control the narrative.⁵⁸ Supporting this work was the Kremlin-backed ‘troll farm’ Internet Research Agency, best known for allegations of meddling in the 2016 US presidential elections by creating fake social media accounts to post fake news, political advertisements and comments “aimed at sowing discord and inflaming tensions among Americans.”⁵⁹ (The agency also reportedly showed “significant levels of interest” in the European elections of 2016, including the Brexit Referendum.⁶⁰)

Aside from stoking division, the IRA’s mission to undermine public confidence in democracy and unsettle collective conceptions of ‘truth’ aligns with the Russian state’s weaponisation of dis/information overall, which Metahaven’s 2015 documentary *The Sprawl* interrogates in part by focusing on state-funded international news broadcaster RT, “unquestionably a case study in the complexity of modern propaganda.”⁶¹ In one 2014 clip, RT presenter Anissa Naouai acknowledges the network’s privileging of a ‘Russian perspective’ while accusing CNN anchor Christiane Amanpour for propagating the US state department line. That year, an RT ad campaign featured posters of Tony Blair, George Bush and Colin Powell next to Iraq War civilian death counts and the statements “No WMDs” and “This is what happens when there is no second opinion”, emphasising US and UK media’s own half-truths and omissions. (On the coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, academic Graeme Smith found Central China Television’s international news channel “more reliable than CNN or even the BBC, who were grappling with embedded reporters and administrations bent on misleading the public.”⁶²)

RT’s assertion of a “Second Opinion”, which relates to the slogan for Central China Television’s international media network CGTN, “See the Difference”,⁶³ comes through in *Eurasia*, Metahaven’s 2018 follow-up to *The Sprawl*, which travels the roads where China’s geopolitical Belt

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and Road Initiative meets the Eurasian steppe, as a means to reflect on the shifting borders and ideological legacies that have sought to define or claim a historically contested territory. The film is partly narrated with excerpts from sociologist Emile Durkheim's early twentieth century lectures on 'Pragmatism and the Question of Truth', focusing on two main points, that "truth cannot be immutable because reality itself is not immutable; hence truth changes in time," and "Truth cannot be one because this oneness would be incompatible with the diversity of minds; hence truth changes in space."⁶⁴

Aleksandr Dugin, who appears briefly in the film, echoes Durkheim's position on truth's relativity when he talks about there being "no facts, only interpretations" – in a multipolar world where "America is not the boss."⁶⁵ Dugin is the self-proclaimed founder of Neo-Eurasianism, an ultra-nationalist geopolitical ideology that rejects the 'Atlanticist' order of the United States in favour of a 'Pax Eurasiatica', and champions a global multipolarity that resists the Western project of "unipolar and unidimensional globalisation."⁶⁶ This brand of multipolarity, a core tenet of Russia's soft power brand, supports the "conservation" and "further development" of "the cultural, religious, and ethnic identities of every people,"⁶⁷ which aligns with Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov's concept of "sovereign democracy" – that every country has the right to determine its own path⁶⁸ – not to mention China's own non-interventionist rhetoric surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative as a project of geopolitical realignment. All of which relates back to RT's provision of "another perspective" and CGTN's invitation to "see the difference."⁶⁹

The decentring of geopolitical perspective problematises what author Peter Pomerantsev states about Russian propaganda using "a plurality of truths to feed disinformation" and "trash the information space,"⁷⁰ not in terms of the accusation, but in its application to just one global power. As the US talks of Russian disinformation campaigns, so Dugin describes "a system of total disinformation" led by a "global oligarchy."⁷¹ Technically he's not wrong.⁷² The US Army's Psychological Operations recruitment page describes a mission unchanged since World War I, to "convey selected information indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behaviour of foreign governments, organisations, groups, and individuals."⁷³ This undertaking matches Psy-Ops objectives worldwide, whether state or not. Take for example the British SCL Group, the private behavioural research and strategic communications company scandalised by its subsidiary Cambridge Analytica, which utilised data harvested from Facebook for Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Quoting journalist Carole Cadwalladr, SCL Group must be considered "a military contractor using military strategies on a civilian population" in order to persuade or change people's minds.⁷⁴

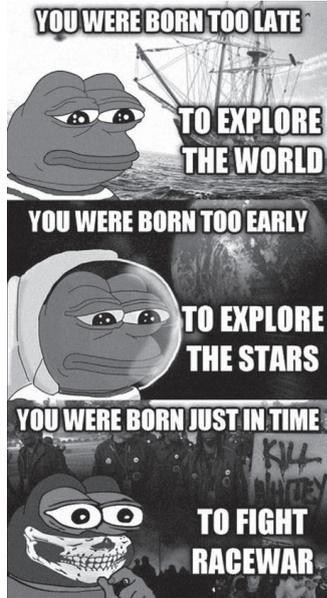
Reportedly contracted by the UK's Ministry of Defence and the US Department of Defense, SCL's operations are located in cyberspace, the so-called fifth dimension of war, which UN peacekeeper Raghu Raman describes as "a foundation for a more sinister sixth dimension. The battle for the mind."⁷⁵ These dimensions unfold in "the technical and geopolitical structures of planetary computation," which Benjamin H. Bratton defines as the "accidental megastructure" of 'The Stack'⁷⁶ – "a real physical construction" that "is also a canvas on which spatial imaginaries are screened."⁷⁷ (In short, the internet and the technologies, infrastructures, and networks that both compose and utilise it, a concept that could loosely align with Laura Berlant's definition of infrastructure "as that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself."⁷⁸) These spatial imaginaries are screened through what Bratton calls "interfacial regimes" – like Google or Facebook – which make this "vast global supercomputational network"

usable and legible.⁷⁹ In *The Sprawl*, he talks about these regimes operating like “totalising machines” that produce “a highly ideological distortion of all... possibilities into a framework,” in which “the capacity for a kind of cognitive fundamentalism” is “not only a danger” but “almost an inevitability” since “what you see and encounter is pre-narrated.”⁸⁰

RT could be read as one example of this pre-narration: an ‘interface’ that filters the world through a specific geopolitical lens while effectively using the online space to present its ‘perspective’ to a global audience. (In 2013, RT became the first TV news channel in history to reach one billion views on YouTube.) As a state-backed international news broadcaster, its function aligns with Bratton’s definition of the interfacial regime as something that “draws together flows and connections that may be geographically dispersed, massively discontinuous, and yet intimately connected by a particular causal interfacial chain” presented “as a single image”⁸¹—which in this instance would be the projection of a global, Russian ‘perspective’ encapsulated in RT’s logo as a sign of its identity. This perspectival projection could be connected with the concept of the empty signifier, and in turn a politicised meme, which brings together disparate communities through a chain of equivalences that are ultimately organised in resistance to a ‘repressive power’—which in the case of RT, and the Neo-Eurasianist position more generally, would be the homogenising force of the liberal West.

In this sense, it is not surprising that Dugin has claimed Trump as neo-Eurasian, since his nationalist platform is positioned against liberal politicians and mainstream media in the US, nor that Pepe arose as an effective symbol of this opposition. As Trump was characterised as a disruptive outsider hell-bent on laying down borders and discrediting CNN during the 2016 election, so Pepe became the image of a networked collective that mirrored this outlier identity—“subcultures and folkways of the internet” whose participants, like the reality TV candidate they rallied behind, had become adept at “manipulating the attention economy.”⁸² But that is not to say that Pepe is a product of the state, nor is the meme a representation of its machinations. By 2016, it was clear that non-state actors like ISIS could operate effectively in the fifth and sixth dimensions of war, given the stateless, im/material quality of the online world and its direct link to individuals, as opposed to the first four dimensions (land, sea, air and space), which are defined by kinetic warfare geared towards the destruction of state-owned or state-controlled people and infrastructure.⁸³ In the virtual realm, “it’s a question of focus, not funds,” writes Raman, geared towards “leveraging and riding on” an enemy’s grid rather than attacking or destroying it.⁸⁴ This is where social media comes in: at once open ground for governments, terrorists, corporations, and individuals alike to influence opinion and in turn ‘reality’—and a series of frameworks with architectures of their own that influence the way information is produced, disseminated and consumed.

“For this turbulent territorial economy,” Bratton writes, “some purposes may be intentionally designed while others seem to emerge as organic mutations in response to apparently normal conditions.”⁸⁵ On one end of the spectrum, there are the apparatuses of the state, and platforms like YouTube, designed to extract revenue from online engagement that have been shown to reward extreme content. On the other end, there are individuals, some who game the system for the ‘lulz’, and others for the profit, indifferent to the implications, like the individuals in Veles, Macedonia, where scores of websites producing fake news during the 2016 US elections were traced. Far from being an outpost of the Russian propaganda machine, the people running these sites were reportedly motivated by the monetary rewards of online ad services like Google AdSense rather than the politics. In short, they took advantage of the algorithms for personal gain, like an independent storm system that merged with another.



In this regard, 2016 was a watershed year when it came to public awareness of the weaponisation of the internet's social and informational spheres, whether for economic, political, or personal gain; a moment when "the extent to which memetic warfare [was] already taking place" became visible⁸⁶—a turning point for which Pepe became emblematic, and continues to embody. After all, writes C_Y_S in *Seize the Memes of Production*, "Online media are not merely a replication of real-world phenomena superimposed on the digital realm, but another layer of abstraction entirely": a reflection of "the self-producing imagination of the Internet"⁸⁷ itself, where, per techno-sociologist Zeynep Tufekci's 2014 prediction, "The rise of online symbolic action—clicking on 'Like' or tweeting about a political subject," or sharing a meme, even—has become "one of the more potent impacts from digital tools," since "wide-spread use of such semi-public symbolic micro-actions can slowly reshape how people make sense of their values and their politics."⁸⁸

On the fallout from the 2016 US elections, An Xiao Mina concedes that the difference between deliberate acts of political propaganda and misunderstandings or mis-shares is minimal these days. Either way, "the effect is similar." In the case of America, there is a growing distrust of traditional news institutions and social media, with many turning "to the silos of friends, family, and niche media for their news diets," making it "increasingly more difficult to build a single national narrative."⁸⁹ This breaking down of common narratives—a trend that, as demonstrated by the 2019 and 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Reports, resonates worldwide⁹⁰—makes today's movements, quoting An, "perhaps more complicated and open-ended than ever before."⁹¹ The result of a multipolar reality spanning geopolitical spectrums and individual experiences that has been conditioned, in part, by the online platforms through which much of the new normal has been shaped. (To quote Shifman, "whatever happens in the digital memetic sphere never stays only in this sphere."⁹²)

The online space, in this light, could be understood as a 'geoscape': what Bratton defines as "a contested terrain of contested terrains" which "extends in all possible directions at once and is held only by the tensile strength of the imagined geographies" – and the "incommensurate projections" of their worldly interfacial maps⁹³ – "that compose it by their co-occupation."⁹⁴ To think of the online world as a geopolitical engine that churns competing projections is to think of it as a global commons. A site – in keeping with Berlant's conceptualisation of the commons as "a powerful vehicle for troubling troubled times"⁹⁵ – that is grounded in contradiction, negotiation and confrontation, as well as resistance, organisation, and community – whether national, regional, or personal; where all actors who have access to a device and a connection can participate in its unfolding, while those who don't still participate in and/or suffer the consequences. It is this tension, "that grinding of incompatible terms for addressing things, events, and territory," writes Bratton, "that is, in practice, the engine of geopolitical design."⁹⁶ Perhaps this is why Pepe the Frog has become such an enduring mask of this anarchic, fluid and conflicted setting, a symbol that has captured a clusterfuck, or as academics Laura Glitsos and James Gall put it, an "unstable composite in a widespread possibility of ideas."⁹⁷

When thinking about memes as products and reflections of the contexts in which they are produced and circulated, which includes the labour and technics of those that participate in the process,⁹⁸ it is within this maximalist landscape of multipolar and multi-positional formation and fragmentation that Pepe can be read; as a fractal image behind which lies a complex and overlapping web of relations – individualised, corporatised and politicised – with "so many textual nodes" that it has "generated conflicting and contradictory signification systems."⁹⁹ In this context, following Wark and Wark, to consider the Pepe meme as "a productive object of theory" in relation to his most recent transition from fascist, edge-lord avatar to pro-democracy activist, would be to think beyond the impasse it signifies – as an image that at once mirrors, encapsulates, resists and obscures the global sprawl from which it emerged.¹⁰⁰ It all depends on one's perspective.

When a storm makes landfall, it begins to decay. The particles making up its form disperse and re-enter the ecosystem, perhaps even forming part of another storm at a later stage, such is the nature of air. In 2017, for example, science writer Sam Kean wrote that Julius Caesar's dying breath in AD44 would have spread across the planet within years, estimating that "roughly one molecule of Caesar's air" would "appear in your next breath" today.¹⁰¹ To quote journalist Simon Worrall, "The gases in the air around us are unseen but their influence is surprisingly visible."¹⁰² The same could be said of a meme like Pepe – ubiquitous and yet often unnoticed until enough critical mass has accumulated to create a perfect shitstorm.

As a politicised meme, Pepe has somehow emerged as an ever-expanding site that absorbs divergent chain reactions and equivalences as it circulates, smoothing over patchworks of difference with a commonality expressed as a signal of resistance. It is "this open-endedness" that "gives [the meme] an obvious strength, since it can be taken up by anyone, pushed in virtually any direction," write Torino and Wohlleben: "its currency depends on its ability to expand and reinvent itself, to resonate and combine with new content and modes of expression."¹⁰³ Here, credit should be afforded to Matt Furie, Pepe's creator: an accomplished artist who had to watch as his personal creation was co-opted for unspeakable horror, and who has since turned to rendering Pepe-esque characters into mandala-like spirals in reflection of the enduring truth that things never stay the same.¹⁰⁴

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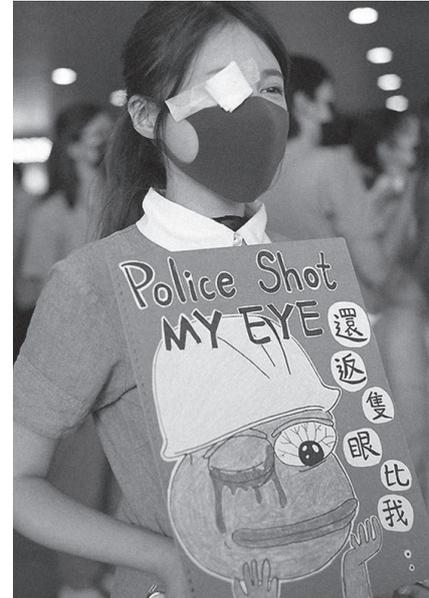
For de Seta, is it this capacity for transformation that makes Pepe “a consistent case study of how digital folklore challenges the notions of the local and the global,” or to borrow Wark and Wark’s terminology, the instance and plurality – a demonstration of how the internet as a broad and decentralised network that even the most authoritarian state powers find difficult to police, is a site of “user-generated globalisation” in which non-linguistic forms of communication open up complex sites of interrogation, particularly “regarding the globalising role of vernacular content.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, de Seta cautions, “the circulation of Pepe does not necessarily involve a direct translation.”¹⁰⁶ But while Pepe’s meaning might not fully translate from one context to another, there is something to be said of his function.

For Laclau, the presence of empty signifiers “is the very condition of hegemony,” the establishment of a frontier delineated by the identification of a common enemy in order to cohere a movement.¹⁰⁷ In the case of Pepe the Frog, however, the condition of hegemony is likewise fluid, relating to nationalist hegemonies, per his usage within the context of the fascist right, and ‘hegemonic’ resistances against repressive powers, per his usage in Hong Kong. More broadly, however, the meme is also a reflection of Baudrillard’s definition of hegemony, characterised by “the domination of networks—of calculation, and integral exchange” in which “an irreducible antagonism to the global principle of generalised exchange” emerges as a form of confrontation that “exists not only at the heart of the dominant power, but at the heart of our individual existence.”¹⁰⁸

Baudrillard’s definition invokes Shifman’s call “for a deeper look into [how] values – which are less organised and articulated social constructs than ‘ideologies’ – are manifested in mundane acts of creative expression” within the context of social media, “characterised by the fragmented flow of data from below.”¹⁰⁹ Shifman identifies “five communicative” values shared by memes – authenticity, creativity, communal loyalty, freedom of information, and expressive egalitarianism – which diminish the “sharp content-related differences” between them.¹¹⁰ In particular, she identifies “two fundamental features” shared by diametrically opposed memes like Pepe the Frog and #MeToo: “the construction and expression of individual-group relationships, and the subversion of ‘prevalent values’ which combine to valorise... the right, and perhaps even the obligation, to communicate.”¹¹¹ All of which recalls C_YS’s assertion that political memes reveal “steeper banks of... ideologies” that “become truly dialectical” when they collide in “new arenas.”¹¹²

This examination may seem problematic. But, as Shifman continues, it could also contribute to “a deeper understanding of broad social, cultural, and political issues” that “move away from veteran, all-embracing ideological dichotomies” – such as, returning to Hong Kong, the Cold War binaries of capitalism vs. communism – “to expose core principles shared by groups who are, at face value, completely disparate.”¹¹³ As Wark and Wark note, “Meme magic points in negative to something real and perhaps even something true... beyond perennially refreshing appearances.”¹¹⁴ Perhaps the unrefreshing reality revealed by Pepe’s move from the US in 2016 to Hong Kong in 2019 is the very problem that Laclau sees enunciated by the “absent totality” behind an empty signifier’s “unified” projection.¹¹⁵ “That is, the limits of signification can only announce themselves as the impossibility of realising what is within those limits.”¹¹⁶

With that in mind, what could the communities that have adopted Pepe’s image have in common, or rather, what is legible in the space between them? Writer Emma Grey Ellis attempted a possible answer in 2019 when thinking about his migration from West to East. “Despite sharply different cultural understandings,” she proposed, Pepe has managed to conserve an “emotional context in [a] global game of telephone,” becoming “more or less a young netizen’s worldwide mood”



of “sad resistance.”¹¹⁷ This resistance, through the lens of Wark and Wark, could be understood as having emerged from an insufficiency “to adequately encompass our contemporary technical conditions” – an insufficiency that, “most surprisingly,” reveals in a meme like Pepe “a political project that is constructive rather than negative,” in which “Meme magic invokes new anchors for a culture adrift.”¹¹⁸ These anchors could be read as products of their contexts. In the case of Pepe, a meme formed out of the online space, a worldly geoscape that has effectively become a turbulent and weaponised site in which all individuals are caught, whether knowingly or not. Where, quoting James Bridle, “a cognitive crisis produced by automated systems, weak machine intelligence, social and scientific networks, and the wider culture – with its own matching set of easy scapegoats and cloudier, entangled substructures” – has emerged.¹¹⁹ Yet despite this complexity, continues Bridle, “we are still seeking clear answers to cloudy problems.”¹²⁰

Pepe could be read as one such cloudy problem, or to return to Laclau, an impossibility: a politicised meme that is composed of antagonism and agonism, affect and indifference, community and atomisation, resistance and complicity alike, whose appearance as an enduring icon reveals an urgent disjuncture; one that is embodied by disparate, emergent communities formed out of historical contexts and present dynamics that are marking out new limits, horizons, and ruptures. In the case of the US, Pepe made visible a dangerously alienated white supremacy that was there all along, which in turn has fuelled an ongoing – indeed, historical – resistance. In Hong Kong, he signalled a popular movement that stakes itself in opposition to an authoritarian state. (But that is not to say that Pepe brought these movements into being.)

Interestingly, these two sites align in positive and negative space. Blocs within Hong Kong’s protest movement, which has used Pepe as an assertion of a resistant front, stand in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, which galvanised in response to the front that

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Pepe made visible. At the same time, the PRC government has voiced support of BLM by condemning police brutality against the American people, while dismissing accusations of state violence both against Hong Kong's protestors and the Uyghurs of Xinjiang; as some international leftists, notably in the US, consider the reporting on Xinjiang a form of US propaganda that feeds a Cold War narrative that they reject – just a few points in a constellation of dizzying convergences and divergences that exist among the positions that have been taken by and towards both movements and the authorities they resist or support.

Meanwhile, violent protests across the US, spurred by aggressive police crackdowns and invocations of 'rule of law', do not only mirror those that occurred in Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020, but those that erupted across the Arab world and the Southern Mediterranean in 2011 and 2012, and beyond. The directions that these movements and their counter movements will take remain to be seen, but what is certain is that, like the rhizomatic trajectory of a meme, their paths will be multiple – and even if they break up or are broken down, they will continue to circulate and mutate before resurfacing again. One Hong Kong protestor put it this way when describing Pepe as "the perfect ideological ambassador of the movement" not only because of his irreverence but also because of his fluidity, citing the famous quote by Hong Kong's favourite son Bruce Lee, "Be Water," which has become the protest's mantra.¹²¹ "Water is fluid, can take many shapes, and it's not easy to grasp or capture – those are its unique attributes. The various forms that Pepe is able to take is also quite representative of this."¹²² And with that, a storm system crosses the equator.

Notes

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¹⁰⁷ Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, p. 43

¹⁰⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power*, Los Angeles CA: Semiotext(e): 2010, pp. 34, 56

¹⁰⁹ Shifman, p. 50

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 53

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 55

¹¹² C_YS, p. 325

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Wark and Wark, p. 297

¹¹⁵ Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, pp. 42, 36

¹¹⁶ Laclau, *ibid.*, pp. 36, 37

¹¹⁷ Emma Grey Ellis, 'Pepe the Frog Means Something Different in Hong Kong—Right?', *WIRED*, 23 August 2019; <https://www.wired.com/story/pepe-the-frog-meme-hong-kong/>

¹¹⁸ Wark and Wark, p. 314

¹¹⁹ James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*, London/New York: Verso, 2019, p. 231

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 235

¹²¹ Christina Ko, 'How Pepe the Frog became face of Hong Kong protests—despite cartoon being a symbol of hate in US'

¹²² Ibid.