
"There is no pandemic": On Memes, Algorithms and other Interpassive Forms of Right-wing Disbelief

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Recommended Citation

Krzych, Scott. ""There is no pandemic": On Memes, Algorithms and other Interpassive Forms of Right-wing Disbelief." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24.4 (2022): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4087>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
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Volume 24 Issue 4 (September 2022) Article 5

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss4/5>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.4 (2022)**

Special Issue: **Platform Psychoanalysis. Edited by Matthew Flisfeder**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss4/>>

Abstract: This essay examines several prominent memes that have circulated on Right-wing social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. The memes coordinate what I describe as a mode of *interpassive humor*, which positions those who "believe" in the crisis as naïve dupes, infantilizing those subjects who have fallen prey to the idea that they should take the pandemic seriously, and thereby delegating fearfulness to the other so that reactionary Covid-19 denialists may continue with their lives unaffected. The essay thereby seeks to draw suggestive lines of affiliation between studies of digital memes, evolutionary mimetics, and psychoanalytic theory, pointing to the algorithmic spread of disinformation during the coronavirus pandemic as a case of interpassive humor.

Scott KRZYCH

"There is no pandemic": On Memes, Algorithms and other Interpassive Forms of Right-wing Disbelief

Consider one of the many disorienting moments during the pandemic when Donald Trump raised doubts about the threat of coronavirus, calling into question the expertise of medical professionals in his own administration. On August 30, 2020, Trump retweeted an anonymous user who claimed that only 6% of deaths were caused directly by Covid-19 as opposed to other pre-existing conditions or comorbidities. Trump's tweet contributed to a rumor (or meme) that would spread across the Right-wing echo chamber, raising doubts about the seriousness of the virus and enabling conspiracy theorists who speculated that fear about the virus had been manufactured, literally, for the purpose of social control. The original "source" for this conspiracy theory was none other than a report issued by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC); the report noted that of the approximately 150,000 deaths in the U.S. to that date, only 6% of death certificates listed Covid-19 as the sole cause. Several Republican senators affirmed Trump's misreading of the report, likewise claiming that the threat of the virus had been exaggerated. After Twitter deleted Trump's tweet for spreading misinformation, Tucker Carlson raced to Trump's defense on his popular evening program on *Fox News*; Carlson cited Twitter's censorship of Trump's as the real controversy worthy of outrage. On the following Sunday, prominent evangelical pastor and Trump booster, John MacArthur, the longtime pastor of Grace Community Church in southern California, which successfully petitioned to the U.S. Supreme Court to continue religious services during the pandemic, would cite the same misrepresentation of CDC data to declare to his congregants, "There is no pandemic."

This example of disinformation and its afterlives stands as just one case among many others during the pandemic when patently false information was proffered by Trump and his political allies, magnified by the Right-wing media echo-chamber, and eventually became viral online as the misleading information was repeated in countless instances on social media platforms by "everyday" individuals. Rather than a case of outright fabrication, this particular example arose from a report issued by an authoritative institution (the CDC), demonstrating a peculiar, antagonistic relationship between this institution and the reactionary voices that would cite it. In effect, the interpretation of the CDC data presumes to unearth a truth of which the institution itself is unaware: there is no pandemic. The public is thereby encouraged by Trump, allied politicians, and like-minded media actors to dismiss the authority of the medical-governmental institution even as that institution's authority is affirmed, though with serious qualification. In a hysterical gesture, the authority of the CDC is maintained only to the extent that it may be denigrated. As Lacan said of hysterical discourse, the hysteric desires a toothless authority against whom he or she may endlessly rebel.

In this essay, I interrogate examples of Right-wing memes that proliferated online during the Covid-19 pandemic. The memes, I claim, demonstrate a form of ambivalence or displacement whereby the crisis was not entirely dismissed as a complete fabrication nor conscientiously embraced as a stark reality in need of collective mitigation. Psychoanalytic theory, I claim, is well suited to address the ambivalent reaction formations spurred by Trump and other conservative voices in the U.S., who often characterized Covid-19 as a cause for mild concern rather than a global event of dire proportions. The ambivalent reaction to the pandemic and the spread of disinformation online is a phenomenon difficult to explain according to dominant modes of study in contemporary media studies. For scholars who work in the arena of "participatory culture," the making and sharing of memes is often described in laudatory terms, as a mechanism for democratic engagement, a digital medium that affords relatively easy access for individuals to express their opinion on issues of the day. Though scholars of participatory culture recognize the sometimes anti-social dimensions of social media, this body of work rarely interrogates fully the assumptions of liberal individualism on which such platforms and their propagandists rely, specifically, the fantasy of users who act creatively, willfully, or intentionally through the manifold forms of participation available to them.¹ In contrast to such imaginary conceptions of direct participation, scholars who attend to the computational dimensions of social media—studying the digital or symbolic forms constitutive of our media infrastructure—tend to describe the same media-sphere in more deterministic terms, emphasizing the digital algorithms that track, archive, and analyze these very same forms of (so-called) participation. Rather than a means for democratic participation, the algorithmic

¹ See the discussion of the libertarian ideology underlying the claims made on behalf of Web 2.0 by prominent figures from Silicon Valley in Phillips and Milner (50-61).

apparatus is often addressed in more cynical terms, derided for its capacity to influence our behavior beyond our conscious awareness or consent, or, perhaps more simply, to deliver us to advertisers eager to profit from our unwitting submission. At the risk of overgeneralization, contemporary studies of digital media and technology either describe the internet as a democratic means for political agency or as an algorithmic apparatus serving the interests of corporate elites intent to extract profit from user engagement.

The psychoanalytic perspective I offer in this essay attempts to avoid the false choice between laudatory endorsements of imaginary engagement (participatory culture) or dystopian concerns for symbolic interpellation (algorithmic culture). Indeed, as I will claim, Robert Pfaller's theory of *interpassivity* and Jacques Lacan's discussions of *wit* provide productive avenues for us to reconsider questions of subjectivity, objectivity, and the mimetic spread of misinformation online.

Memes Without Participants

A single image, containing text, often with humorous intent, and shared online is just one example of a media form conventionally identified as a meme. As Ryan M. Milner writes in *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*, this classification may include, more broadly, such diverse media forms as "pictures captioned on Reddit, puns hashtagged on Twitter, and videos mashed up on YouTube. They can be widely shared catchphrases, Auto-Tuned songs, manipulated stock photos, or recordings of physical performances" (1). The distinguishing feature common to each of these forms derives from their iterative formation and spreadability: one form begets another by the hands of individual participants who contribute to any particular meme and its progression across the digital landscape. Indeed, Milner is emphatic about the active, conscious, and intentional manner by which participants contribute their creative voices to the proliferation of mimetic content: "Mimetic media are premised on participation by reappropriation, on balancing the familiar and the foreign as new iterations intertwine with established ideas [. . .] When everyday members of the public contribute their small conversational strands to the vast cultural tapestry, they are mimetically making their worlds" (3).

While Milner identifies the meme as a democratic medium, his mostly laudatory account is a significant departure from the term's original definition as coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. As scholars of *digital* memes like Milner are quick to acknowledge, Dawkins originally theorized the meme as an example of cultural evolution similar in its function to the biological gene.² Like the evolution of genes by means of natural selection, Dawkins claims, memes circulate and evolve in the material world, using their human hosts as passive replicators, so that certain "tunes, ideas, catchphrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches," and so on, "propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (192). In contrast to the intentional acts of participatory meme-makers affirmed by Milner and others in media studies, however, a meme, according to Dawkins, possesses ontological independence. According to this line of thought, memes spread by way of relatively mindless, algorithmic procedures; or, as philosopher Daniel Dennett surmises, memes manifest as "distinct memorable units" that do not merely impact society but are rather constitutive of society. And just as a novel coronavirus infects its human hosts against the hosts' will, so too do memes emerge and evolve independently of human agency. Indeed, as Dennett admits, the very theory of mimetics "is distinctly unsettling, even appalling" to conventional notions of liberal rationality and human exceptionalism. Or, as Dennett puts it, polemically, "We can sum it up with a slogan: A scholar is just a library's way of making another library" (346).

Depending on our disciplinary context, then, a meme may be understood to be an idea whose formal qualities exist and circulate in the world independently, and whose form lends itself to prolific replication by way of human enablers who mindlessly spread it throughout society; or, a meme is tool by which active and agential participants contribute their singular voices to the collective and democratic construction of culture and society. For the moment, I mean to emphasize this point of theoretical tension in order to highlight the materialist orientation on which this essay depends. "We must all become philosophers" in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, Slavoj Žižek writes, because the ongoing crisis lacks modern precedents that might provide guidance for our individual or collective responses. Whatever actions we endorse or reject—to lockdown, to mask, to vaccinate—entails a concomitant "vision of what human beings are" and likewise how we might (re)build society according to such ontological and ethical commitments (Žižek 5).

² See also Shifman (11).

Prominent psychoanalytic studies of digital media and technology have increasingly identified a perverse structure endemic to the demands of online engagement and so-called participation. While social media platforms and streaming services offer the promise of interactive experiences tailored to the desires of each individual, these same online experiences generate data by which individuals are tracked and categorized as a means for greater corporate profit, a perverse process by which a fantasy of freedom masks a more basic attempt at social control, or what Jacob Johannsen has termed dis-individualization (144-63). When users perceive their digital devices as a source of pleasure, they overlook how they themselves become objectified as a source of exploitation, Isabel Millar suggests, thereby serving as objects for the corporate Other's pleasure and profit (154-56). On the topic of social media and politics—the area of primary concern for this essay—Matthew Flisfeder points to Trump's blatant disregard for the truth as coordinating a perverse feedback loop peculiar to the era of online platforms; namely, how Trump's seeming belligerence perhaps hews to the neoliberal demand embraced by social media platforms, which compels individuals to commodify themselves as individual brands seeking attention by any means possible. As Flisfeder writes,

When liberal critics gaze with wonder and amazement at the effectiveness of Trump's blatant disregard for truth and rectitude, they miss something essential about his rhetorical clout. Social media, Twitter in particular . . . is first and foremost a 'selfie machine.' It exacerbates the neoliberal ethic of the individual, in which everyone is allowed their own voice (and nothing more), but nowhere do we find anything resembling democratic consensus. (5)

As this small sampling of scholarship indicates, psychoanalytic theory is well positioned to address the complicated terrain of digital media and political engagement on which other media studies approaches sometimes founder; that is, an explanation for how subjects become caught in a paradoxical space between imaginary participation and symbolic/algorithmic interpellation.

In this regard, Robert Pfaller's theorization of *interpassivity* is especially useful because it addresses the myriad ways in which subjects outsource their desires to external objects. As Pfaller has argued, interpassivity describes those ritualistic behaviors by which we delegate agency to an external object. Unlike relations of capitalist exploitation, interpassive relations do not necessarily entail an exploitative dimension. Indeed, interpassive rituals typically occur when a subject relies on an external source, routinized behavior, or other algorithmic process to *enjoy or believe* on the subject's behalf. Of the many examples of interpassivity Pfaller cites, one is particularly apposite for my purposes. Pfaller describes those academics who may spend hours standing at a photocopier, dutifully copying page after page from a book they intend to read, leaving the library with a sense of accomplishment, as if they have fulfilled their intellectual duty for the day, regardless of whether they ever glance again at the stack of papers they carry with them. In Pfaller's interpretation, the "crucial point in this case of interpassive behavior is the *figurativeness* of the act" in which the academic performs research "by means of the machine: the light of attention, as it were, is shed on every page one after another, in a linear process; slowly the machine 'looks' at every line and every page" (56). Through this performative activity the "interpassive person delegates her pleasure to a medium by ritually causing this medium to perform a figurative representation of consumption" (Pfaller 57).

As an account of perverse disavowal, attributable to many different forms of cultural engagement, Pfaller's theory of interpassivity has far reaching applications for studies of digital media, mimetics, and participatory culture. As Clint Burnham has effectively argued, also by way of Pfaller's theory of interpassivity, the quotidian use of the term *LOL* demonstrates a prolific case of interpassive digital discourse by which our devices "laugh" on our behalf and thereby save us the time and affective energy required for quotidian acts of social exchange (48-50). For the purposes of this essay, I mean to suggest certain points of commonality between meme generation, algorithmic culture, and interpassive behavior, especially as it concerns ritualistic forms of mindless or rote activity. For the academic who photocopies books he or she will never read, or downloads thousands of PDFs he or she will likewise fail to glance at ever again, the photocopier or digital archive may provide a sense of relief from the demands of intellectual labor. As I suggest below, we may recognize a similar appeal to affective *relief* exemplified by conservative memes about Covid-19 as they save their audiences from the time, energy, or labor required to take the pandemic seriously. In this light we may further notice how algorithmic procedures, in their mindless efficiency, may likewise be understood as interpassive forms of (dis)engagement. As Dennett puts it, "An algorithm is a certain sort of formal process that can be counted on—logically—to yield a certain sort of result whenever it is 'run' or instantiated . . . Many familiar arithmetic procedures, such as long division or balancing your checkbook, are algorithms, and so are the decision procedures for playing perfect tic-tac-toe, and for putting a list of words in alphabetical order" (50). Thus, a central

feature of an algorithm is its underlying mindlessness—one need not understand what one is doing in order for an algorithm to be effective. In this light, algorithmic procedures, when coordinated for the purpose of denying the pandemic's existence or at least dampening the sense of the pandemic as an existential crisis, provides a material structure for what I call interpassive modes of political (dis)engagement. The humor(lessness) of conservative memes, as I will claim, carves out a psychically appealing field within society at large by which conservative audiences may take perverse pleasure in forms of political antagonism at a distance—call it politics without participation.

If we are willing to suspend belief in participatory culture as a product of intentional human agency, as I suggest we do here, then conservative political memes appear to provide a useful starting point for further analysis. After all, the proliferation of memes—conservative or otherwise—often demonstrate minimal variation on the part of the cultural participants who mostly imitate an idea that appears before them ready-made and pre-formed, a kind of template that requires little creativity on the part of any prospective users. Consider just one iteration of a meme that spread prominently in Right-wing corners of the internet in early 2021, titled, "The Deadliest Virus in History" (Figure 1). The meme pictures an assortment of bulky gas masks and respirators, protective devices intended for firefighting, coal mining, working with pesticides, or encountering radioactive dust. The final mask pictured in the sequence, which bears the eponymous title of the meme, is a loose-fitting surgical mask. One of these masks is not like the others, or so the joke goes.



Fig. 1: "The Deadliest Virus in History"

Not only is the surgical mask's appearance in the meme incongruous by comparison to the other heavy-duty respirators; it is also ill-fitted to the task for which it is worn; namely, to protect individuals from "the deadliest virus in history."

The joke coordinated by this meme presumes a naïve subject who mistakenly believes Covid-19 poses a serious threat to public health and who likewise accepts the recommendations of health officials who have implored or mandated that citizens wear masks to deter the virus's spread, among other safety measures and precautions. If we follow the ideo-logic of the meme, its sardonic gesture labels as gullible anyone who wears a mask: if the coronavirus pandemic is as serious as "they" claim, then surely a more professional-grade respirator would be appropriate. To be sure, a critique of the State's reliance on loose fitting masks to stem the spread of the virus in the pandemic's early stages *could* serve as a

reasonable argument to demonstrate governmental failure in response to Covid-19. However, according to the strained logic of this mimetic joke, *any* failure by State authorities is demonstrative of the pandemic's inexistence, not the State's bungled response to it; or, the very existence of mask mandates proves such mandates to be unnecessary; or, we may understand such jokes to function as algorithmic abstractions (*if . . . then*) that simplify a complex global crisis into basic models for moral categorization: *if* the virus was as deadly as alleged by the medical establishment, *then* we would not rely on flimsy masks as a preventative measure and *thus* "there is no pandemic."

As is typical of any meme's evolution, the original idea contained in "The Deadliest Virus in History" was tweaked and twisted into alternative forms, eventually replacing the anonymous naïve subject/mannequin with an historical individual: the much-maligned Dr. Anthony Fauci (Figures 2 and 3).



Fig. 2: "The Deadliest Virus in History" with the addition of Dr. Anthony Fauci.



Fig. 3: "Mask for the Deadliest Virus in Human History?"

By making a joke of the pandemic, or by poking fun at those who take the virus seriously, or by presuming to identify hypocrisy in the case of Fauci, the political memes delegate to the naïve other a

sense of ideological commitment or *belief* that saves the conservative audience from participating more directly, immediately, or explicitly in the traumatic event. The images of Fauci donning a cloth mask or appearing in public with his mask displaced, as displayed in the sarcastic memes, similarly displace the sense of the virus's threat for the memes' intended audience. In the algorithmic logic replicated by such mimetic performances of political irony, *if* those who wear masks are naïve, ignorant, liable to make mistakes or slips, or are otherwise untrustworthy, *then* we can be sure that the crisis is overblown or no crisis at all. It is important to note that these memes function not as an all-out assault on mainstream epidemiology. The memes do not make an explicit argument or offer a coherent ideological position so much as they offer a viral simulation of democratic participation, attributing naïve belief (in the pandemic's existence as a pandemic) to their political antagonists so that they may continue on with their lives unaffected. The political opponent's belief and its denigration provides a vehicle for the Right to justify, maintain, and perpetuate its particular manner of *disbelief*. To be sure, other viewers may react in disgust at the meme's display of ignorance. The scientific basis for wearing masks as a deterrent for viral spread has been clearly and comprehensively affirmed by the global medical establishment. Attention to the memes' formal gestures, however, highlights another matter worth our consideration: how the memes demonstrate an interpassive form of political disengagement. Rather than staking out a clear or coherent political position at odds with their opponents, the reactionary memes provide a minimal form of democratic interaction—just enough passive engagement to check the participatory box and move along, unchanged and unaffected by the crisis, at least until that time when some in meme's audience inevitably contract the virus and make a trip to the hospital or grave.

Though a wide variety of individual participants may constitute the network by which these memes, and many others like them besides, appear and circulate across social media, the manner of participation belies a rote, arguably tedious, repetition of the same idea in forms only minimally different from one another; the more we map the network of conservative political memes, the more evidence we find of habitual imitation.³ From the vantage point of *algorithmic studies*, the more laudatory accounts of participatory culture offered by scholars of digital memes overlook the temporal efficiencies of content sharing online; that is, by the point a user "chooses" to share or revise a particular meme, a series of algorithmic functions may have already determined, in advance, what content appears on a user's screen in the first place. Whether or not we recognize or affirm the various data points by which we are categorized by social media platforms, the algorithmic procedures nevertheless produce "a freshly minted algorithmic truth" that may have material, immediate, and long-lasting effects on our lives, as John Cheney-Lippold notes (9). Cheney-Lippold continues, "Algorithmic agents make us and make the knowledge that compose us, but they do so on their own terms" (11).⁴

Pfaller's theory of interpassivity adds an important caveat to studies of participatory and algorithmic culture: subjects may locate a profound, if not constitutive, experience of pleasure through the delegation of belief to external objects. What may appear in media studies to be an irresolvable conflict between agency or determinism—the social media participant or the dupe of the algorithmic apparatus—might otherwise be described as a return of the repressed, *inter alia*, a Lacanian account of subjectivity. After all, one of the most pertinent features of the Lacanian clinic is the attempt to address patients who enter analysis, not in order to unlock the truth of their unconscious, but rather to avoid any knowledge about what drives them. As Lacan would often say of neurotic patients: they *don't want to know anything about* their symptoms. At odds with conventional wisdom, the analytic disposition does not seek to answer the questions underlying the patient's unconscious desires but rather promotes a "passion for ignorance," that is, the analytic intervention provides greater affordances for the patient's desire to express itself in ways and forms irreducible to clear or coherent explanation (Nobus and Quinn 27-33). At odds with the fantasy of liberal individualism, psychoanalytic free association seeks to spur new signifiers arising not from the subject's intentional will but from the subject's incorporation into a signifying chain that is neither entirely determining nor merely a tool for intentional agency or willful expression.

In this light, in the following section, I turn to one of Jacques Lacan's privileged formations of the unconscious—the witticism—and what Lacan describes as wit's unpredictable, but psychically productive, emergence in the clinical space. The unpredictable witticisms that may arise over the course of an analysis demonstrates a subject's creative potential to spur new psychic formations amenable to a reshuffling of desire's coordinates, precisely because the witticism arises from an interpassive source: the analysand's speech. Like the spreader of a meme, the speaker of the witticism brings into the world

³ For further discussion of digital media as a structure of habituation, see Chun.

⁴ See also Bucher, O'Neil, Wang, and Finn.

a new signifying creation but cannot claim sole authorship over its origin. In contrast to the witticism, whose arrival is necessarily unexpected, occasionally a cause for laughter but also an enigma demanding further reflection, the interpassive humor of Right-wing memes infantilizes its ideological opponents and thereby relieves the speaker of any sense of obligation for further (democratic) engagement.

Bad Jokes

When faced with traumatic circumstances, it is understandable that some people will displace, disavow, or otherwise repress the horrific reality before them. Willful ignorance may be preferable, at times, to emotional or psychic turmoil. "In times of crisis," Renata Salecl writes, "people individually often embrace ignorance in order to avoid facing up to traumatic events or feelings" (154). Comedy and humor may provide at least momentary affective relief from otherwise oppressive circumstances, acting as an effective avenue for coping with feelings of existential vulnerability. As Freud notes in his late essay, "Humour," a well-timed joke may provide momentary respite, the establishment of a minimal sense of distance from circumstances beyond our control. The adoption of a "humorous attitude," Freud offers, may provide a subject with an effective psychic defense against otherwise traumatic events by bolstering feelings of self-esteem even in the face of the subject's mortal demise (161-62). As an example, Freud recounts a joke about a condemned criminal who, upon being led to the gallows, wryly comments, "Well, the week's beginning nicely" (161). The attempt at humor in an otherwise humorless situation may displace one's immediate attention, thereby constructing a semblance of agency in a scene marked by agency's ineradicable loss. More directly relevant to pandemic memes, especially the wry commentaries marshalled by the Right-wing to dismiss the pandemic's seriousness, Freud also considers cases when a humorous attitude may be turned toward others in displays of egoistic superiority. The humorous emphasis on self-aggrandizement, then, often infantilizes others, making light of others' concerns, or "behaving towards the [other] as an adult does toward a child when he recognizes and smiles at the triviality of interests and sufferings which seem so great to it" (163).

Commenting on Freud's conception of humor as that which distances us from trauma or as that which belittles the concerns of others in our social sphere, Jamieson Webster highlights the distinction between *humor* and *comedy*, also by reference to the figure of the child. Whereas humor could be described as "parental" in its infantilization of the other and their concerns, "in comedy we rediscover the child's helplessness, the child's incomplete control over his bodily functions . . . the pleasure of constant repetition . . . the child's lack of moderation . . . [and ultimately] the entire domain of the infantile itself—universal in its pleasures, confusions, helplessness, vulnerability, pain; its consistent force of the undoing the human psyche" (272). Webster's endorsement of comedy's creative potential—creativity that emerges from *within* a scene of vulnerability, rather than its egoistic overcoming, as in the case of Freud's theory of humor—echoes Lacan's commentary on wit (and Pfaller's theory of interpassivity). As Lacan makes clear in the early sessions of *Seminar V*, witticisms often emerge in the psychoanalytic clinic during the course of an analysand's free association: when speaking freely, a patient may stumble upon, as if by accident, neologisms or witticisms that emerge from their speech but over which they cannot claim original authorship. Oftentimes, the patient may not even recognize the witty comment even as they speak it aloud. "Is this a bungled act or successful one" Lacan asks, "A slip or a poetic creation? We don't know. Maybe it's both at once. But it's fitting to think about the formation of the phenomenon strictly on the plane of the signifier . . . *Something new appears*" (SV 21).

In *Seminar VI* the following year, Lacan begins his first session by reviewing the ideas introduced the year before. Commenting on his theory of wit, Lacan offers a close reading of a witty remark recounted once by Charles Darwin. In his book, *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals*, Darwin offers an anecdote of a witticism whose effect on its audience left the author flummoxed. In Lacan's rendering of the story, "Darwin recounts that at a soirée he heard a man named Sidney Smith, who was, I assume, a high-society Englishman of Darwin's time, come out quite placidly with the following sentence: 'I hear that dear old Lady Cork has been overlooked'" (SVI 20). In Darwin's retelling, the intended meaning of "the quip was perfectly clear to everyone present," to wit, "that the Devil had overlooked the dear old lady and had forgotten to carry her off to the tomb" (SVI 21). According to Lacan's treatment of the witticism, both the "placid" manner of its delivery and the use of an unexpected term ("overlooked") produces the kind of surprise necessary for a witty punchline:

A sentence that begins with "Lady Cork" should usually end with "ill." [We would usually expect to hear something like,] "I hear she is not well." It seems, in fact, that everyone was expecting news concerning the old lady's health, for, when people talk about old ladies, it is always their health that is foremost in their minds at the outset. A substitution thus took place here: the expected news was replaced by something else, which

was, in certain ways, irreverent. Smith did not say she was on death's doorstep, nor did he say that she was quite well; he said that she had been forgotten.

What then came into play to produce this metaphorical effect? If the word "overlooked" had been expected, there would have been no such effect. It is inasmuch as it was not expected, but was rather put in the place of another signifier, that a new signified was produced. (SVI 21)

Not only does the witticism produce an involuntary effect on its audience, who "shudder" in response; the comment does not dismiss the Lady's mortal circumstances in the manner assessed by Freud's account of humorous detachment. To describe the woman as ill or on death's doorstep might place the ailing individual on a temporal register seemingly distinct from the other participants on the scene; instead, the term "forgotten" highlights the always indeterminate temporality of death shared by all mortal beings. The witticism thereby places the speaker on the same existential ground as the other. Or, as Lacan explains, the man "simply and serenely articulated that the fate that awaits each of us in turn had been forgotten for a moment" but that this fate "would come one day or another" (SVI 22).

Returning to conservative political memes, the dismissal of the pandemic's seriousness, I claim, bears the hallmarks of humor and its interpassive dismissal of others' concerns: rather than admit the existence of the virus as a serious threat, the attempts at humorous displacement subtract from the event its traumatic kernel. In line with Freud's consideration of humor as a performance of superiority—or what we may simply describe as *bad* joke—the denigration of those who wear masks likewise positions the conservative humorist at a spectatorial remove from Covid-19, condescending to those individuals so feeble-minded as to believe the "experts" who claim the virus is more deadly than the common cold. Such memes thereby demonstrate a minimal gesture of social participation, not a full-throated act of democratic engagement. More perversely, the memes and their circulation seem intended to participate in such a manner that forecloses possibilities for democratic disagreement. By making a joke—not of the virus but of people who *believe* in the virus—conservative political discourse thereby refuses to make an argument or take a position on the crisis as such, attuning itself to the algorithmic structure of digital media to ensure the habitual circulation of its particular brand of humor and the *jouissance* this circulation makes possible.

Conclusion

As has often been noted in studies of comedy, to explain a joke is to ruin a joke—there is nothing less funny than a theory of comedy. Returning to my first example of "The Deadliest Virus in History," the humor intended by the meme raises a different, though related, problem. To understand the ideas entailed by its compressed form requires an excess of explication (to outsiders) in inverse proportion to the efficiency by which it makes its point (to insiders). The meme circulates as a joke to the extent that it condenses, algorithmically, a more complicated and complex series of claims, assumptions, and dispositions. In order to "get" the joke, one must recognize, immediately if not unconsciously, an assortment of premises that predate the meme's circulation but may be taken for granted by many conservatives and Right-wingers in the United States: Covid-19 is no more deadly than the flu; morbidity rates have been grossly exaggerated by the CDC; supposedly effective treatments (such as hydroxychloroquine) have been suppressed or ignored by the medical establishment, likely as an attempt to tarnish Donald Trump's presidency; the media has overblown the pandemic, another instance of "fake news," likewise marshalled by the establishment press as a cynical attack on Trump; Dr. Fauci, among other prominent epidemiologists, is an untrustworthy source of information, whether because he has repeatedly contradicted himself on questions concerning masks and lockdowns, or, more conspiratorially, because he is connected financially to global pharmaceutical corporations with an interest in manufacturing and selling vaccines and other treatments to anyone gullible enough to believe they might need them; and so on. Thus, in order to understand the joke, we must recognize a broad and complicated assemblage of pre-existing ideological conditions operative on the political Right, including a generic disbelief in any reporting on the crisis that arises from the mainstream press, a longstanding distrust of expertise in general and medical science in particular, and resistance to a proactive federal government, especially concerning issues of domestic healthcare.

We would be mistaken to believe, however, that this particular meme and others like it *merely* compresses, via its cynical punchline, a more elaborate series of political claims or arguments that precede it. This case of mimetic condensation is better understood not as the byproduct of a comprehensive, coherent, thorough knowledge-base maintained on the political Right, but rather as an algorithmic rationality prominent in contemporary conservative discourse and Right-wing media at large. In other words, the meme is better understood not as a symptom of disease but as the disease itself. The logic by which the meme classifies its naïve antagonist—if you wear a mask *then* you are a dupe—

displays an algorithmic mode of categorization constitutive of conservative political (un)reason more generally. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in the U.S., politicians and influencers on the Right have demonstrated a peculiar form of withdrawal, a refusal to participate fully in the pandemic, as if the ongoing global crisis was a matter of choice rather than a brute fact. The instances of viral media discussed above suggests not a complete or outright dismissal of the pandemic's existence, but rather a form of interpassive inoculation: the minimal acknowledgment of calamity, but with a clever act of displacement, in which the *real* crisis is attributable to those fools who naively believe the pandemic to be a serious threat.

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