"Note how they talk about animals, and are moved by them. They make a list of affects. These affects circulate and are transformed within the assemblage." Deleuze & Guattari

(This is part III of a series of essays on meme theory. Part I is called **They Say That We Can't Meme: Politics of Idea Compression**. Part II is entitled **Rude Awakening: Memes as Dialectical Images,** all of them both published on this blog and on non.copyriot)

In the summer of 2016 a meme about a sacrificial animal captured the internet. At the Cincinnati Zoo a 200 kg silverback gorilla named Harambe was shot by officials after it grabbed a three-year-old child that had climbed into the enclosure. Following an initial outpouring of shock over the animal's passing, Harambe began to inspire meme producers. According to one commentator, Harambe's image constituted "the perfect meme,"(1) in that it lent itself to a type of flexible and open-ended recuperation that meme scholars refer to as polyvocality (2). Such recuperative practices have roots going back to 1990s culture jamming and tactical media techniques, whose legacy can in turn be traced back to avant-garde "rules for artistic rebellion" as developed by the Situationists in the late-1950's (3). Following this formula, Harambe's image was initially recuperated towards politically progressive ends. Shortly after his killing, hashtags and petitions of solidarity were trending across all social media platforms. As efforts to turn the gorilla into an avatar for animal rights failed, the media scholar Brandon Storlie suggested that it was precisely Harambe's virality that assured the meme's fate as mere Internet noise. According to Storlie, as a meme, Harambe was in fact *too polyvocal* and as such was "never successfully instilled with a greater purpose"(4).

In spite of Storlie's analysis, Harambe did manage to galvanize online activism, becoming an early symbol for the reactionary internet populism associated with the so-called *alt-right*, whose meme tactics would go on to have significant influence long after this particular meme had died. Not only did the alt-right manage to instill Harambe with a greater purpose, but it was the meme's very polyvocality that made it so politically effective—an organizational capacity that we should not underestimate. As an open-ended symbol, a kind of *totem* for condensing the disparate set of grievances of an insurgent neo-reactionary form of identity politics, the alt-right's use of Harambe conformed to a classical trope in fascist discourse, what we can call the *theft of joy* narrative, in which an authoritarian figure channels the

desires and resentments of the "radical loser" through a spectacle of collective hate (5).

In recent years it has been the alt-right, above all, who have excelled at channeling the use of memes as modes of symbolic protest by counter-publics. Why did the alt-right suddenly become so effective at using memes, and how might we understand this success through the lens of psychoanalytic theory towards the ends developing a kind of therapeutic response? The alt right initially used Harambe as a symbol to mock the fetishization of animal rights discourse by contemporary American liberals—a narrative that had also played out online a year earlier with the death of Cecil the Lion(6). On Twitter Harambe was used to parody a particularly American form of political correctness, a target of critics on both the left and on right (though mostly on the right these days). While provocateurs initially used this totemic image in the name of parody, the jokes got darker and darker with the 'the maze of irony' (7) around the meme allowing cover for sinister reactionary political formations. The Harambe incident anticipated an explosion of racism in America that would accompany Donald Trump's insurgent rise whereby racism would be justified with the rejoinder that they were just jokes and examples of trolling (8). Over the course of 2016, incentive structures seemed to pull trolls and their audiences further and further to identify with the newly insurgent alt-right.

A case study can be found in how the British alt-right figure Milo Yiannopoulos' used the Harambe meme to lead his Twitter followers in attacks on the African- American actor Leslie Jones. Yiannopoulos, much like Trump (whom he referred to as "daddy"), had gained fame and notoriety as a Twitter-based political insult comedian. To that end, Yiannopoulos used the Harambe meme to taunt the star of the new Ghostbusters, a cult-classic with a devoted nerd fandom whose reboot had been recast with an all-female cast. Yiannopoulos' led his Twitter followers in a series of racist and misogynistic attacks on the Ghostbusters actors, in particular on Leslie Jones, hounding the actor off of the platform which eventually also led to Yiannopoulos being banned from Twitter (9). The racist tone of these attacks led to the use of the Harambe meme being banned on some American college campuses. Having himself dismissed the very concept of racism as "a story told by parents to frighten children"(10), Yiannopoulos sought to exploit the controversy as an instance of free speech censorship. While Harambe was thus revived for a while, ultimately the meme lost steam by summer's end. In looking back, however, on the Harambe incident, we can

trace some of the same dynamics of a trollish recuperation that would motivate the Anti-Defamation League, later that same autumn, to add the Pepe the Frog meme to their database of "general hate symbols"(11).

The alt-right should be considered as a reactionary movement that have used memes to create the spectacle of common grievances against an opponent perceived to have stolen something precious from the collective. In addition to having been articulated by Frankfurt School (12), the theft of joy is also a central trope in the classic critique of the "paranoid style" of conspiracy theorists, whom, it is argued, project "unacceptable aspects of their own minds" into an enemy who thus becomes "a perfect model of malice."(13) While there are valid reasons to reject the across-the-board pathologization of both conspiracy theory and populist politics, it is the reactionary movements on the new right that have been most successful at mastering these primal Manichean dynamics.

Indeed, the intellectual roots of the alt-right may be found in the obscure neoreaction movement that adherents refer to as NRx, and which developed the popular alt-right concept of 'red pilling'. While originally derived from the famous psychedelic scene in the 1999 film The Matrix, in the abstruse writings of Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land red-pilling became a metaphor for an antidote to a cultural diagnosis that Yarvin and Land referred to as 'The Cathedral', in which they posited that political correctness had become a totalizing system of mind-control. As per the film, taking the red pill exposes one to the 'reality' underlying the realm of illusions, which is generated by The Cathedral, whilst taking the alternative 'blue pill' merely perpetuates the illusion. In contrast to The Cathedral's blue pill, one need only take NRx's red pill once. Having gained a cult following in the UK for his contributions to 90's cyber-theory, with a particular focus on Deleuze and Bataille, Nick Land had come to believe that the acceleration of capitalism would inevitably dissolve the human into the machine. In line with recent media theorists on the left such as Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, Land interpreted Marx's claim that the real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself as an injunction to accelerate the imminent dynamics of capitalism towards its immanent dissolution. Land—whom some of his colleagues had thought had actually lost his mind—believed that the Cathedral covered over this teleological reality, making the red pill the only logical response. (14)

As a violent rejection of the insidious logic of what he referred to as the

generic parasitic memeplex of the Cathedral, Yarvin advocated embracing the most extreme of elements of trolling, by, for example, instrumentalizing the symbol Hitler as the ultimate symbol with which to mock the moral police of The Cathedral. (15) A particularity of this neo-reactionary discourse is its use of humor. Here we can see parallels between the alt-right's weaponization of irony and the way in which, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, anti-Semites "like to play with discourse," engaging in forms of absurdity while their interlocutors by contrast are "obliged to use words responsibly"(16). We identify this logic at work in the alt-right embrace of explicitly racist and anti-Semitic memes, including Nazi Pepe and 'le happy merchant'. Offensive stereotypes serve as heuristic substrata for memes, which promulgate racism though the schadenfreude of trolls laugh at the extreme reactions that they have triggered. Thought expressions of racism that are imagined as not actually racist, earnest bigotry is thus incidentally perpetuated in the name of an ironic strategy.

Latent in his analysis of this discourse, Sartre detected the presence of totemism, referring to the anti-Semite as "a man who wishes to be a pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt-anything except a man"—in considering the alt-right we might add to Sartre's list: 'a plague of frogs', or 'a pitiful martyred gorilla'. Like many mid-century intellectuals trying to make sense of rise of fascism, Sartre's etiology of hatred followed Freud in identifying totemism with a dangerously irrational form of magical thinking that civilization necessarily sought to repress, so as to prevent us from destroying one another. Freud identified the origins of morality with a mythical primeval patricide, interpreting "the first rule of morality and moral restrictions of primitive society as reactions to a deed which gave the authors to it a conception of crime. They regretted this deed and decided it should not be repeated" going on to state that "This creative sense of guilt has not become extinct within us" (17)

According to Freud's diagnosis the history of civilization can thus be understood as the history of the gradual internalization of a vast apparatus of repression. It was in response to this cultural diagnosis that Freudo-Marxists such as Herbert Marcuse came to see the emerging counterculture of the post-war baby-boom generation as representing a rejection of these evermore pervasive systems of 'control' through which humans "are kept incapable of being autonomous"(18). As the counterculture came to be absorbed into the mainstream of the liberalism cultural establishment, it arguably lost much of its counter-hegemonic status. Whether or not this

cooptation narrative is entirely accurate, it is this same argument that the alt-right has used to present itself as a youth movement recuperating the transgressive appeal of a counterculture rebelling against an oppressive establishment (10)—although critics argue that this claim rings hollow since the alt-right produce so little in the way of actual culture production(19).

But what if the condition that Freud diagnosed in psychic terms does not originate from within our psyches but rather in our relations with others and with the historical, and thus ever-changing milieu in which we are enmeshed? This is how René Girard problematizes Freud's framework. He rejects the psychoanalytic ontologization of aggression in the individual. In place of Freud's view of violence as ineradicable trait of human nature, Girard posited the openness of humans to others as the source of violence and aggression. In studies ranging as widely across literature and anthropology as those of Freud, Girard developed an alternative relational type of ontology with desire at its core as opposed to repression. Whilst, from a Marxist perspective, Girard's ontological account like that of Freud can rightly be accused of dehistoricizing its subject there is nevertheless something to be gained by applying this framework to an understanding of the Harambe phenomenon.

For Girard, imitation governs desire, with man creating his own being "essentially based on the desire of his fellow"(20). While this rejection of the Freudian repression hypothesis was common in post-structural thought, what is characteristic of Girard's approach is the extent to which imitative desire provides the basis of a potentially limitless source of conflict. Girard sees culture as basically an attempt to contain mimetic violence, to immunize the social against the centrifugal pull of the Other's desire. In Girard's conservative interpretation, while traditional societies periodically staged theatrical enactments of sacrifice in order to dissolve the 'mimetic crisis', by turning away from such rituals modern societies leave themselves open to the escalation of conflictual reciprocity. As Geoff Shullenberger argues then:

Social media platforms, a Girardian analysis suggests, are machines for producing desire. Their equalizing structure–what is most widely celebrated about them–converts all users into each other's potential models, doubles, and rivals, locked in a perpetual game of competition for the intangible objects of desire of the attention economy. By embedding users in a standardized format, social media renders all individuals instantly

comparable in simple, quantitative terms. Enabling instantaneous comparison creates the conditions for a universal proliferation of horizontal rivalry. In this situation of universalized mimetic antagonism, conditions are ripe for scapegoating. (21)

While it is a contemporary platitude that we have today come to occupy a 'global village', as imagined by Marshall McLuhan, we tend to overlook the degree to which this retribalization process would bring us in touch with a dynamics that totemic cultures had long sought to control. In this regard, following a Christian conservative dimension in both Girard and McLuhan's thought, we can observe how contemporary social media affords certain modalities that have long been lost in more visually-oriented literary cultures.

McLuhan saw new technological innovation as precipitating a shift in what he called our sense ratio, effectively extending our senses whilst simultaneously occluding another dimension of awareness. McLuhan framed this in terms of a process of 'retrieval' of archetypes from the past. In McLuhan's words "an archetype is a quoted extension, medium, technology, or environment, an old ground seen as figure through a new ground"(22). What, for McLuhan, is occluded in this retrieval is the broader context within which this archetype was initially formulated. From this perspective we can say that social media retrieve the archetype of the non-modern totem as a new digital object while occluding the context of conflictual reciprocity against totem were meant to guard. Memes may be 'viral' in the sense that they spread out quickly but even more powerfully bring people together. This dynamic might explain both the violence and power of the meme, or what the alt-right likes to call 'meme magic'.

Returning to Freud's essay Totem and Taboo, Jacques Derrida argues that Freud's account of the origin of morality depends on a logic of the supplementation, or what we could call *technicity,* as the bearer of unconscious thought. How, he asks, could the perpetrators of the primeval patricide have been able to feel remorse if the event occurred before the foundation of the very order in which such a feeling was said to be grounded? Logically it can thus be argued that Freud's primal scene of repression "inaugurates nothing since repentance and morality had to be possible before the crime"(23). Derrida is insistent that the very notion of an origin, in such an instance, can only ever be imaginary—as Freud himself had remarked that "there are no indications of reality in the unconscious."

By conceptualizing humans' ontological openness to others as well as to the environment this line of thought replaces notions of primeval interiority—the idea of the individual as already constituted — with an "environmental" idea of being as explored by what we might call the ethical turn in media philosophy, in particular as developed by Bernard Stiegler and his acolytes.

To understand the effects, the potentials and the perils of memes, we ultimately need to be able to understand the dangerous power of what Michel Serres refers to as "the extremely dangerous" dynamic of the quasi-object, which he writes "is there only to be circulated. It is the rigorous trans-substantiation of being into relation. Being is abolished for the relation. Collective ecstasy is the abandonment of the 'I''s on the tissue of relations"(24). In spite of the dangerous loss of self-consciousness that mid-century intellectuals facing fascism found so terrifying, we can acknowledge that, as opposed to effacing individuality, collectivity completes us. In confronting today's totemism we should conclude that, while we may consider ourselves beyond them, many taboos still serve a valuable purpose. So, why did the alt-right suddenly become so effective at using memes, arguably it is because they have better understood how to exploit the tribal dynamics of social media. In counteracting the contemporary forces of neo-reaction online, the (normative) gaze of psychoanalysis and anthropological philosophy may indeed offer some therapeutic insights into how to immunize ourselves against the potentially limitless source of conflict that social media seems to have the power to unleash.

Notes:

1. Venkatesh Rao, How Harambe Became the Perfect Meme, in: *The Atlantic*, September 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/harambe-the-perfect-meme/498743/.
2. Ryan Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), 2015.
3. Tom, McDonough (ed.), *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, October Books, Cambridge, 2003.
4. Brandon Storlie, The Summer of Harambe: the Curious Case of a Detourned Gorilla, and the Limits of Internet Virality, in: Proceedings of the 68th International Communication Association Conference, Prague, 24-28 May, 2018.
5. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Globalization and the Radical Loser." in

New Perspective Quarterly, July 26 2006

6. See: KnowYourMeme, "Cecil the Lion's Death", http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/cecil-the-lion-s-death.

7. Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Zero Books, London, 2017, 6

8. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online*. Polity Press, Cambridge (MA), 2017.

9. Elle Hunt, Milo Yiannopoulos, Rightwing Writer, Permanently Banned From Twitter, The Guardian, July 20, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jul/20/milo-yiannopoulos-nero-permanently-banned-twitter.

10. Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right, *com,* March 29, 2016, http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/.

11. Staff, Pepe the Frog, September 26, 2016, *Anti-Defamation League*, https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/pepe-the-frog?referrer=http%3A/www.jta.org/2016/09/28/news-opinion/pepe-the-frog-meme-added-to-adl-hate-database.

12. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, Standord, p. 199

13. Richard Hofstadtler, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Harpers, New York, 1964, pp. 77–86.

14. Elizabeth Sandifer, *Neoreaction a Basilisk: Essays on and Around the Alt-Right*. Eruditorum Press. 2017, page 38

15. Yuk Hui On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries. E-flux, no. 81, April 2017. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/

16. Jean Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Schocken Books, New York, 1948, 13

17. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Beacon Press, London, 1913,264

18. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964, 8

19. Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018.

20. Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan, 2013.

21. Geoff Shullenberger, The Scapegoating Machine. https://thenewinquiry.com/the-scapegoating-machine/, November 30

2016.

22. Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan* (edited by Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone), Routledge, London & New York, 1995, 31
23. Derrida, Jacques. Acts of Literature. New York: Routledge. 1992, p. 192
24. Michel Serres, Theory of the Quasi-Object, in: *The Parasite*, University of Min, Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1980, pp. 224-234.