

Source?

Memes as Spiritual Expression in a Post-Truth Landscape

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Introduction

According to Pew-Research, 28% of U.S. adults are now religiously unaffiliated—a figure that has nearly double since just 2007. Some identify as agnostic or atheist, but the majority identify as “nothing in particular” – giving them the title religious “Nones”.¹ In studies about this exodus from religion including the one referenced above, journalists and pollsters are always careful to mention that this statistic does not primarily reflect lack of belief, or lack of spirituality. Instead, it probably represents dissatisfaction with organized religious traditions. In today’s ease of access to information and new forms of community online, local churches are less and less able to maintain stability and growth of congregations. And yet, studies also indicate that close to half of Americans report an *increase* in spirituality over their lifetime.

One might assume that a deeper scientific understanding of the world might explain away the need for religious explanations, yet there is much evidence of the opposite. In *Techgnosis*, Erik Davis illustrates that technological advancement has historically been intertwined with new mysticisms going back hundreds of years. When the daguerreotype was invented, it brought new waves of interest in the unseen, including ghostly doppelgangers and fear of the occult. “Regardless of how secular this ultramodern condition appears, the velocity and mutability of the times invokes a certain supernatural quality that must be seen at least in part, through the lenses of religious thought and the fantastic storehouse of the archetypal imagination.”² As new

¹ "Religious 'Nones' in America: Who They Are and What They Believe," Pew Research Center, accessed January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

² Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2015), 1.

technologies alter our reality and displace us, we turn to “sacred ritual and metaphysical speculation, spiritual regimen and natural spell.”³

One doesn’t have to look hard to see evidence that “secular” life online is actually teeming with spirituality, belief, and existential awareness. To question the nature of reality is not a fringe academic pursuit, but common across culture. For instance, the belief that our reality is a programmed simulation is an accepted plausibility in mainstream science. “The Joe Rogan Experience” is the most streamed podcast in America, valued at \$200 million by Spotify in 2020. It is regularly criticized for platforming right-wing conspiracy theorists, from anti-vax football star Aaron Rogers to “Infowars” mythomaniac Alex Jones, who was recently sued for over \$1 Billion in restitution for lies about the Sandy Hook victims and their families.⁴ In some ways, the conspiracies could be seen as symptomatic of a much deeper questioning of reality itself. Guests regularly discuss supernaturalism, question the nature of consciousness, simulation theory, aliens, and psychedelic drug use. Rogan himself discusses his experiences with DMT trips in Shamanic Ayahuasca rituals.

This spiritual interest goes across political and demographic divides. Millennials and Gen Z on the other side of the political spectrum regularly consult astrology to organize their days and make social decisions. Apps like Co-star deliver the spiritual information in bite-sized, personalized messages. “The algorithm-based astrology app has a following of over five million users and uses a combination of NASA data, professional astrologers and your exact birth chart

³ Davis, Erik, *TechGnosis*, 2.

⁴ Williamson, Elizabeth. "Sandy Hook Lies Will Cost Jones About \$1 Billion." *New York Times*, October 13, 2022, A1(L). Gale Academic OneFile (accessed March 29, 2024). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A722113167/AONE?u=purchase&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=f4a21c12>.

to provide users with highly personalized daily horoscopes.”⁵ Practitioners of witchcraft share manifestation spells on “#witchtok”. Netflixes’ “*Escaping Twin Flames*” documentary follows vloggers-turned cult leaders preying on their lonely audience with prophetic tools for finding love. Fandom culture creates new religious rituals, like attending comic-con costumed as a fictional character, or even tailgating a major sports event.

Tara Burton calls these new sources of spiritual and ritual gratification “remixed religions.” They are customized by each individual, who engages with them at whatever level of depth they choose. They can sometimes become a central way that one identifies oneself with a community, but more often, they become a patchwork. People acquire elements of what works and abandon the rest.⁶ In general, they are separate from established religious doctrines, traditions, and dogmas, even when they borrow from them. As the origins of Protestantism are inseparable from the printing press, today’s remixed religions are inseparable from the influence of the internet.

The visual languages of art history are intertwined with that of religious identity, ritual, and metaphysical belief. What is the visual language of the deeply spiritual “religious nones”? Spiritual identities today are not only decentralized and non-universal, but their social life primarily exists online across social platforms. There is no traditional lexicon of religious icons that unify across these networks. However, their online communication *does* create visual culture, distinctly related to the technology that allows them in the first place: the internet. The

⁵ Izzy Copestake, “I Followed Co-Star’s Advice for a Week to See If It Would Improve My Life.” VICE. Last modified February 15, 2022. Accessed March 15, 2024. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3nwx/co-star-astrology-app-review>.

⁶ Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020) 6.

language of religious none's is memes- not only in terms of text-image relationships, but in mimetic behaviors, language, values, etc. Their remixed spiritualities mirror their remixing of content and ideas in the making and spreading of digital debris. While they certainly help create group identities and insider culture not unlike religion, meme culture has taken an existential turn in general, outside of group identification entirely.

From memes about the suffering caused by desire, (Fig. 1) to pondering “is it really possible for a country boy to break the cycle of death and rebirth,” (Fig. 2) core Buddhist concepts are referenced ironically, without mention of the faith tradition attached to them. Similarly, Jesus Christ shows up in memes as a blank slate, like SpongeBob or Peter Griffin. Other memes make a more direct comment on intuitive sources of truth and remixed religion: “empiricism? rationalism? babe we’re doing vibes-based epistemology now.” (Fig. 3) This meme asserts that the origin of knowledge is not empirical, but “vibes based” – it is based on a feeling, a good intuition.⁷

While these memes do carry social and political critiques, they do little to organize groups around a central identity in the way traditional religions have. This is in stark contrast to Q-Anon, (or less specifically, MAGA) memes. You could argue that Q-Anon memes also function based on intuition (or “vibes”), yet their creators and sharers deny this. They do not see their mimetic behavior as creating and exploring knowledge collectively and in real time. Instead, their memes are perceived as a tool that delivers knowledge directly from a nameable source: Q himself. Thanks to the MAGA movement, “Post-Truth” became Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year, rising to prominence alongside Fake News, Alternative Facts, and of course,

⁷ Guerrero, Jordi Viader. “Memeing Reading // Reading Memeing.” In *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* edited by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw, (Amsterdam Institute Of Network Cultures, 2021) 278.

Donald Trump. Inability to fact-check information, flattening of high and low cultures, and skepticism towards elites are trends that long preceded Trump. In many ways, though, Trump and his loyalists were seen as the zenith of these problematic effects of the internet, fulfilling the predictions of internet skeptics from earlier years.⁸ Q-Anon's secret weapon for sewing distrust has always been the efficiency with which images can be remade, given new meanings, and disseminated.

QAnon's efficient misinformation peaked with the January 6th insurrection: an event still echoing through the courts, especially in regards to Donald Trump's involvement. Many influential Q-Anon participants who got their start posting memes on facebook groups are now jailed for their organizational roles in the insurrection. Thus, their online behavior has been substantially documented and analyzed, both in order to prove their guilt, and to better understand radicalization online. The memes of the religious "nones", however, have not. By definition, they are decentralized, difficult to track, and explicitly reject organized action and material impact. Their implications are personal rather than public.

This thesis will interrogate the philosophical, infrastructural, and material elements at play in memetic culture at large, but specifically regarding existential memes, in order to better understand intuitive spirituality across digital landscapes. Does the dematerialization of life and culture online reflect the severing of spirituality from religion, or help to cause it? Are memes an effective way to try out different orientations to spirituality? What do young internet users find trustworthy in a post-truth landscape?

⁸ Dan, Viorela, Britt Paris, Joan Donovan, Michael Hameleers, Jon Roozenbeek, Sander van der Linden, and Christian von Sikorski. "Visual Mis- and Disinformation, Social Media, and Democracy." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (2021): 641–664.

After introducing a primary memetic subject, the contextual elements that created meme culture will be interrogated, including the pre-incorporation of postmodern theory, the development of Web 2.0 throughout the 2000's, and disillusionment with economic and material infrastructure. Then, memes' resistance to primary modes of analysis will be evaluated in order to develop a more effective methodology, which will be applied to the primary subject to create a typology of memetic frameworks that, in both form and function, answer the above questions.

PART I

Primary Case Study: Source?

In late 2022, a viral meme format illustrated some of these questions, directly addressing the internal dilemmas brought on by post-truthism. It also provided an array of functional solutions, in the form of irony. It speaks to peoples' experiences in the social era of the internet, what they believe about reality, and perhaps ways they have organized their lives around a purpose. I'll refer to it as the Source Meme. Like all memes, it exists in iterations and remixes that build on itself. Meme-creators utilize the prompt of the template, but switch out the base image and punchline in service of their own rhetorical goals. By classifying memes that build on the same format, the consistency of their affective register is made apparent. By holding up variations within the same register, a typology of different possible belief systems is voiced. At the risk of over-explaining the joke, some background on the forms employed is useful, as well as a bit of meme-lore, as applicable.

This variation is built upon a bearded shirtless man in the woods. (Fig. 4) He poses with one leg up on a log, looking off into nature like some sort of conqueror. He brandishes an ax, presumably for cutting firewood. His muscles are overly-defined and exaggerated, with big round biceps and pecs, veins bursting out of his arms, and 12-pack abs. Like his muscles, his jawline is huge and sharp. This is the so-called "Gigachad."⁹ The Gigachad pushes all visual limits of masculine ideals to the point of fantasy. He builds upon the idea of a "Chad" - a nickname for a successful white man in his late 20's or early 30's who spends his free time going

⁹ 1. "Gigachad," *Know Your Meme*, May 10, 2018, accessed March 29, 2024, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/gigachad>.

to bars and meeting women. The caricature is mostly used pejoratively by the more online type, implying a dumb jock character with primal and unsophisticated interests. The Gigachad, in contrast, represents an ascension beyond normal masculine ideals, a sort of perfect specimen at the peak of human evolution. The Gigachad is used to assert a more refined position, a position difficult to understand by average people, by the unsophisticated “Chad”. It has been embraced by incels as a way of elevating and promoting their own condition. It functions similarly to the expanding brain meme, in which a range of perspectives on a topic are organized from a low sophistication level to a high one, illustrated by an expanding brain, which eventually consumes the whole galaxy. (Fig 5) Here, stupider ideas are usually represented as more transcendental, more transformational than the smart, normal, or correct way to think about something.¹⁰ Thus, here our lumberjack Gigachad is used in service of comparing ideas. What he supplies is a deeper understanding, a more spiritual intuition, an awareness of that which is unseen.

This brings us to the text overlaid on the image. The top text asks us concisely to cite the source of some unnamed information: “Source?” In this joke, we are placed in the context of an online debate, in which one person makes a point or states a fact. The other, the opposition, asks where they got their information. They want to know if their argument is grounded in legitimate happenings, or if their statistics are accurate. They may want to find out about the biases of their sources, whether it was reported by Tucker Carlson, or Rachel Maddow; an independent journalist on Twitter, or NPR. The goal of this inquiry is to win the debate, to break apart the opponent's argument and defeat them. This exchange is all-too familiar for internet users over the last twenty years or so, especially for the “chronically online” subset: internet users who experience a large percentage of their lives on digital platforms.

¹⁰ Brian Feldman, “What Level of Brain-Meme Irony Are You On?,” *Intelligencer*, last modified March 15, 2017, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/the-brain-meme-will-expand-your-mind.html>.

When challenged, the ascended Gigachad provides his source: “It was revealed to me on my walk.” The response is, of course, a joke. Yet it is also direct and decisive, and a legitimate and wide-felt response to the demands of Web 2.0, post-truthism, and even late-stage American capitalism.

First, this response is a refusal to debate. In the imagined scenario, asking for a source is an antagonization- a request in bad faith. The meme acknowledges the bait and refuses to bite. By providing a source that is blatantly unacceptable, the memer withdraws from the conversation altogether. It is a refusal to engage in dialogue, and unwillingness to hear another perspective and try to reconcile it with one’s own. However, it is also not a *rejection* of truth, and it is not “agree to disagree.” The logic of the meme accepts truth as external: “it was revealed to me,” or, it does not come from one’s self, or one’s subjective lived experiences. The subject of the meme receives truth directly, as though it is being beamed into them from “the source”. This form of truth is unquestionable because it cannot be interrogated, fact-checked, or disproven.

Second, this conception of truth is provisional. By linking truth to an experiential moment, (in this case, going on a walk) it must be momentary and evolving. It is revealed based on one’s time and place. There is no reason to believe a contradictory revelation won’t surface tomorrow, and there is no reason to accept one as more or less true than the other.

Third, by citing an ultimately unknowable source, the meme also asserts that knowledge can be, or definitely is, mystical in nature. If the nature of reality could simply be communicated with text, it would be trivial and unimportant. This is reminiscent of the first chapter of the Tao Te Ching. “The Tao that can be described is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.”¹¹ There is an appeal to a more

¹¹ Laozi and John H McDonald, *Tao Te Ching* (London: Arcturus, 2010).

esoteric knowledge that one cannot see when bogged down by the conventions of society, especially material and digital infrastructure. By appealing to this intuitive and spiritual level of truth, the meme presents a call to withdraw: perhaps not only from the debate, but from the modern world itself. This provisional truth is revealed only when the mind and body are deeply in touch with the natural world.

While the implications of this meme (and others in its register) will be analyzed in more depth in later chapters, it effectively illustrates the affect of the post-truth problem. Where does Truth come from, and how can one *be* when this question is up for grabs? It suggests a possible answer, at least on an individual level: knowledge comes only from nature.

Theoretical Context: The Problem of the Origin

Even before providing an array of answers, the Source meme gives voice to an experiential sentiment that the origins of knowledge and meaning are debatable- a philosophical question that underscored much of the 20th century. While the meme-makers may not consider their project philosophy, but rather, relatable humor, their sentiment can be better understood by looking at the problem of the origin in postmodern philosophy. In 1935, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* addressed the social and political stakes of the creation of mass culture through industrialization.¹² Through modern technologies like film and photography, an artwork could be reproduced as an image and disseminated freely, increasing access but also diminishing the ritual value of the object itself, its "aura." These technologies also diminish the role of the critic as a mediator between art and people. Instead, the masses get a new sense of ownership over culture, experiencing it collectively in real time.

In the 1960s, postmodern philosophy responded not only to the effects of industrialization on culture, but also, computation. Fred Turner wrote about how the writings of Norbert Wiener, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan introduced young Americans to "a cybernetic vision of the world, one in which material reality could be imagined as an information system. To a generation that had grown up in a world beset by massive armies and the threat of nuclear holocaust, the cybernetic notion of the globe as a single, interlinked pattern of information was deeply comforting: in the invisible play of information, many thought they could see the possibility of global harmony."¹³

¹² Walter Benjmamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 217-251. New York: Schocken Books, 1969

¹³ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture : Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Martin Heidegger's work, published throughout the 1930's and 1940's, was born out of the existential implications of industrialization and modernism, including alienation, meaninglessness, and the breaking down of previous societal structures of meaning. Jacques Derrida's work, published beginning 30 years later, illustrates not only a response to modernism but a move away from it, informed by the shifting cultural context of the 1960's and the technological predictions of computation. In *Origin(s) in (of) Heidegger/Derrida*, Edward S. Casey outlines the similarities and differences between their interest and conclusions through their discussion of origin in art, geometry, language, meaning, and so forth.¹⁴ Heidegger pointed to Western Metaphysics's problematic reliance on origin for meaning. He asserted that a text cannot simply represent that which is already fixed and foundational. The present is not merely a negotiation of the past. Instead, the past, present, and future are interdependent in the same way that a text and its referents are interdependent. Casey cites *The Origin of the Work of Art*, wherein Heidegger posits that the origin of an artwork is the artist, while the origin of the artist is the artwork. For both sides of this circle, the point of origin is the idea of art itself. Here, origin is rendered "more an abyss than a ground or principle, it lends us inevitably in paradox."¹⁵

Derrida's diagnoses of origin are more focused on language and definitions. According to him, meaning of language and thought is necessarily always deferred to other language and thought, again bringing us to a paradox instead of a stable original reference point. To prove this point, he breaks down the functions of particular linguistic paradoxes where binary positions are not autonomous. Instead, they always defer to each other. One meaning is "subversively operative within the opposition itself, being its secret motor and being even determinative of the

¹⁴ Edward S. Casey, "Origin(s) in (of) Heidegger/Derrida." *The Journal of philosophy* 81, no. 10 (1984): 604.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 604.

dominant term.”¹⁶ The meaning of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, ‘speech’ and ‘writing’, and ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ are all shown as contingent on their counterpart, which must be continually referenced in the present, obscuring an identified origin in the past.

For Heidegger, a text is continually representing traces of other texts, which are representing traces of other texts, and so forth, to a point where ideas were not yet represented in texts, and thus cannot be known. Yet, we can trace this lineage for the sake of “commemorating” each trace, and still learning about meaning despite lack of origin. For Derrida, this process of commemoration is not fruitful, as the extratextual meaning exists within the text itself. This demonstrates the interconnectedness of meaning at large, and frees us from a never-ending quest to locate the point of origin.

As Derrida points out, the act of representation, (also spelled “*re-pre-sentation*” to emphasize the contrasting prefixes) is “disseminative rather than gathering or unifying.”¹⁷ To create an image or a text is to spread new meanings across networks of deferred signifiers. Thus, a meme that spreads is to create meaning rather than capture it.

Similarly, Roland Barthes’ *The Death of the Author*, originally published in 1967, argued that the meaning of a text exists perpetually within the space of the reader, rather than its author. The author is continually fixed in the past, but the reader is always in motion, evolving through different moments in time, different locations, and different cultural networks of meaning. Thus, like Derrida and Heidegger, signifiers cannot point back to a fixed and foundational meaning. Barthes makes the stakes of this claim obvious. “[Literature] ... by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-

¹⁶ Casey, Edward S. “Origin(s) in (of) Heidegger/Derrida.” *The Journal of philosophy* 81, no. 10 (1984): 605.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 605.

theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases- reason, science, law.”¹⁸

To take seriously the arguments of Heidegger and Derrida is to admit that truth is always in negotiation. It is always temporally created and contingent on our experiences and reinforced conventions. This is true of discerning meaning from texts and images, but also in terms of worldview. A grounding, universal foundation (or the perception of one) is lost.

Internet memes are in some ways the climax of this trajectory of mass culture brought on by industrialization and then computation. Memes surpass Barthes’ assertion that “the author is dead” by completely eradicating the concept of authorship. Memes have no author. They need not acknowledge that they are one author’s mixing and recreating of other texts, because their form shows us their iterative remixes and absent “theology”. Instead, they are snapshots of undefinable networks’ negotiations of meaning in real time. They have no point of origin and no destination. They regurgitate and remix previous forms, texts, and images. Each time, meaning is born anew in the individualistic space of the reader.

It is unlikely that most meme creators are directly influenced by these texts, or factor them into their creative decision making. Instead, the texts provide a useful framework for understanding how and why memes operate the way they do, and also, that it makes sense to analyze them as significant and meaningful cultural outputs. Thus, the prevalence of memes in culture proves that Heidegger, Derrida, and Barthes’ postmodern assertions are useful, and have become more inevitable today, in our increasingly information and network-based world

¹⁸ Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 147.

systems. When reading a meme as a text, we know longer need to ask “Who is speaking thus?” We are innately aware that, as Barthes said, “*I* is nothing other than the instance of saying *I*.”¹⁹

This loss of foundation directly impacts the very perception of one’s self. In 1990, Judith Butler expanded on the problem of origin in *Gender Trouble*. In one instance, Butler focuses on drag’s movement beyond parody, to pastiche. By performing gender, it reveals *all* gender to be performance- a reference without an original referent. Conservative resistance to this sort of experimentation with gender tends to center *normalcy* as an idea: that something is morally *good* if it is normal. However, this foundation does not hold up to scrutiny, as normalcy is only achieved through repeated imitation.²⁰ Thus what is perceived as normal, universal, or permanent actually entirely provisional.

Butler resists the idea that exterior expression of identity derives from a fixed interior. What is sometimes perceived as the signifiers of the self, are actually the exact opposite: they signify our “*social temporality*.” Our exterior expression is always one of negotiation within the networks in which we exist. Like the meaning of a text, it exists always in flux in the present.

These postmodern concepts were, of course, more radical in the moment they were proposed. Today, they are made obvious not only by collective memetic discourse, but by social networks. Therefore, a distinction must be made between the later 20th century and the present, wherein, to various degrees, we have all seen these philosophies deeply integrated into our lives. Today, our networks (and therefore, sense of self) are rendered as data and filtered through digital infrastructure instead of material infrastructure. If Heidegger, Derrida, and Barthes’s were considering shifting sources of meaning in relation to information technology, we must look at how the networks have been built since then, and for what ends they have been optimized.

¹⁹ Barthes, Roland, and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 145.

²⁰ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, 138.

Digital Infrastructure: Network Sociality

The philosophical quandaries posed by the promise of computation in the 1960's were fully realized in the 1990's with Web 1.0, which was seen as a new technological horizon. The very early internet was dominated by companies that could afford to design and maintain a presence there. Major corporations and brands bought up URL's and began moving marketplaces online, and new startups like Amazon eventually promised to revolutionize the world through ease of consumption. Even as the internet made its way into homes through personal computers, early websites were "read-only" websites, meaning that companies designed and uploaded content that users accessed. Individuals could not communicate back in any personal way. With communication going one direction, the internet was static, and thus, it was mostly non-transformative in terms of personal identity or sociality.²¹

As social spaces began cropping up, they were completely unlike the major social platforms that have dominated the last twenty years. Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the world-wide web, URL, and HTML, has stressed the decentralized and open nature of the spaces where socialization did occur early on, like chat rooms and message boards.²² Even here, users did not create and distribute content. Instead, groups usually congregated around specific (mostly non-virtual) interests, which were discussed in these spaces. Sociality here was perhaps more transformative, in that it provided community where it hadn't previously been, but still did not interrupt the organization of social life. This kind of environment has been described as a

²¹ *Web 1.0: The Story Begins*. Anonymous IE University Publishing, 2021.

<https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/web-1-0-the-story-begins-2>.

²² Caitlin Dewey, "A Complete History of the Rise and Fall — and Reincarnation! — of the Beloved '90s Chatroom," *Washington Post*, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/30/a-complete-history-of-the-rise-and-fall-and-reincarnation-of-the-beloved-90s-chatroom/>.

spattering of “frontier towns,” where users got to know others through their usernames and their contributions to the forum.²³ Individual groups were often less than 30 users, and the rules of engagement were arrived upon naturally and collectively. Users could easily remain anonymous, or reveal as little about their real life as they preferred. However, they were accountable to each other and the shared sense of community they had built.

On Web 2.0, static websites that delivered content were replaced by interactive websites that constantly renewed based on user input. Early chatrooms, forums, and blogs quickly evolved into social networks created and designed by major corporations. From Friendster to MySpace to Facebook, it became easier and easier to create a profile and connect with new networks of users. Unlike the early web, it was free and intuitive, and users grew by the millions. Today in America, 83% of adults report having used YouTube, 68% report using Facebook, and 47% using Instagram.²⁴ The dominance of social media use is inarguable, in many contexts replacing traditional social interaction.

In contrast to Web 1.0, users of the social internet were asked to *create* content rather than just see it. Thus, posting online becomes an act of creation of self: an exterior negotiation of identity within one’s respective networks of friends, family, acquaintances, celebrities, and brands. Rather than these spaces being closed and communally moderated like chatrooms, they are policed by content algorithms and Silicon Valley moderation teams according to terms of services and company mission statements. The result is a corporatization of social spaces, where users compete for attention, are bombarded with advertising, and struggle to create a reliable

²³ Keith Wagstaff, “AOL’s Longest-Running Employee on the History of AOL Chat Rooms,” *Time*, last modified July 6, 2012, <https://techland.time.com/2012/07/06/aols-longest-running-employee-on-the-history-of-aol-chat-rooms/>.

²⁴ Jeffrey Gottfried, “Americans’ Social Media Use,” *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech* (Pew Research Center, January 31, 2024), last modified January 31, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/>.

sense of community. “A space that was once a frontier, was being standardized, monetized — colonized by moms. And the places that remained on the fringes were categorically gross: full of spam and sludge and a/s/l-style solicitation, a far cry from the supportive communities of the late ‘80s.”²⁵ In general, the average person is treated more like a public figure, feeling pressure to weigh in on current events, make announcements, and portray a curated public image. In the format of the curated feed, all texts, images, video, etc., are stripped of external context and rendered instead as *content*- created for the feed rather than just shared there. Origins are literally denied, and all information is presented through a nonlinear, nonhierarchical lens. It is literally dematerialized. In this way, the theoretical framework of mass culture first explored by Benjamin in 1935 has increased to the point of hyperbole.

The democratizing effects of this shift are innumerable, for better and worse. Andrew Keen’s 2007 book *The Cult of Amateur: How Today’s Internet is Killing Our Culture* famously voiced concerns about handing the cultural means of production over from elite institutions to anyone and everyone. Through an economy of attention, the layman is empowered as a “noble amateur” and granted influence despite lack of credentials. “...whereas the democratization of media has taken away the traditional cultural institutions’ vantage positions to control, regulate and filter information, the proliferation of amateur content and celebration of amateurism have crowded out expert’s judgements and the importance of expertise.”²⁶

Keen’s work has been lambasted for its preference of traditional modes of cultural production, wherein institutional gatekeepers prevent access, and ultimately benefit those who have access to power.²⁷ However, it’s hard not to see his work as prophetic. The early trends of

²⁵ Caitlin Dewey, “A Complete History” 2014.

²⁶ Pak-Hang Wong, “From Culture 2.0 to a Network State of Mind: A Selective History of Web 2.0’s Axiologies and a Lesson from It.” *TripleC* 11, no. 1 (2013): 191–206.

²⁷ Ianto Ware, “Andrew Keen Vs the Emos: Youth, Publishing, and Transliteracy.” *M/C journal* 11, no. 4 (2008).

anti-elitism have come to a dominate culture, laying the groundwork for the mainstreaming of fringe conspiracy theories, science denial, and ultimately Post-Truth politics.

In this context, it is difficult to know where ideas or facts are coming from, who one is interacting with, or what money is funding certain types of content. With the ability to witness only information that confirms one's biases whether credible or not, discourse is replaced by echo chambers and self-fulfilled prophecies. One's perspective of the world can quickly become a projection of how they are inclined to imagine it. Misinformation is spread intentionally in bad faith, and accidentally, making comment sections generally hostile. In contrast to Web 1.0, the effects of these interactions are not relegated to remote chatrooms. Today, digital realities are empowered to shape "irl" (in real life) reactions, bringing hostility and division into daily lived experience. The impact is felt in relationships with friends and family.

The moving of networks onto these digital spaces forced individuals to actively create new forms of identity. To return to Butler, our *social temporalities* are now fragmented, and thus, so are our identities. Facebook could be used to emphasize family life, Twitter, for political identity, and Instagram, for social identity or creative accomplishments. But commonly, users throughout the late 2000's and early 2010's maintained personae on each of these platforms and others, fracturing their identity across them and emphasizing different parts of themselves to different ends. This was succinctly illustrated by the viral Dolly Parton meme, in which users showed how they are in effect four different people on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Tinder. (Fig 6).

The act of making oneself becomes a game, in which users craft their identity entirely externally across networks, depending on the particular demands of the network and its structuring algorithm. With the pre-incorporation of these postmodern concepts-

“We come to see individual life as gamelike, dramalike. We become more explicit about personal reality-construction, even to the point of creating psychotherapy schools based on it. Some of us — indeed most of us in one way or another — play the dangerous game of ingesting drugs that modify our reality. We are still driven to be someone, to be happy, to be good, but we find new ways of playing the game, and of understanding it.”²⁸

Contemporary social media platforms like TikTok have understood and capitalized on this fragmentation of identity. Where Instagram has been used to build up personal brands and create a sellable version of identity, TikTok is built for collaboration. Creators are expected to adapt to and survive the daily rising and falling of trends, moving from account to account (and when necessary, from platform to platform). The promise of turning one’s profile into a successful brand is waning, contributing to the lack of interest in any sort of movement towards the future. “It’s as if they don’t care about building a following or about being recognized in the way platform-loyal millennials do.”²⁹ Thus we see younger generations quicker to accept this fragmentation of identity. The increasing influence of A.I. algorithms on newsfeeds has obscured identity even further. Instead of modeling digital identities to work for friends lists, they are made to be seen and pulled into the feeds of strangers by algorithms.

These years have been a battle between technological optimism and concern. For Benjamin, the creation of mass culture could aid revolution, but could also aid fascism through the rendering of politics as aesthetics. Hito Steyerl emphasizes the same dualistic effects of online culture today. Through appropriating high-resolution images and recontextualizing them in lower quality, disparate collectives can create new aesthetic bonds and shared culture outside of the traditional capitalistic modes of production. And yet, it can be utilized against us.

“On the one hand, it operates against the fetish value of high resolution. On the other hand, this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information

²⁸ Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be* (Harper Collins, 2009).

²⁹ Joshua Citarella, “Adventures in TikTok, the Wildly Popular Video App Where Gen Z Rules,” *Artsy*, last modified December 3, 2018, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-tiktok-wildly-popular-video-app-gen-rules>.

capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation, on previews rather than screenings.”³⁰

Every year, new technologies, platforms, networks, and algorithms are introduced with utopic promises. Changes are quick and transformative at times, (as with the rollout of the first iPhone, or Facebook) and fly under the radar at times. Regardless, we are often left to address the harms of these technologies after they have already reached their peak saturation. This year, more than 40 states and Washington D.C. are suing Meta for intentionally implementing addictive features, despite internal knowledge that showed direct links to damaged mental health.³¹ Here, too, the question of trust is central and evasive.

³⁰ Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image - Journal #10 November 2009 - E-Flux,” *E-Flux*, last modified November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

³¹ Bobby Allyn, “States Sue Meta, Claiming Instagram, Facebook Fueled Youth Mental Health Crisis,” *NPR*, last modified October 24, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/24/1208219216/states-sue-meta-claiming-instagram-facebook-fueled-youth-mental-health-crisis>.

Economic and Material Infrastructure: Something's Wrong

In addition to postmodern theory and the optimizations of Web 2.0, there is another contextual element that lays the groundwork for the existential content in memetic discourse today. That is, the disillusionment and discontent with the state of the material world. In some ways, different political and religious identities are built on a foundation of cynicism. This underscores both the existential memes and Q-Anon memes.

In addition to responding to the shifting identity-based demands of social media platforms, Americans who grew up on the internet have only seen accelerating political and socioeconomic dysfunction. The transition into the new millennia began with the (anticlimactic) hysteria of y2k, rooted in the fear that our burgeoning digital foundation was not equipped to survive the transition and the grid would collapse. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 followed shortly after, shocking and traumatizing the world with the loss of nearly 3,000 lives (and 25,000 injured) in the heart of American Capitalism. The reaction in the following years was defined by aimless war in Iraq, government surveillance of U.S. citizens, and Islamophobic anti-immigrant sentiment. In 2005, the government's delayed and inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina highlighted our inability to protect against and recover from natural disasters, and how fragile our entire infrastructure can be. In 2008, gross negligence among bankers led to the greatest economic recession since the Great Depression. Many in Gen Z saw their parents lose homes and savings accounts as a result of a negligent and irresponsible system. This is all before the rise of Trumpism, which has stress-tested the weakest points of the American political system and democracy itself.

Every major event of the 2000's has occurred simultaneously with the threat of climate change. Gen Z has quite literally been told that without dramatic reorganization of industry to

lessen CO2 emissions, they would have no future. As climate-related natural disasters increase, division and culture wars prevent innovation. Ultimately, millennials and Gen-Zer's have grown up in an America with once-in-a-lifetime tragedies occurring seemingly constantly, each highlighting the inability of our political and socioeconomic systems to adjust and adapt and move forward in a constructive way. To them, the world has always been ending.

So many of these events, including the inability to address climate change, arise from the difficulty of achieving change that cannot be immediately converted to profit. The dominance of our global network society has also aided in the proliferation of Neoliberalism, which affords corporations unchecked power under the guise of personal freedom. According to David Harvey, Neoliberalism “values market exchange as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs,’ it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.”³² Through our integration into a digital society, new markets are created within every aspect of contemporary life, no matter how private it may seem. In this context capitalistic forces are empowered to supersede all others. Previously foundational institutions, such as “professional, emotional, sexual, cultural, family and international domains, as well as political affairs”³³ were perceived of as foundational because they were stable. By fully replacing them, the ethics of capitalism rendered them temporal and provisional depending on their relationship to capital.

³² David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2005, 3.

³³ *Ibid*, 4.

Gen Z has seen a stagnant minimum wage, skyrocketing rents and cost of living, and exponentially increased higher education costs with less perceived sense of payoff.³⁴ Even the promise of monetizing one's personal brand through social media is disappearing. Instead, Gen Z has been taught to live with a sense of placelessness, always adapting to provisional expectations of each moment. At the same time, older generations tend to blame Gen Z's arrested development on their own laziness and narcissism, simultaneously taking credit for their own privileged position in life as "self-made."

Mark Fisher describes the effects of this landscape in his 2008 work, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. The question in the subtitle plays off Margaret Thatcher's assertion that "there is not alternative" to capitalism, tracing our contemporary issues back towards the beginnings of Neoliberal dominance in the 80's.³⁵ The 20th century was largely defined by global battles between communism and capitalism, authoritarianism and democracy. Today, capitalism has "won" so decisively that despite the widespread discontent, all other options have been erased from the realm of possibility, so much so that a better world is mostly removed from the dreaming life of the general populace. "What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the preemptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture."³⁶

Part of the dominance of Capitalist Realism is that it effectively neutralizes potential threats by incorporating them into its ends. For instance, one can look to countercultures of the

³⁴ Meredith G. Troupe, "The Economic Environment of Gen Z." *Dollars & Sense*, July-August 2023, 37+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed April 16, 2024).

<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A762989934/AONE?u=purchase&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=800c40ff>.

³⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 9.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

20th century, where disillusioned young folks attempted to “opt-out.” For instance, the anti-war hippie movement of the 1960’s, or the hardcore punk movements of the 1980’s. The aesthetics within these subcultures, whether peace signs and rainbow clothing, or tattoos, ripped clothes, and mohawks, referred not only to a group identity, but to a sense of rebellion against and withdrawal from “the system”. Today, those aesthetic signifiers are merely that- aesthetics, recycled and distributed within the forces of capital. “‘Alternative’ and ‘independent’ don’t designate something outside of mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles.”³⁷ The same is true of symbols of protest, from black lives matter to pride flags. This creates a pervasive atmosphere in which young people are doomed to repeat and remix signs from the past, performing them out of a sense of nostalgia and longing, yet disconnected from action.

This is reflected in the political action and identities of the younger generations. Despite having an increasing interest in social problems locally and globally over the last twenty years, their interest in government has decreased.³⁸ This gets back to a distrust in gatekeeping institutions in general. Even if they are willing to identify as conservative or liberal, they are much more likely to avoid identification with the Republican or Democratic party, preferring independent labels. The inability to achieve change through traditional political makes extreme political ideas feel necessary, in response to the pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism.

In the past, postmodern theory provided a cultural path forward in response to the collective problems of modernism. Strategies like cultural deconstruction, irony, pastiche,

³⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009) 9.

³⁸ Jean M Twenge, *IGen : Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)* (New York, Ny: Atria Paperback, 2017) 281.

fragmentation, were deployed in order to poke holes and complicate a disingenuously oversimplified world. The same strategies are no longer effective in the context of capitalist realism. Like the problem of the origin's pre-corporation into internet culture and meme culture, postmodern skepticism is pre-incorporated into Millennial and especially Gen Z culture.

In order to diagnose the strategies of our times, theorists look to the ways cultural expression differs from the late 20th century. Their observations tend to orient around Web 2.0's exponential acceleration of postmodern and late capitalist tendencies.³⁹ A different approach is posed by cultural theorists Robin Van Den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen in the term *Metamodernism*. Instead of doubling down on postmodernism, they highlight a desire in culture to move *beyond* deconstruction and towards some sort of construction. Within the postmodern saturation, they observe modernistic tendencies making a resurgence. This is not merely a regression towards naivety of grand narratives. Metamodern discourse "acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nonetheless takes forward it *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naivete yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossibility."⁴⁰ They go on to illustrate metamodern discourse as a donkey chasing a carrot on a string that it will never catch, yet moves towards it anyways.

In practice, it is not that postmodern and modern tendencies have found harmony. Instead, metamodern strategies "oscillate" back and forth.

"It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. Indeed, by oscillating too and fro or

³⁹ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, "Note on Metamodernism" from *Supplanting the Postmodern*, edited by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavrakis, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) 311.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 315.

back and forth, the metamodern negotiates between the modern and the postmodern. One should be careful not to think of this oscillation as a balance, however; rather, a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 1, innumerable poles. Each time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back towards irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back towards enthusiasm.”⁴¹

To consider this oscillation can help us understand how the “reflexive impotence” of Capitalist Realism make internet memes a primary mode of expression of ideas today, other than mere convenience. In addition to pre-incorporating postmodern assertions, they reflect the users’ suspicion of pursuing one end too wholly, whether ironic or sincere. Previously dominant modes of expression and mass communication tend to ask one to state their intentions and their artistic or rhetorical goals clearly and move towards them. Traditional gatekeeping institutions train young creators to do just that. Memes, however, reflect the flippancy that capitalist realism demands. “‘Being realistic’ may once have meant coming to terms with a reality experienced as solid and immovable. Capitalist realism, however, entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment.”⁴²

Take, for instance, depression memes, which openly discuss and at times make light of anxiety, unhappiness, and suicidal ideation. Whereas early identity-making on Web 2.0 revolved around performing constant positivity and fulfillment, today, overly-positive content is more likely to come across as disingenuous and out of touch. While millennials are experiencing disillusionment with lack of upward mobility, the housing crisis, etc., high schoolers who are less financially concerned are also affected. Over the last 10 years, high schoolers are 10-15% less likely to report that they are satisfied with both themselves, and with life as a whole. There is a

⁴¹ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Den Akker, “ Note on Metamodernism” from *Supplanting the Postmodern*, edited by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavriv, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015),316.

⁴² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 9.

similar increase in feelings like they “can’t do anything right,” their life is “not useful,” and they do not enjoy it.⁴³

There are increased efforts to address mental health through therapy, better regulated social media, and awareness. Yet, to Fisher, depression and a crisis of meaning is actually a very sensible response to the schizophrenic and bi-polar function of capitalism, especially online. Thus, efforts to address poor mental health fail to address the systematic root causes. Depression memes express not only a sense of hopelessness and lack of meaning, but of the awareness of the inability to change its causes. Depression is externalized into a general social critique that contributes a shared sense of community. Seeing a tweet that reads “Microdosing hell by waking up every morning,” (Fig. 7) or a “deep-fried” image of Spongebob despairing with the text “I haven’t had a positive thought in weeks” (Fig. 8) reposted tens of thousands of times can actually contribute to positive imaginative cognitive processes, wherein symbols help us understand our place in a grander picture.⁴⁴ Through memes one knows that they are not alone in their suffering.

Fisher summarizes his position with the statement that it is easier to imagine the end of the world itself than an end to capitalism. It is precisely within this context wherein there is no possible collective vision of a future, that we contextualize our two separate trajectories: MAGA Americans and Gen Z spiritual meme-posters. The first doubles down on belief in an origin, and seeks to return to it. The latter acknowledges admits their lack of foundation, and seeks to negotiate what this means for them personally, and how to proceed.

⁴³ Jean M Twenge, *JGen*, 101.

⁴⁴ Laurence Sherz, “I’m Not Lonely, I Have Memes” from Chloë Arkenbout, *Critical Meme Reader Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, edited by Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw, (Amsterdam Institute Of Network Cultures, 2021) 148.

Pathways to Adaptive Strategies

For the origin of the term Post-Truth, we can look to the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, in which misinformation spread like wildfire. Fact checkers and official sources simply could not compete with the immediacy and emotional impact of the power of the grand declarations of anonymous memes. This was exploited by then-anonymous bad faith actors, including Russian intelligence and the elusive “Q.”⁴⁵ Their insider language of codes and extremity of conspiracy theories were gradually increased over time, until the narrative swallowed and incorporated nearly all conspiracy theories. President Trump’s “meme-ability” only fueled the fire, elevating him from fringe joke candidate to the dominant leader of the republican party.

The success of Q-Anon is a result of combining this sense that something is deeply wrong with the game-ifying effects of Web 2.0. Through cybernetics, Q connects with those desperate for a source of truth, unhappy with the conditions of their lives, and desperate for a structure of meaning to give them purpose, filling all these needs on a functional level. While they are political in nature, their language mirrors fictional good guy/bad guy narratives from pop culture and religion, allowing individuals to join the game. In one example (Fig. 9), Q-Anon casts themselves as the King of Sparta in the movie *300*, refusing to bow to the god-like King Xerxes (who represents antifa, liberals, and Black Lives Matter). This meme clarifies a complicated political reality by making the terms clear. By framing this perspective in terms of relatability, the meme can onboard less politically extreme conservatives into the group identity

⁴⁵ Huu Dat Tran. “Make A-Meme-Rica Great Again!: Studying the Internet Memes within the #maga and #trump2020 Network during the 2020 US Presidential Election on Twitter.” *Southwestern mass communication journal* 38, no. 1 (2022) 4.

of Q. Users are invited to join the urgent cause against “antifa, liberals, and BLM” and are roped into the underlying conspiratorial project: saving America from the pedophilic deep state, and “making it great again.” In true cultish form, there are only two identities in contemporary America: true patriots and traitors. While followers certainly would not concede to the proponents of Capitalist Realism, (which are rooted in Marxist critique), they do express a disillusionment with their material world and an inability to imagine any progressive future at all. Without being able to see the future, it becomes a latent threat. The only alternative one can imagine is their own imperfect recollection of the past. Thus, the groundwork is laid for fascism, which capitalizes on the “us vs. them” logic, creates an enemy, and promises a return to traditional nationalist and ethnically centered values.⁴⁶

By providing a foundation, Q moves beyond politics and into worldview. Researchers point out the problematic tendency to think of QAnon adherents as partisan extremists. Instead, preachers of political extremism of this form tend to be more psychological, including personalities with traits of “psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism.”⁴⁷ They rate both parties extremely poorly, and call for execution of both Republican and Democratic politicians. MAGA and QAnon memes motivate followers to political action first by engaging them on the level of worldview, of right and wrong, and good and evil. Followers speak fervently at political rallies and in online forums about the veils coming off of their eyes, allowing them to see reality for the first time. They eagerly awaited new “drops” from Q like revelations from God.

⁴⁶ Inte Gloerich, “Speculate – Or Else! Blockchain Memes on Survival in Radical Uncertainty” In *Critical Meme Reader Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, Edited by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw, (Amsterdam Institute Of Network Cultures, 2021) 251.

⁴⁷ Adam M. Enders, Joseph E. Uscinski, Casey A. Klofstad, Stefan Wuchty, Michelle I. Seelig, John R. Funchion, Manohar N. Murthi, Kamal Premaratne, and Justin Stoler. “Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism.” *The Journal of politics* 84, no. 3 (2022): 1846.

In some ways, these religious tendencies could be labeled “intuitive.” They work because, like a meme, they feel good. And yet, there is a strong distinction to be made: QAnon memes distinctly reject the postmodernism lack of an origin. In contrast to the metamodern discourse, which expresses a postmodernism-informed desire for modernist grand narratives, QAnon maintains modernism itself. It insists on universal truth, and believes it, even when no evidence supports it. Both Q-Anon and intuitive, remixed religions are finding new ways to create identity, community, and ritual in place of traditional religions. Yet QAnon names its source of truth directly: Q himself. Like typical Christian religion, the need for one’s source of truth to be “infallible” trumps the need for factual accuracy. When apologetics fall short, one can reverse their argument, and say “it is true because I believe it.” Thus, reality itself becomes plastic, in support of maintaining the spiritual purpose achieved through the grand narrative.

Ironically, the exact sect of culture that brought us to the term “post-truth” very much believe in truth. However, it is a sort of deeper truth, a spiritual narrative that gives purpose, that trumps the “facts,” which become mostly unimportant. In many ways this can be seen as a fulfillment of Andrew Keen’s prophecies, that the ease of misinformation and anti-elitism on Web 2.0 would harm culture beyond repair. It can also be seen as a fulfillment of the kind of religiosity that is distinctly American. Burton points out that in some ways, American Christianity has always been unique in its prioritization of the individual experience over collective tradition.⁴⁸ Building on the protestant cultural innovation of direct access to God through scripture and religious ritual, American Christianity utilized the aesthetic and cult value of religious scripture towards personally affective means. This was mobilized by the merging of the political right with faith, especially under President Reagan in the 1980’s. QAnon followers

⁴⁸ Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 36.

and Trump loyalists consider their political project distinctly Christian, despite the inability to square their own logic with the traditional values of Christianity as drawn from the life of Christ.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez traces the ways the figure of Jesus has been morphed into a more politically expedient symbol in *“Jesus and John Wayne.”*⁴⁹ Depending on one’s political views, Jesus is either a hypermasculine, independent, outlaw Cowboy, or a peace-loving pacifist. By appealing to tradition and authoritative scripture with the origin point of God himself, both adherents get to claim their Jesus not as an interpretive reading, but as actually demonstrably true. As with Q-Anon, it is near impossible to convince one that the other is true if it does not agree with their own experiential sense of the world and right and wrong. True believers abandon their relationships and sever family ties before abandoning the “truth” that they are unable to admit is an intuitive choice that suits their needs. Today, Donald Trump pushes this “manifestation” of reality to its limits, arguing his own truth in court against the facts that disagree with him.

As illustrated through the Source Meme, a sense of “debate fatigue” is widely felt. Misinformation moves quickly and easily, and sources cater more and more to their already established audience. The need to track down information to its roots and verify it is exhausting, laborious, and often does not end up being persuasive in changing one’s ideas. Whether or not we indulge our withdrawal fantasies, it is clear that people want a way out of this trap. Those who grew up with the internet do not know another way, and yet they express desire for one.

In relation to the game-like selection of reality, Walt Anderson makes comparisons to constructivist therapy, in which it is the therapist’s goal to “identify the plot that governs the patient’s life and to see if a more positive one can be constructed- and believed in, and lived

⁴⁹ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne : How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

by.”⁵⁰ This requires the difficult acknowledgement that reality itself is a constructed fiction. Q-Anon is unable to make this acknowledgment, as insistence on ultimate truth and knowable origin creates their sense of urgency and call to violent action. Gen Z’s memetic negotiations, on the other hand, lay bare this complicated (and at times contradictory) process. They are constantly externally exploring the plot, and internally trying out new models of spiritual orientation with truth (or lack thereof).

⁵⁰ Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be* (Harper Collins, 2009).

Memetic Methodologies

In the same way as visual art, memes can be, (and are, as previously demonstrated) subjected to standard practices of visual and biographical analysis. However, in their deferment of authorship across networks, they complicate traditional methods. They also rely on irony to simultaneously complicate and dismiss their own claims. How can one take seriously the implications of these claims that are made with unclear levels of sincerity? a statement about truth that so obviously refuses to take itself seriously? What does it reflect about the real lived experiences of 21st century Americans? And how does it stand in contrast to opposite conceptions of truth, like Q-Anon?

Early scholarship on memes, from theorists like Dawkins or Shifman gave us a rudimentary understanding of the meme as an idea that spreads through imitation, like a virus. While applicable to much human culture or behavior, the concept has been most universally applied to the understanding of internet culture, where packets of visual information are endlessly copied, remixed, reshared, and disseminated. In the years since, the term “meme” is more likely to *first* be recognized as referring to internet memes, and can retroactively be applied to social behavior, or culture. In the effort to treat memes as serious artifacts of visual culture, there is a temptation to over-rely on the success of Dawkins’ and Shifman’s concepts in defining this online-phenomenon. Similar to ethnographic artifacts and works of art, there are few strategies for analyzing meaning and function of particular memes: including, most notably, uncovering and documenting its trajectory back to its point of origin. By focusing on *imitation*, and *evolution*, the project of analyzing a meme can be understood as tracing a network of imitators back to their source, to their point of origin, in order to understand them. This is the etymological approach.

Take, for example, the online database KnowYourMeme. While the *actual* histories of memes are decentralized across a mostly untraceable array of instagram pages, reddit threads, youtube comments, and even closed groups, KnowYourMeme attempts to provide a few key moments in the life of a meme that give insight into its meaning, or explain the joke. This often includes where the actual image (if there even is one) comes from, as well as the referenced social media lore or viral content that could explain the commentary. While this is a useful database for documenting moments of meme-culture (as cited to explain what might be the first iteration of the Source meme) it could be argued that KnowYourMeme is less useful at decoding actual *meaning* of how the meme functions, especially over time and place. In the *Journal of Internet Histories*, Pettis argues that this approach narrativizes a distinctly non-linear process, and denies the embedded polysemy which makes memes stand apart for other modes of communication and expression.⁵¹ As internet historiographers look to KnowYourMeme for information, their work becomes homogenous and inaccurate.

Another example is the documentary “Feels Good Man,” tracing the path of perhaps the most infamous (and influential) meme of our era, Pepe the Frog, from silly comic cartoon character to mascot for the alt-right. While the narrative arc of the doc revolves around the artist Matt Furie’s attempt to reclaim and redeem his creation, the connection between Pepe as an icon and his origin (Furie himself) is tenuous. Pepe worked for his plasticity, but ultimately, anything could have been chosen as the vessel which fulfilled his use function. This becomes more obvious as the end of the documentary shows the character’s use in amplifying the voices of collective action protests in Hong Kong. Pepe ends up an example of the opposite. His meaning is always negotiated in the present amongst networks for which he is useful, never by the author.

⁵¹ Ben T. Pettis, “Know Your Meme and the Homogenization of Web History.” *Internet histories* (2017) 6, no. 3 (2022): 264.

This approach is mirrored in attempts to understand Q-Anon itself. HBO's *Q: Into the Storm* documentary revolves around tracing the origin of Q, including who Q actually is, and how the conspiracy theories began to spread. The headline of one opinion piece states this erroneous approach directly: "HBO's QAnon Documentary Searches for Q's Origins but Misses the Point."⁵² Like KnowYourMeme, or Pepe, the attempt to narrate the outgrowths of decentralized networks misrepresent and oversimplify the complicated psychological and material conditions at work within them and because of them.

As of late, there are new theoretical approaches to take seriously the messy, undefinable forms and functions of memes. The Institute of Network Culture publishes work on "Viral Image Culture" including so-called "critical meme theory, emoji studies, TikTok analysis, and Instagram counter-strategies."⁵³ Their Critical Meme Readers bring together leading voices on the cutting edge of meme-theory. By pulling together different academic and theoretical approaches to different memes, formats, social platforms, etc., the readers demonstrate the need for highly specified strategies. Rather than isolate memetic output and project a narrative life into the past and future, they tend to focus instead on the specific networks within which provisional meaning can be understood.

The essays create new analyses that don't over-rely on Dawkins and Shifman's rudimentary evolutionary definitions. However, they also tend to be a bit more complicated. Throughout the first and second Critical Meme Reader, memes are interrogated based on their use, which varies depending on their temporality. Instead of limiting them to memetic remixes of

⁵² Sam Thielman, "HBO's QAnon Documentary Searches for Q's Origins but Misses the Point," *NBC News*, last modified March 21, 2021, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/hbo-s-qanon-documentary-q-storm-searches-its-origins-misses-ncna1261661>.

⁵³ "Viral Image Culture | About," *Networkcultures.org*, last modified 2024, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://networkcultures.org/viralimageculture/about/>.

visual culture, they can be treated as outsider art, folk art, neo-dadistic art, as well as language, religion, and virus. Different approaches are informed by the way they operate. They are useful because they resist approaching memes based on their forms (and their origins), and instead start with their functions. This teleological approach is more appropriate effective.

For instance, theorists tend to classify their subject based on a sort of open-ended affective register. This is sometimes platform specific, but not always. Jordi Viader Guerrero writes about the discourse on what they call *Theorygram*: the loose collection of theory-focused Instagram meme accounts.⁵⁴ The subject of study is not a singular meme, but in this case, the networks of Instagram users who post memes about theoretical texts and philosophers. The meme can be studied by looking at multiple memes in this register and better understanding the group identity of co-creators and *why* they post *what* they post; not what the memes autonomously mean, but their purpose for the community from which they emerge.

Josh Citarella writes about what he calls *Politigram*. In these political instagram meme pages, young, often radical, posters identify with micro-niche and fringe political ideologies. They utilize similar strategies as Q-Anon circles, introducing users to the next stages of radicalization and shifting their political goals subtly. For instance, a republican might end up identifying as an anarcho-capitalist, and a democrat may end up an accelerationist eco-terrorist.⁵⁵ In contrast to QAnon, Citarella notes that in these cases, these radicalized individuals are most often too young to formally participate in democracy. While their posts may influence general politics by shifting the Overton window, their posts are more obviously for the sake of selecting outsider political identities that reflect dissatisfaction with the times. While Citarella does cite

⁵⁴ Jordi Viader Guerrero. "Memeing Reading // Reading Memeing." In *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image* edited by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw, (Amsterdam Institute Of Network Cultures, 2021) 260.

⁵⁵ Joshua Citarella, *Politigram & the Post-Left*, 2021.

calls for political violence (in one case, memes that teach one how to make a bomb) the majority of posters on Politigram become more moderate as they get older and participate in society more fully.

A less specific example of this sort of affective register is the generalized classification of memes, such as “depression memes,” cited earlier, as well as absurdist memes, or art criticism memes. Absurdist memes play on the expectation of a joke and subvert their form, in a sort of nihilistic rejection of meaning in general. Art lovers will be familiar with art criticism meme Instagram accounts, such as @stolenartifacts, @artreviewpower100 and @freeze_magazine, which have democratized institutional critique and given voice to the common sentiment from artists (and art lovers) that something is deeply wrong with traditional art institutions. With combined hundreds of thousands of followers, the ability to orient networks around these sentiments has empowered memetic criticism to expand into real world institutions, one example being @freeze_magazine’s (known as Cem A. in real life) curatorial practice built off his online persona. “Cem has been tapped by high profile institutions, including the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark and the Barbican in London to realize IRL projects that toe the line between digital culture, museum outreach, and conceptual art, in clever ways.”⁵⁶

Alongside Theorygram, politgram, art criticism pages, depression memes, and absurdist memes, networks are built specifically around memes that communicate intuitive spiritual affects. While their references vary, their thematic content is oriented around voicing contemporary spiritual sentiments that do not rely on sincere religious expression or traditions. @Afffirmations creates and posts memes that function like manifestations to an audience of over a million followers. Their images tend to reflect cynically on the promises of capitalism.

⁵⁶ Artnet News, “The Artist behind the Art World’s Most Viral Memes,” *Artnet News*, last modified January 11, 2024, <https://news.artnet.com/multimedia/the-artist-behind-the-art-worlds-most-viral-memes-2418051>.

Glowing hotels, beachfront properties, and sportscars are oversaturated and glowing like heavenly bodies. Yet, the textual commentary doesn't manifest wealth or capitalistic success, but shines a light on people's deep insecurities, as well as their desires for a less miserable life. "My brain has the ability to experience genuine happiness." "Studying is fun and meaningful." "Healthy food tastes so good in my mouth." "I am not plagued by irrational anxiety" and "I play a HUGE role in this crazy world"(Fig. 10). Highly specific arrays of memes are posted in batches, elevating the ability to feel seen and repost the manifestations one seeks for their own life. By vocalizing and "setting intentions," they are simultaneously optimistic in their insistence on betterment, and defeatist in their acknowledgement that something is deeply wrong, and there is not much one can do about it.

@Venerealdisneys posts absurdist images with text that confuses and disorients religious and philosophical truisms. A man stands the walls of a gravitron fair ride, suspended horizontally with the text "I overthink therefore I over am." An iMac computer is submerged in a bathtub with the text "How'd ppl ever survive without a bunch of shit they don't need?" A young boy balances on just two fingers with the text "Not religious, just locked tf in" (Fig. 11).

@ineedgodeverymomentofmylife collects the detritus of ultra-sincere Christian content online and reposts it mostly unaltered. By shifting the context alone, sincere content is rendered completely ironic and absurd, reflecting a cynical distrust of religion, and perhaps a quiet jealousy of the ability to entirely devote oneself to an unprovable belief. One image features a portrayal of Jesus in a field next to a woman on an iPhone. The caption reads "Jesus loves women with tattoos, debt, and a past."(Fig. 12). Here, the original poster's watermark remains: "@ahomemakersmanifesto."

@You.are.another.me does the same with eastern philosophical content, but combines it with commentary that seems to make fun of it. Again, there is a sense that these religious truisms and spiritual proverbs are so ridiculous that they are ironic, and yet, they communicate honest sensibilities. An artistic reimagining of a swirling galaxy is accompanied by “I have access to the multiverse and the universe because I have access to my inner self.” An illustration of a man in therapy expresses: “I wish we could create a society that wasn’t inherently soul-crushing.” His therapist answers: “best I can do is pills that trick your brain into thinking you don’t hate it here” (Fig. 13).

Together, the affective output of these meme pages could be labeled *Spiritgram*.

Relatability and the Existential Turn

Spiritgram is a thriving example of the existential bent of “meme content” in recent years. Early internet memes were mostly relatable observations, simple jokes, or viral videos (that often functioned a lot like the clips on America’s Funniest Home Videos). They were shared because they got a laugh or made a relatable point. Memes today might still get a laugh and make a relatable point. The point, however, is much more likely to be existential in nature: A critique of modern society, or a cry for help. The rhetorical goals of early internet memes were mostly irony: a cartoon or an image accompanied by some text, that together painted a funny scenario or witty observation. They placed us inside of a specified “relatable” moment, and then never expanded outwards. They tended towards inside jokes and commented on shared knowledge or experiences of groups. In an investigation into the political content of young Chinese internet users, Guobin Yang cites play as a distinctly political act.

“It is against this culture of official-centricity that the Internet culture of humour and play assumes special significance. Play has a spirit of irreverence. It always sits uncomfortably with power.... Much online activism, and much Chinese Internet culture in general, is enlivened with this spirit [the spirit of play]”⁵⁷

Similarly, the fact that memes rely first and foremost on “relatability” means that they help one construct their perception of reality by seeing it reflected back at them. Wherein ideas and words are first external, relatable memes externalize difficult to express, internal, sensual experiences. When one sees this type of meme and relates to it, they identify themselves within a network of perspectives similar to their own. Thus, even *before* memes were primarily used to

⁵⁷ Marcella Szablewicz, “The ‘Losers’ of China’s Internet: Memes as ‘Structures of Feeling’ for Disillusioned Young Netizens.” *China information* 28, no. 2 (2014): 259–275.

express existential truths (or lack of truths), they were more effective at capturing what it feels like to be a human in the world than more traditional media. Florian Schlittgen cites Television as an earlier form of “relatable” media. Domestic-set sitcoms were built around the attempt to create connectedness through common experiences and feelings: falling in love, settling family disputes, joking with co-workers. Sitcoms necessarily rely on modernist conventions that memes abandon: clean narratives, fixed and normative identities, family values, moralistic lessons. Instead, memes capture much deeper, perhaps *realer* affects by not needing them to fit within a modernistic structure. What interests Schlittgen are memes that “give feelings a shared attention, one that has not been normatively captured, feelings that are too ephemeral, even too banal, to stand in as identity markers or character traits. In very few cases are these long-lasting emotions, but rather fleeting and ambivalent affects that are difficult to classify and have their place in the everyday situations and constellations.”⁵⁸ Like the feeling of withdrawing cash without knowing how much money is in your checking account, the feeling of being at a friend’s house when their family starts arguing, or the feeling of being drawn towards online shopping to create a dopamine hit.

If memes are already more effective at affirming the deep interior sensations, it stands to reason that they would evolve to reflect the difficult-to-express feeling of being online in the 21st century and evolve into the primary medium for negotiating widespread existential crises. Today, Memers ask the biggest philosophical questions possible- about reality, society, and spirituality. They reveal themselves in the process. And in contrast to philosophers or academics asking these same questions, memers laugh at their own answers. Existential memes are allowed to be full of

⁵⁸ Florian Schlittgen, “You’ll Never Feel Alone – Thoughts on Relatability.” In *Critical Meme Reader: Global Mutations of the Viral Image*, edited by Chloë Arkenbout, Jack Wilson, and Daniel De Zeeuw, (Amsterdam Institute Of Network Cultures, 2021) 285.

paradoxes and contradictions. They are at once sincere and ironic, skeptical and romantic, cynical and spiritual. They are also literally personalized by unique timelines and algorithms. No two meme-consumers are likely to see the exact same catered menus of existentially aware memes. Instead, our nuanced, inexplicable interiors are mapped onto an ever-evolving network of expressions that do little to unify or mobilize, despite creating the sensation of connectedness and relatability. Like the ever-expanding galaxy brain, their scope gets bigger and bigger the more they drill into the psyche.

It is primarily within the context of *Spiritgram* that the Source Meme was created. Upon achieving success through remixes and shares, it expanded outwards virally, making its way onto the feeds and timeline of all kinds of internet users.

PART II

A Typology of Sources

Religious ritual shows up in secular community-oriented projects like social justice, fandom culture, wellness culture, as well as distinctly spiritual (or identity-based) beliefs like astrology, witchcraft, ethical non-monogamy, and psychedelic drug use. However, what today's remixed religions have in common is their rejection of authority and unifying doctrine. Behaviors are more easily observed and studied than their actual *beliefs*. Religious worldviews as they appear online are not as simple as belief or non-belief. Declarations of spiritual beliefs are replaced by snapshots of affective negotiations across decentralized networks. If we are culturally Post-Truth, what has taken its place?

By comparing and contrasting variations on the Source Meme, we can develop a typology of memetic negotiations of all the elements at work in this thesis: the problem of the origin, post-postmodern cultural modes, inability to affect change amongst dominant capitalism, and the need to express and satisfy spiritual desire while rejecting religious authorities. Through this typology, we might be able to understand how and where “religious nones” express a sense of truth, or rather, what truths are more significant and useful than other truths. These types can also be used to categorize real-world participation in society from groups that are under-represented by traditional forms, like political and religious affiliation. Examples will be shared from outside this particular memetic format to illustrate an affective register- that the sentiment shows up in memetic culture at large, and voices a legitimate sensation throughout culture. Then I will attempt to address the ways these source effects “irl” priorities and values- whether,

despite their irony, they actually provide insight into how one thinks of their reality throughout the minutia of their life.

The top text across the typology remains the same. “Source?” The bottom texts provide variations, which read as follows, and will be analyzed in this order.

First, “It was revealed to me on my little walk.”

Then, “God’s Divine Light”

“It was revealed to me in a dream.”

“I told me.”

And lastly, “I made it up.”

The primary commonality across the typology is the ironic context of the joke: an internet debate in which the subject has made some claim. An unidentified other is skeptical of their claim, and begins to engage in debate by verifying or debunking their source. The Source Meme Typology not only provides options of where one sources personal brands of truth, but it provides strategies for withdrawing from the exhausting clash of Web 2.0 style debates, in which two distinct perspectives, from two irreconcilable identities across space and time, with no shared context of debate, are pitted against one another with thousands of anonymous onlookers. Instead of engaging by making a bad-faith argument, or citing biased new sources, they reject the invitation to debate entirely. In doing this, they not only free themselves from the laborious burden of proving themselves correct to an audience who will likely end up rejecting their claims anyway, but they also refuse to cast the temporal relationship as oppositional. Protecting an inner sense of peace is prioritized over winning the argument, (Fig. 32). There is also an implication that one is actually superior to the debate itself, as illustrated by the tendency of these memes to reference some sort of ascension, or higher plane of knowledge.

Source 1: Nature

The first Source meme sources its truth from nature: “it was revealed to me on my little walk” (Fig. 4). Thus, truth is provisional and mystical: it is found beyond the influence of conventions and is experienced inwardly and intuitively. This type illustrates not only a desire to withdraw from an internet debate, but from the internet itself.

This desire to withdraw is a fantasy with the function of quelling the deep sense that something is wrong. Its appeal is thoroughly expressed on social media across generations, and across memetic formats. For example: “You know a mf hit rock bottom when they start going for walks and appreciating the little things in life,” (Fig. 14). Here, withdrawal is seen as an obvious symptom of one’s life going poorly. They have tried everything else and are left empty. By returning to nature even in the small context of a little walk, they can get in touch with themselves and “appreciate the little things” in their life. To return to nature is a reset.

Both “little walk” memes appeal to spiritual values that stand in direct opposition to capitalism, especially online. Studies show that most social media users consider it harmful, admitting that it creates feelings of inadequacy through compulsive comparison with others. This is particularly true for young women, who are much more likely to report debilitating depression during their teenage years.⁵⁹ From ads for virtual therapy, to wellness products, to entertaining distractions, social media provides a constant stream of remedies for unhappiness. This meme suggests what the forces of capital will almost never suggest: going offline and appreciating the things that can’t be bought and sold. It also provides us an optimistic safety net in its promise of withdrawal. If things don’t work out, one can always return to nature. Even the momentary

⁵⁹ Jean M Twenge, *IGen : Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What This Means for the Rest of Us)* (New York, Ny: Atria Paperback, 2017) 103.

withdraw, “the little walk” becomes a peak into a world without the nag of social media, where perhaps we can be free on individual, experiential level if not systemic.

The call to nature as both a source of constancy and an alternative path appeals to older internet users as well. “Who else wants to shut their phone off, drive to the mountains, and just enjoy peace?” (Fig. 15). This example follows the characteristics of a boomer meme in a few ways. It is the most basic format- text on an image. It is not ironic or self-referential to its form. There is no joke. Instead, it sincerely expresses this same desire to unplug and withdraw, and the same sense that the world today is unnatural and unsatisfying.

Similarly, “You’re telling me they someone made wifi out of this?” (Fig. 16) critiques the absurdity of modern life in general. Here too, we are also placed in the context of someone stepping out into nature for a little walk. Struck by the disconnect between nature and modern life, they question the unknowability of the historical path that led us to our technological present. All of human history is called into question and rendered absurd and arbitrary. In succinct and relatable language, it is essentially an open-ended ideological critique. It calls awareness to the fact that all conventions we experience as natural are actually simulacra of conventions reinforced over time. They can be questioned and even rejected. The problem of the origin is made explicit.

The relationship between technology and mysticism is also embedded in this meme. Billions of dollars go into making user interfaces so obvious that even young children can navigate them, but the interior cause-and-effects relationships that create our contemporary life are mostly obscured. For instance, one knows how to scroll, like, and comment, but not how an

algorithm determines what content is brought into the timeline.⁶⁰ The trajectory of the “black box” is especially true with Artificial Intelligence, which even its creators have little understanding of. This meme doesn’t just target AI, but the alienation of contemporary life in general. Not only are iPhones a window into a magical world, but they materialize in front of us like magic too. The labor and resource-mining that created them are mostly invisible. This particular meme does not go so far as to make a Marxist critique, and yet, it does ask us to critically interrogate contemporary life on several levels. It lacks a call to action, and yet, one could read optimism into it as well. If we can harness the power of magic, shouldn’t it be harnessed to better ends? To make a less miserable world? As is common, the question is gestured towards, and the answer is lacking. Perhaps in the meantime it is best to be aware, and tune in to the natural world.

These withdrawal desires are not limited to memetic fantasizing. We talk about social media as a social space, but it could just as easily be described as a marketplace. Everywhere you look, users are trying to capture your attention and hold onto it, and monetize it. The desire to be offline is capitalized just the same. Take the Youtube and Instagram trend of #Vanlife. Influenced also by minimalism, content creators perform their withdrawal to nature for those who fantasize about picking up and leaving their jobs, homes, and perhaps families. Their content often provides a blueprint for others to for the same. They talk about safety on the road, their van build, minimalist packing, etc. Of course, the irony here is extreme, as these influencers’ entire lives revolve around their social media. They carry tripods and ring lights

⁶⁰ Kevin de Souza, “Opening up Digital Players’ Black Boxes: The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information, by Frank Pasquale.” *Church, Communication and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2020): 136–39. doi:10.1080/23753234.2020.1713012.

everywhere they go. They travel to photogenic locations, talking to you through their camera. At best, you get to escape with them, or pretend to.

This is an example of what critic Ben Davis describes as ‘Parasocial Aesthetics’, in which online content (and sometimes art) allows consumers to vicariously experience that which they lack: from genuine human interaction (drawing strangers on the subway, in Davis’s example) to living unrestrained on the open road.⁶¹ These aesthetic modes are born out of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with contemporary life.

In this case of #VanLife, though, what is being romanticized is a material placelessness that mirrors the dematerialization of identity online. To live in one’s car is to reject a point of origin, and to give one’s self over to continual adaptation to temporal location. In another way, this could be seen as admission that the promises of capitalism, for instance, home-ownership, do not actually offer freedom, but exploitation and burden. Instead, one can choose luxury homelessness, and opt-out of traditional expectations (and maybe even make a living by live-streaming it.)

Other alternative trends towards a simpler, more natural lifestyle include #TradWife culture and forklift memes. Like the Gigachad lumberjack, Forklift memes romanticize an alternative to personal branding and content creation through unseen physical labor. Being “forklift certified” is treated as a badge of honor, marking one’s ability to withdraw from the attention economy and be a blue-collar worker in a factory or warehouse. These memes are particularly embraced by leftist meme pages, while #TradWife content performs traditional

⁶¹ Ben Davis, “The World’s Most Popular Painter Sent His Followers after Me Because He Didn’t like a Review of His Work. Here’s What I Learned,” *Artnet News*, last modified October 19, 2023, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/devon-rodriguez-parasocial-aesthetics-2380960>.

gender roles, promising withdrawal to an imagined natural order of the past, where fulfillment comes from submission to patriarchy and domestic labor.

In this Source meme, Post-Truthism has rendered all man-made institutions of knowledge untrustworthy, and the subject opts for truth that is personal and intuitive, yet external, and provisional. It occurs on a whim, primary as an internal feeling brought on by a physically grounded, yet mystically, relationship with the natural world.

Source 2: God (or, a spiritual ‘other’)

The second strategy is to cite a spiritual “other,” in this case, “God’s divine light,” (Fig 17). In this meme, the text is accompanied by an image of a shadowy silhouette in the forest, haloed by a glowing spiritual aura. Here, God is useful in his hierarchical position of authority. By citing personal revelation directly from God, one can feign their claim as authoritative without needing to engage in debate or prove it factual. This mirrors the strategies of Q-Anon and MAGA ideologies, which attribute themselves to God directly, and the deity-like Q.

This reflects the way God shows up in memetic culture at large, standing in for both the cause of our suffering (a person to blame) and also a way out (a path to salvation). Functionally, it is an exterior validation of internal sensibility, perhaps modeled off of the Christian value of a personal relationship with God. In another meme, an image of a woman in terror cries out, alongside the text “I am so normal about god” (Fig. 18). Here, spiritual commune with God (or one’s perception of God) is cast as schizophrenic and compulsive, and yet incredibly sincere. Similarly, “Nothing a desperate, guttural prayer to God can’t fix” is overlaid on an image of a stick figure on his knees, (Fig. 19). Rather than a normative depiction of piety, the scene is rendered in childlike scribbles, and the room is full of a chaotic and threatening energy that

surrounds and consumes the subject. In this, God is cast as a personification of one's unhealthy inner life. He is a location to direct one's feelings of spiritual need, desires, and existential pain. In the same way Jesus is either a symbol of conservative traditionalism or hippie pacifism, God becomes a projection of one's one conception of themselves. He is God, and he is also us, and yet, we are not God. "Not arguing with the voices in my head- whatever you say god," (Fig. 20).

Like the claim to nature, here, truth is external. Yet, the theological means by which one might receive God's light are unclear. Two art historical images from the Christian tradition come to mind: Bellini's *St. Francis in Ecstasy* and Caravaggio's *Conversion of Paul*. For Saint Francis, religious ecstasy comes from ascetic withdrawal from society and pursuit of humble piety. For St. Paul, God's Divine light shines upon him despite his own opposition to God, and converts him. Regardless, the self is cast as a prophet with direct connection to divine truth, and without need for intermediary authority or hierarchy in any regard. There is no resulting demand to live according to religious or moral code at all. There is no prescriptive action, only pure revelation, again, mirroring the manifestation of information online.

The ideological critique exists here, too. By citing God as the source of personal knowledge, the idea of the origin is again made explicit. The modernist project of tracing Western history to its origin necessarily runs into the Bible as a primary source. Even today, conservative appeals to "Judeo-Christian values" are common. The meme-poster here problematizes this assertion by asking it to be taken seriously across the board. If culture can be built upon spiritual revelation, so can anything. The same tactic is employed personally, thus creating a new origin-less spiritual reality in the present.

Citing "God's Divine Light," provides religious none's a diagonal strategy to the primary strategies deployed by the highly religious. On exactly the same time, their truth is intuitive and

personal, yet backed by the highest spiritual authority, again trumping man-made institutional sources. Here, truth is allowed to be BOTH provisional, AND definitive.

Source 3: Dreams

The next source meme utilizes a common image format amongst this affective register: Dr. Manhattan from *The Watchmen* comic, (Fig. 21). This is the image upon which the remaining examples of the typology are built. Like the Gigachad from the Nature meme, which represents a physical and intellectually superior position, Dr. Manhattan represents a superiority through personal ascension. In the comic, his character is born out of a lab experiment that grants him the ability to interact with and control subatomic matter, leading towards his wielding of god-like omnipotent power. Here, the ascension is made literal, as he rises in the air at the disbelief of an onlooker, or perhaps a foe. In the memetic context, he rises to overpower his online debate opponent, or whoever has questioned his claims, delivering his source: “It was revealed to me in a dream.” In this appeal to esoteric revelation in dreams, the user goes further than casting themselves as a prophet receiving divine inspiration from God. Instead, they actually become a god, with direct inward access to higher metaphysical realities.

An interaction on reddit (distributed as a meme) satirizes the academic need to cite sources in the first place, by attempting to follow specific citation format. The Reddit thread’s title reads “How to cite dream/hallucination in APA 7th?” They clarify: “I want to cite something that was revealed to me in a vision in one of my research papers. But I do not know how to cite it” (Fig. 22). With the integration of internet information to education, the issue of legitimate and illegitimate sources has been a continual debate between students and their instructors. ‘Wikipedia does not count as a source’ was a refrain repeated every time homework

was assigned. Now, the Redditor asserts that not only does Wikipedia count as a source, but so do one's personal intuitions and experiences in dreams.

Another example also cites hallucination, (Fig. 23). By labeling the revelation as a hallucination rather than a dream, there is an explicit acknowledgement that one's lived experiences may not be factual. This gets directly to questions about perception and reality as highlighted by both the pitfalls of Web 2.0, and the dissatisfaction with the material world. As one's lived experience feels increasingly nonsensical, and the digital world game-ifies every aspect of one's identity and social life, reality itself is rendered as dreamlike. Dreams are regularly used in memes to express this sentiment. Online, one continually manifests in new spaces without knowing how they arrived there, or where they are going, guided only by the subconscious and algorithmic input. Fact and fantasy become blurred to the point of amalgamation. Experientially, reality (or the perception of it) is untrustworthy, nonlinear, and illogical- it oscillates between intensely felt emotional states like euphoric bliss and nightmarish terror.

This sensation is emboldened by the scientific acceptance of simulation theory. Adherents literally conceive of their reality as a virtual game that, despite experienced as real, is ultimately fictional. The impact of this belief is felt much more broadly than the niche true believers. The phrase "the simulation is breaking" was a widespread and common expression to illustrate this sense. Similarly, "Just another filler day in a reality that is not canon," (Fig. 24) highlights the feeling that there is no longer an official narrative, only unofficial offshoots. This distrust of reality and resulting gamification is made most obvious with Q-Anon, which creates a LARP (live action role play) hero quest, that intentionally leans into this blurring of reality and

fantasy. Instead of this, memers cope through acknowledgement, and attempt to remain ‘the dreamer,’ controlling the dream as much as possible.

In another example, the meme subject compares their own dream life to that of F.B.I. Agent Dale Cooper from David Lynch’s cult classic TV series *Twin Peaks*, (Fig 25). In the show, Lynch gives the viewer access to Cooper’s dreamlife, which is full of “cryptic symbolism” that he utilizes to solve a murder. His pursuit of this esoteric knowledge is at times intentional, involving absurd rituals (that he credits to Tibetan Buddhism). Other times, it arrives uninvited. His dreams play out as dreams often do, like nonsensical theater. However, the characters that populate these scenes (some good, some evil, some neither) are not dream figments, but entities from some deeper reality that overlaps his own. As they move back and forth between worlds, the veil between them is increasingly unreliable. Instead of Cooper’s dreams helping him decode the natural world, they lead him on a mystical journey through esoteric spirit worlds. In the process, the material world becomes stranger, and there are more questions than answers. One assumes that there is a unifying spiritual logic that guides the lore of the show. And yet, it never comes fully into focus. Like Cooper, the viewer is left always looking for patterns and trying to make sense of disparate and confusing events.

This mirrors the difficulty of decoding the outputs of the “black box,” which materialize like magic. Desperate for a unifying logic, Q-Anon, or astrology, or numerology, helps people see meaning where perhaps there is none. To name this awareness in memes is to acknowledge it, and perhaps be less susceptible to cultish forces that seek to organize your world, and take advantage of you in the process. Citing cryptic symbolism in dreams allows one to appeal to a higher natural order and try it out. It can be abandoned just as easily, as it ceases to provide a helpful framework.

This meme could also be appealing to Jungian and Freudian notions of dreams as messages from the truer, more foundational plane of the unconscious. “Dreams are impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will. They are pure nature; they show us the unvarnished, natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundations and run into an impasse.”⁶² In this conception, to turn to dreams is also to withdraw from (and critique) conventions by returning to “pure nature.”

This logic shows up in absurdist memes, whose aesthetic approach mirrors that of the surrealists. In the same way that surrealism forfeited waking logic for the sake of digging deep into the subconscious, absurdist memes merge and remix the detritus of the collective subconscious. Here, too, reality is rendered like a dream, and dematerialized digital images float to the surface like visions. One example (from @thesurrealbank) puts the viewer in a nonsensical proposition. An image of a horse standing on four tiny horses asks, “What would you do in this situation?” (Fig. 26). The result is a digital neo-surrealistic and dada-esque effect, which relies on incoherence and illegibility for the sake of both humor and critique.

The ‘Dream’ source differs from the ‘God’ source by leaning into these frameworks of Freud and Jung, and leaving open the possibility that dreams are a deep connection to what is *natural* rather than *spiritual*. And yet, there are consistencies between the two strategies. Historically, dreams have also been cited as trustworthy where material evidence falls short. Take for instance, the ‘spectral evidence’ of the Salem Witch trials, wherein dreams and visions were admitted as key evidence in the prosecution and (and execution) of suspected witches. In another case, KnowYourMeme cites a twitter interaction from 2017 in which a user uncovered

⁶² C.G. Jung and Meredith Sabini, *The Earth Has a Soul : C.G. Jung on Nature, Technology & Modern Life* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

an actual dream citation in print. In *The Divine and the Human*, Russian theologian, philosopher, and Christian existentialist Nikolai Berdyaev includes a footnote that reads “This was once revealed to me in a dream.”⁶³ It’s fitting that Berdyaev wrote about the existential implications of free will. In all these citations, there is no proving that a dream actually occurred, thus, there is not external difference from citing a dream and citing one’s own intuition. Experientially, however, the difference is dramatic and potentially life changing.

This conception of truth is not entirely straightforward. It asserts that truth is both mystical and natural, and both esoteric and intuitive. It can be exterior or interior, depending on one’s interpretation of dreams. It offers empty signifiers, ripe for attribution to whatever ends one sees fit. Like astrology, it is ready at every moment to provide an explanation for the unexplainable or unsatisfactory parts of life. And lastly, because of its location within one’s subconscious, it is catered specifically to one’s own internal and external needs.

Source 4: The Self

The fourth source also utilizes the appropriated image of Dr. Manhattan, but offers (in some ways) a much more concrete source: “I told me” (Fig. 27). This is distinct from claims of Nature, God, and Dreams in that it does not claim an external authority on truth. This type is ultimately distrustful and skeptical. It trusts only one’s own experiences, creating its own reality through thought. In the framework of Descartes’ ‘I think therefore I am,’ reality is also akin to simulation theory, in which one can only prove their own experience, all others could be “NPC’s” (Non-Play Characters) who are programmed to interact like a person, but are only avatars. Withdrawal from debate is achieved not through ascending over it, but by refusing to be

⁶³ “Source? I Made It Up,” *Know Your Meme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/source-i-made-it-up>.

convinced of exterior knowledge at all, no matter the source, and stating that fact openly. This approach is perhaps more antagonistic in its refusal.

In practice, this is similar to the “hook” of relatability that makes memes effective at describing interior and ephemeral sensibilities in the first place. Knowledge is accepted and incorporated when it makes sense. There is no need for research or citations, because one already knows. “I’m not good at explaining or listening, but I’ve mastered the art of already knowing,” (Fig. 28). The awareness is that one shapes their own reality, and yet, they are *not* cast as a godlike force of creation. There is no claim to infallibility or ultimate truth, and no attempt to convince others. Even when one acknowledges their own memory as faulty, they remain aware that they alone shape their reality, and remain unconvinced. “Gaslighting me doesn’t work because I already don’t trust my memory and I don’t actually care what happened,” (Fig. 29).

This awareness also manifests in claims to personal responsibility. In one meme, life itself is cast as a sandwich from subway, (Fig. 30). When one complains that it is dissatisfactory, they are reminded that they constructed it themselves- “you made the assumptions which hardened into beliefs that formed your reality,” (YOU made the sandwich). Here, the individual has responsibility for their own reality, despite the fact that they are largely powerless to shape the material world around them in a way that ultimately benefits them. The function of this system of belief could either be acceptance and fluidity to changing one’s perspective as necessary, OR an escapist attempt to make one’s internal sense of self and being more tolerable.

One might assume this internal authority would make them less likely to fall prey to conspiracies that offer a foundation to build upon. However, it opens the door towards creating one’s own conspiratorial logic by not needing a foundation in the first place. Once again, we can look to Donald Trump as embodying this sort of logic, bordering on manifestation. The

difference between Trump and this meme, though, is that Trump uses repetition and projected confidence in order to *win* debate, instead of avoiding it. He seeks to actually create his internal reality and will it into existence. In this case, the practice is more align to delusional narcissism than an awareness of the self's influence on shaping experience.

This source of truth is revealed to be internal, rather than deferred, and takes responsibility rather than deferring it. However, it is still intuitive, and most likely confirms one's own biases. It is also definitive. It is not changing and cannot be argued. Thus it does not cater to communality, but individuality above all else.

Source 5: the Troll

The last example also utilizes the image of Dr. Manhattan. When asked for a source, the subject reveals: "I made it up," (Fig. 31). Another memetic example takes this same appropriated character, and the same affective point further. "Source? Elaborate! Explain this claim! Debate me!" Dr. Manhattan smites his opponent by simply responding "no," (Fig. 32).

Knowyourmeme cites an interaction on reddit as the origin point for this meme, (despite the fact that people have been "making things up" online since the beginning of internet history). In their example, a Redditor posted an image of actor Bryan Cranston to the "Atheism" subreddit. The image is overlaid with a quote (attributed to Cranston) in which he recalls his religious upbringing with disdain and discusses the harms of imparting spiritual dogmas onto children. Another Redditor asks for a source, and the original poster responds "None, I made it up." THEY wrote the quote, photoshopped it onto the image, and posted it in the forum.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ "Source? I Made It Up," *Know Your Meme*, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/source-i-made-it-up>.

This is the only strategy in the typology defined by antagonism: the troll. Here, the poster does not prioritize their own sense of peace, or knowledge, or biases. Instead, they debate in bad faith in order to prevent it in others. The interaction is fun for the troll, and incredibly frustrating for everyone else. In another example, the fictional cartoon character Patrick Starr personifies the troll, rubbing his hands together like a villain ready to plant the seeds of chaos, (Fig. 33). “I spread misinformation fella- I propagate unverifiable facts, my fella.” The smaller, secondary text reads: “on my *‘missing content, independent fact-checkers say information in this post could mislead people’* shit.”

This poster’s response to a post-truth landscape is to give themselves over to it. Externally, they make no legitimate claim, express no point of view, and accept nothing as true. In doing so, they force others to do the same. Internally, however, they are a mystery. If they did accept a truth, they would not admit it. Therein, they insist a separation from their humanity and their world online, rendered as random and largely meaningless data.

At best, this troll displays a cynical awareness of misinformation (and disinformation) online, and a playful attempt at making others aware of the same. At worst, they contribute to hostility and political division online. To extrapolate outwards, the intentional sewing of chaos is a strategy deployed by accelerationists and extremists on both sides of the political spectrum. In order to bring about the end of current systems, they make this one uninhabitable, making its worst qualities unignorable. In contrast to the other types, the troll does not reveal themselves or appeal to a source of truth. Their withdrawal is not from debate or the internet. Their withdrawal is from a mutual good will for others, against saying something true at all. Thus, they teach a cynical lesson: don’t trust anything.

Conclusion

The first three types, God, Nature, and Dreams, are willing to name an external source from which they draw legitimate knowledge. The last two types, the self and the troll, either decide truth themselves or refuse to acknowledge it at all. Thus, the first three are more akin to representing the spirituality of the religiously unaffiliated, and the others, while not identical, more closely make the selective origins of QAnon (for whom trolling is a central tactic). The first three types engage with the affective problems of post-truthism with self-awareness. They provide alternative pathways to outright rejection of truth. To them, the most trustworthy sources are the ones that are deeply felt, providing functional meaning where traditional sources fail. They are relatable, so much so that one is freed from the burden of explaining them. They accept and acknowledge unnamed mysticism and esoteric knowledge in place of absolutes. The other types, the self and the troll, respond without the same awareness. They allow their truth-claim to control them, at times to destructive ends. Regardless, they are outputs of a cultural landscape in which traditional social systems of meaning (and their hierarchies) are distrusted and unsatisfactory.

Memes are ultimately an effective communication strategy for the present because of their ability to negotiate ironically and sincerely without conflict. The Typology of Source memes resonate so widely for their employment of polysemic paradoxes in general. They allow one to stake a claim and insist that it is true, while denying that it is a collective or universal truth. They allow one to engage in online discourse, but deny any opponent in their debate. They illustrate both the effects of the problem of the origin on one's life, and simultaneously utilize it as their solution. They are pointed social critique of religion, politics, and contemporary life at

large, yet they acknowledge their own necessary reliance on these systems- that any convention they seek to subvert still informs their thoughts and actions. They are an expression that action is mostly useless without expressing hopelessness. They express rich inner spiritual lives of desire, fulfillment, questioning, and longing, yet need not attach them to traditions or preconceived logic.

Ultimately, memes prove the necessity for and functionality of external negotiation of meaning that is always decentralized, temporal, and provisional. It has overthrown the theology of the author and authoritative meaning. Here, one is free to express spiritual desire and intuitive truths without risking “cringe” sincerity or disprovable facts. They may not organize and work towards progressive (or regressive) ends, but they do provide one a framework for being in the present. In the model of construction therapy, they can redefine the plot that guides their internal narrative by returning to nature, connecting with their own personal sense of god, or exploring coded meaning of dreams. They can simply create and inform their own truth. Or, they can ignore the question altogether.

This historical moment is defined by digital networks’ remaking of the world and the individual’s place in it. Like the invention of the printing press or the daguerreotype, the collective project within this context is to negotiate the foundational truths with fresh eyes: What is real? What is true? Who am I? What is my purpose? What is *our* purpose? Where can I find answers? What the 21st century has made undeniable is that there are endless plausible and functional answers to each of these questions. However, the answers handed down from familial tradition, modern religions, or institutional sources are no longer sufficient on their own merit. With postmodern awareness, one identifies that these “answers” are only forceful through performed repetition and constant deference into the past- a past that is only one of endless

counternarratives always debated online. Inability to agree on facts creates an inability to agree on solutions to collective problems, from stagnant wages, to homelessness, to the mental health epidemic, to ineffective political systems, to these deep and personal questions of meaning.

Instead, the contemporary individual takes what little agency to participate in these questions collectively and constantly. The functional roles of different “sources” named in these memes vary. The consistent element is the importance and awareness of their function *first*. Like constructive therapy, memetic negotiation provides a valid and useful way to express complicated affects, especially those mystical in nature. Like constructive therapy, they help one create a more livable life through adjusting the underlying plot. Across this memetic spiritual expression, we see the religious “nones” commitment to evolving spiritualities, to paradoxical truth, and to profound plasticity- not by choice, but out of necessity. And of course, in contrast to traditional religions, they have fun doing it.

Post-truthism is not a result of misinformation online. Instead, it is a phenomenon that has been bubbling up in human culture through history, finally breaching the surface in the 21st century. It doesn't apply only to media literacy or Q-Anon cultists. It is a deep and dominant condition that must be reckoned with in new ways, personally and collectively. One used to base their spirituality on what they were told, or what they believed they could *prove* was true. Now, one wades through a plethora of spiritual realities, prioritizing how they feel intuitively and how they function practically, instead of wasting time debating each one's legitimacy. When theological sources fail, revelation can be found in memes.

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Images



Fig. 1: “Me remembering how I desired when I could have freed myself from the root of all suffering”



Fig. 2: “Is it really possible for a country boy to break the cycle of death and rebirth?”



Fig. 3: “Empiricism? Rationalism? babe we’re doing vibes-base epistemology now”

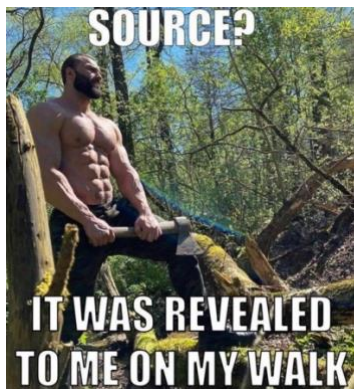


Fig. 4: “Source? It was revealed to me on my walk”



Fig. 5: “who, whom, whom’s, whomst’d”



Fig. 6: “Linkedin, Facebook, Instagram, Tinder”



Fig. 7: “Microdosing hell by waking up every morning”



Fig. 8: “I haven’t had a positive thought in a couple of weeks”



Fig. 9: “Antifa, Liberals, BLM: I Require only that you take a knee. Me: See, that’s gonna be a problem”



Fig. 10: “I play a HUGE role in this crazy world”



Fig. 11: “Not religious, just locked tf in”



Fig. 12: “Jesus loves women with tattoos, debt, and a past.”

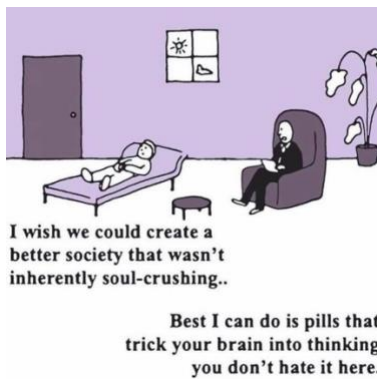


Fig. 13: “I wish we could create a better society that wasn’t inherently soul-crushing… - Best I can do is pills that trick your brain into thinking you don’t hate it here.”



Fig. 14: “You know a mf hit rock bottom when they star going for a walk and appreciating the little things in life”

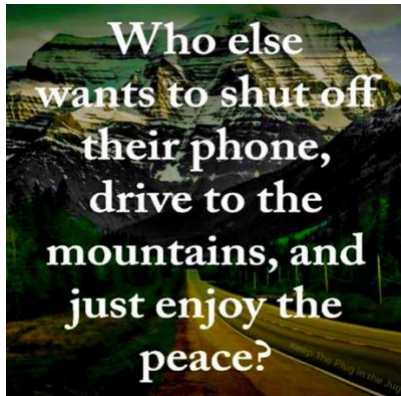


Fig. 15: “Who else wants to shut their phone off, drive to the mountains, and just enjoy the peace?”

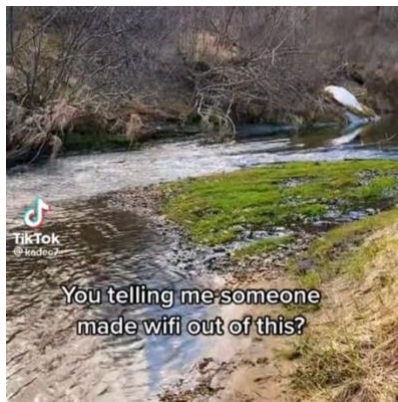


Fig. 16: “You’re telling me someone made wifi out of this?”



Fig. 17: “Source? God’s Divine Light”



Fig. 18: "I am so normal about god"



Fig. 19: "Nothing a desperate, guttural prayer to god can't fix"



Fig. 20: "Not arguing with the voices in my head- whatever you say god"

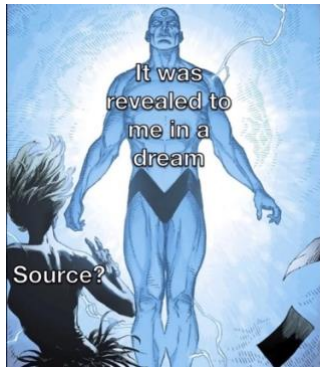


Fig. 21: "Source? It was revealed to me in a dream"

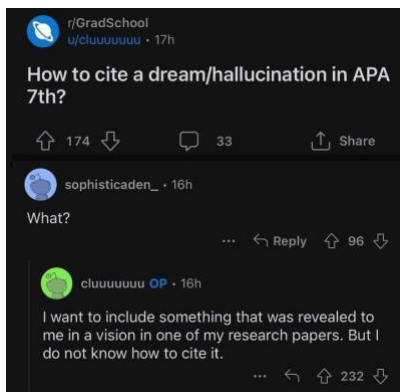


Fig. 22: "How to cite a dream/hallucination in APA 7th?"



Fig. 23: "Source? I hallucinated it"



Fig. 24: “Just another filler day in a reality that is not canon”

*I get my news from the only reliable source,
cryptic symbolism in my dreams*



Fig. 25: “I get my news from the only reliable source, cryptic symbolism in my dreams”

what would you do in the
situation?



Fig. 26: “What would you do in the situation?”



Fig. 27: "Source? I told me"



Fig. 28: "I'm not good at explaining or listening, but I've mastered the art of already knowing"



Fig. 29: "Gaslighting me doesn't work because I already don't trust my memory and don't care what actually happened"

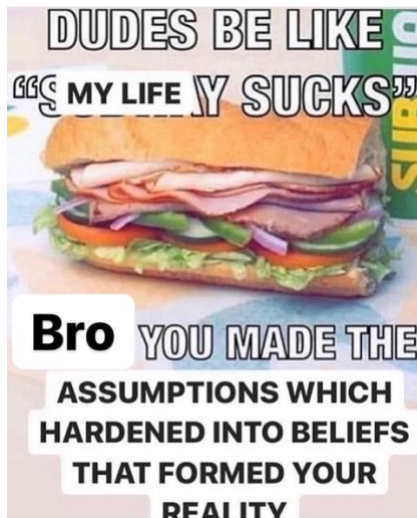


Fig. 30: “Dudes be like ‘my life sucks’ – Bro you made the assumptions which hardened into beliefs that formed your reality”

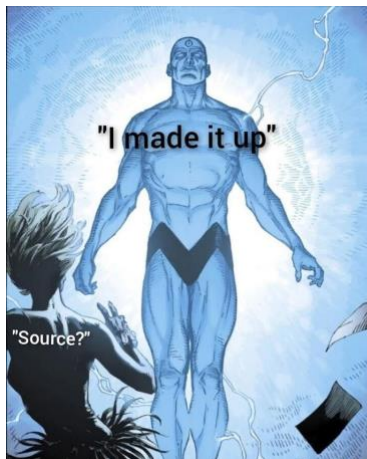


Fig. 31: “Source? I made it up”



Fig. 32: “Source? Elaborate! Explain this claim! Debate me! – ‘no’”



Fig. 33: "I spread misinformation fella. I propagate unverifiable facts my fella"