

Who Run the World? Cats: Cat Lovers, Cat Memes, and Cat Languages Across the Web

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Abstract The paper provides an overview of the macro-isotopy “cat”, a totemic figure disputed between the elitist and often-esoteric subculture related to the origins of Internet and the standardized mass culture permeating social media. Due to its features, “cat” is a cultural unit which is easy to anthropomorphize and iconize, according to a variety of textual practices, including so-called Internet memes (lolcats) and one of the most interesting examples of sign proliferation to date: the creation of a whole new language (lolspeak) based upon systemic misspellings and mistakes.

Keywords Cats · Internet memes · Lolspeak · Semiotics · Transtextuality

Most internet users find it easy to relate to cats (as both are lazy, antisocial, egocentric, never-satisfied cynics that overreact to everything), which is why cats have become the official animal of the internet.
—From the entry “Cat” in *Encyclopedia Dramatica*

1 The Luxuriant Catscape of the Web: A Privileged Point of Observation

On May 7th 2017, the Facebook page of Italian right-wing politician Matteo Salvini, leader of the party called Lega Nord (“Northern League”), was flooded with pictures of cute and funny cats under the battle-cry hashtag #GattinisSalvini

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(“Kittens over Salvini”) (Fig. 1). According to the organizers of the virtual flash mob at Progetto Kitten, by these means the *Felis Catus* became a “messenger of love along the walls of people who took themselves way too seriously”, in the attempt of finding a viral antidote to the massive influence of such public figures. This *reductio ad cattum* was launched to defuse and contrast hate speeches without engaging in a proper political rant and, at the same time, to call for a less serious and more playful Web; a Web run by “the true king of the Internet”, as experts have it: the Cat.¹

This Italian cat-story made of ideology, protest, and laughter can be coherently read as part of a much wider struggle which permeates the entire Web; divided into two opposite factions by two different *regimes of meaning* generating different textual practices (and whole lifestyles), the two-faced Net is based on two incompatible systems of values, operating at the very same time [24]. On the one side, we have *the Internet*,² the heir of the “original Web”, which is set at the peripheries of the online world; the implicated regime of meaning is characterized by the anonymity of the users, by an extremely fluid and evanescent system of relationships, and by a prominent playful and humoristic attitude. On the other side, we have the *Social Web*, set at the very centre of the online *semiosphere* [20] and both built up and capitalised by gigantic corporations; the implicated regime of meaning here takes for granted a strict one-to-one bond between online identities and empiric subjects: in other words, life online is seen as an extension of the “real” one. Playfulness does exist across the Social Web, obviously, but it is seen as an “oasis” [11], whereas its basic semiotic domain is that of seriousness, mimicking everyday-life³: from simple strategies of do-it-yourself *image crafting* to wide and complex political campaigns, we find a variety of online textual practices aiming at “engineering” power of both individuals and groups in “real life”. Despite the presence of dedicated websites, gathering their own dedicated textualities, the two different ways of conceiving and living the Web get often in touch with each other, via reciprocal trespassing or in borderline placements; the consequent conflict usually sees users from the Internet *trolling*—namely, systematically and provocatively making fun of someone, without making explicit the playful, humoristic, parodist or satirical intention—users from the Social Web, triggering surreal attacks such as #Gattinisusalvini and *flamewars* or *shitstorms* (violent discussions filled with personal insults which burst over message boards or comment sections [22]).

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² The syntagm is here used improperly on purpose: it imitates its use within online discourses, indicating the most peculiar part of the Web.

³ Playfulness seems to exist mainly as a contextualized discourse, featured with some appropriate textual markers (cf. the famous “Poe Law”), over the Social Web. If such markers are absent or are not recognized, a given joke, for instance, will be mistaken as something belonging to the *default* semiotic domain (namely, seriousness), with all the subsequent misunderstandings (e.g., taking an article from the satirical website “the Onion” for real news).



Fig. 1 #GattinisuSalvini

Despite its ubiquitous presence across the Web, and despite the progressive “alternativification” of the Social web, on the one hand, and the progressive “mainstreamification” of the Internet, on the other, cats were firstly adopted by and became a symbol—a true totemic animal (Fig. 2)—for the latter, by means of a hugeness of Internet memes [21]. Memes are syncretic texts (they can present a verbal, a visual, and/or an audiovisual component), created through several types and degrees of interventions upon pre-existent texts (extraction, transformation, imitation: they are *hypertexts*, according to Gerard Genette’s typology of transtextuality [16]). Memes are created by following precise rules—one can create a “well-formed” meme, or not, according to their competences—and they are collectively recognized as efficacious with regards to their prominent playful component. They are characterized by the anonymity of the empiric author and by bottom-up routes of spreading (Henry Jenkins talks about “spreadable media” [18]; according to Ruggero Eugeni [10], play is one of the main paradigms within which contemporary media are being “melted”). The formal characteristics of memes clearly show many points of contact with the defining traits of the Internet (anonymity, playfulness, participation, repetition, variation etc.) and make these texts both typical products and key constituents of this area of the Web. The presence of cat memes is conspicuous, with a notable array of famous and historic ones (e.g., *I Can Has Cheeseburger?*, *If it fits I sits*, *Long Cat*, and *Business Cat* etc.) which fit every meme category [21]: *ready-made* (*Grumpy Cat*), *sample* (*Nyan Cat*), *remix* (*Chemistry Cat*), and *remake* (*Cat Beards*). Furthermore, cat memes—lolcats—generated their own language: appropriately called lolspeak.



Fig. 2 Welcome to the Internet

A collective figure travelling across the Web far and wide in all its planes of immanence (fruition and textual production practices, lifestyles, community-building rhetorics, regimes of meaning etc.), cats are incommensurably valuable, heuristically speaking, due to their synthetic capabilities: by studying them, in other words, we can observe and analyse *what is happening online*, around us, every day, from a privileged standpoint.⁴

2 A Short Semio-Ethnography of the Web: *Social Web Versus the Internet*

After such a quick general overview, and before approaching cats on the Web in detail, reviewing single, specific tokens, it might be useful to linger a bit more on the Web *in itself* and its main semiotic features. In particular, we shall make a few remarks on the position of the Web and its users within our cultural system, in the footsteps of Yuri Lotman.⁵

The “original Web” was definitely positioned at the periphery of the semiosphere, as it generally happens to any technological innovation. Its users—

⁴ The Facebook public group “Internet Cat Research Group a/k/a Institute of Kitteh Studies”, counting more than 150 active members (scholars and enthusiasts from around the world), has to be understood in this perspective.

⁵ Other approaches are, of course, possible and have been attempted, the most prominent example being *The Internet Galaxy* by Manuele Castells [5].

most of them already being users of “Usenet” (a precursor of forums) or other Internet services (e.g., e-mail)⁶—were, for the most part, technicians and insiders in computer science (students of cybernetics and engineers) or, more broadly, people who, thanks to their jobs, had the possibility to interact with the first, few, interconnected computers. They constituted a community of practice [7], based on the usage of such technologies and strongly influenced by the *nerd* and *geek* subcultures (which, simplistically speaking, include people extremely keen on—one or more of the following fields of expertise—technology, science, games, comic books, modelling etc.). This peripheral area of the semiosphere acquired precise connotations based on the features of the medium that hosted it in the first place. The insurmountable opacity of the empiric subjects faced within CMC (computer mediated communication) led to forms of interaction that privileged anonymity and pseudonymity (*nicknames*), instead of a one-to-one correspondence with offline personality; in other words, online personas were quite different from the “profiles” introduced by social media in the early noughties. Thus, relationships among Web users tended to be ephemeral instead of durable [1], generally lasting for the time of a one-shot *chat* or limited, in virtual space and real time, to specific boards or websites. For the same reason, as well as for the software and hardware limitations of the epoch, written communication was preferred to the verbal one, with the important addition of visual constructions such as *emoticons* (originally used for disambiguation purposes and born within the aforementioned “Usenet” message board, in 1982).

As time went by, and generations alternated, the Web started steadily moving towards the centre of the macro-sociocultural semiosphere: its users were no more limited to a small circle of specialists, belonging to the same nerdy community, but grew in number and demographic diversity (class, profession, origins etc.). With so-called Web 2.0, the medium became a proper *modelling system* and, from the very heart of the semiosphere, it started influencing culture as a whole, its languages and metalanguages; it introduced neologisms (e.g., “to Google”), altered economic *equilibria* (cf. the growth of Amazon or AirBnB), and conditioned political discourses, marketing strategies, and the very cognitive models we use to understand reality (e.g., the metaphor of the “network”).

This new centrality is also being paired with a change of paradigm, mainly ascribable to the success of *social media*, which radically broke with the classic features of the original Web. In this new virtual space, nicknames almost completely left the field to detailed Facebook profiles and “name.surname” kind of

⁶ It might be useful, at this point, to specify that the Internet (here in its proper, neutral meaning) is the World’s biggest computer network, which allows each terminal to communicate with any other, according to a series of *protocols*. The Web (short for World Wide Web) is a information-sharing model employing the physical network of the Internet and the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP; which is only one of the different “languages” spoken over the Web). The Web is organized into *pages*, that can be visualised on a computer through a Web *browser* (e.g., Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox etc.), as they are formatted in a Hypertext Markup Language (HTML). Some services, such as the e-mails, can be viewed through HTML pages, albeit they use different protocols from HTTP to concretely work.

e-mail addresses, while the written word started being accompanied by pictures (often produced by the users themselves, as in the case of *selfies*), GIF animations, and videos and, thanks to apps such as Viber and Whatsapp, also sounds and voice messages. Finally, the ephemeral interactions have been substituted by “friendship” and “follower/followed” kinds of relationships, which are, at the same time, stable, lasting, and traceable in detail (Facebook, by now, is nothing but a real-time updatable archive of both semantic—words, metadata—and media—images, videos—contents, that can be employed for different purposes).

It would not be correct, however, to claim that the World Wide Web is entirely placed at the centre of the semiosphere. The birth and growth of the Web 2.0 has to be seen more as an *expansion* than a proper *movement*: the Social Web spread like wildfire from the periphery inwards, covering *every* area of the semiosphere and beyond (some areas of the *Deep Web* and the whole *Darknet* can easily be conceived as “heterotopian” or “extra-cultural”). Therefore, the Web as a whole appears as a *cross-section* of the semiosphere [24], encompassing all its areas and hosting both central and peripheral texts and practices. A map of the Web, drawn according to the hierarchies of the semiosphere, would place the websites and apps whose importance extend their influence beyond the “online life” (Google, YouTube, Facebook, Amazon, Instagram, Twitter etc.) at its centre. These websites actively promote a rhetoric of transparency [25] and offer services based on the continuity between online and offline life. This, together with the fact that they appeal to a very wide and diverse user-base, secures their central position.

In the medium range, we would place a multitude of websites dedicated to various activities and topics: successful blogs, commercial sites, pages of public agencies or private companies, and so on; a rather heterogeneous group that covers the majority of the contents of the Web, so that it would be quite complex to describe it further. At any rate, these websites have often wide but specialised user bases, selected by their interests (in the case of blogs and commercial sites), their location (University websites, PA sites...) and so on and so forth. This prevents them from being central, but not to have a (limited) influence over their users.

Finally, at the peripheries of the Web, we can gather all those websites that preserved many of the features of the original Web and that, albeit fairly unknown to the masses, proudly stand as semiotically “producerly” (in Jenkins’ terminology) and innovative; as it is expected in *border* areas, according to Lotman. We can find here, for instance, image boards such as *4chan* and *8chan*, forums such as *Gaia Online*, and online encyclopaedias such as *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

Centre and periphery’s different regimes of meaning are based upon two opposite systems of values; while the *Social Web* proposes a continuity between “the online” and “the offline”, based, in turn, on the (con)fusion between the empirical author (the *user*) and the model author (as Umberto Eco [9] would say; the *profile* or the *account*),⁷ on the other hand *the Internet* claims that personal data should be

⁷ According to Eco, the *model author* is a sort of simulacrum of author inbuilt in a text. It might be fairly different from the empirical author (as is Robert Walton from Mary Shelley) or more subtly intertwined (the real Moliere from the idea of Moliere that I can desume from his works). A *profile* works in the same way: it is an identity constructed through a series of textualities (profile picture, likes, statuses...) and might diverge a lot from the empirical author—even completely in the case of fake profiles.

protected and never shared online (cf. *Anonymous*, a collective of activist hackers, or *hacktivists*). The Social Web maintains that the medium can and should be transparent, whereas the Internet argues that it is inevitably opaque [25]; the Social Web is textually structured into a striated space, organized as a sequence, the *feed*, while the Internet preserves the features of a hypertextual smooth space [26] (similar to the model which was originally imagined by Ted Nelson, one of the “forefathers” of the Web). These two different systems of values consequently give birth to two different online lifestyles [19].

From a purely textual perspective, these areas⁸ are *contextual* spaces and, more specifically, they indicate contexts belonging to different semiotic domains [15]. The Internet, as opposed to the Social Web, has to be interpreted as completely situated within the semiotic domain of play [24]. In this peripheral area of the Web, the intrinsically playful character of *every* interaction is taken for granted and, therefore, the meta-communicative message that Gregory Bateson [4] describes as typical of every playful situation—“This is play”—is completely absent. According to the regime of meaning of the Internet, *nothing* should be taken seriously (as it is also claimed by the 20th “Rule of the Internet”; cf. *infra*): the opacity of the medium makes it impossible to engage into any serious interaction, turning the Net into an immense, virtual playground [1, 12], a huge carnival, where everyone is masked and, as such, allowed to play [2]. The Social Web, on the other hand, presents itself as an ideal prosthesis of everyday-life. This does not imply by any means that play does not take place in this area: the difference with the former regime is that its context is not indiscriminately playful per se. Without an adequate meta-communication of one’s playful intention, the texts on the Social Web are taken seriously; sometimes even too much.

Since these semiotic domains do require specific competences for being correctly interpreted, it is not rare that users “coming” from such diverse backgrounds and contexts would meet with reciprocal hostility. When visiting the peripheries of the Web, a Social Web user (unaccustomed to the ever-activated irony of the Internet) could take, for instance, politically incorrect jokes for serious statements, and feel sorry, offended, scared, or threatened.⁹ At the same time, users from the Internet often cannot help *trolling* other users within contact zones between the two areas—e.g., the comment sections on YouTube—that, by these means, quickly become true “battlefields”.

⁸ The hypertextual architecture of the Web makes it extremely challenging to draw any border between these lines. If, on the one hand, we could claim that Facebook belongs to the Social Web and *4chan* to the Internet, this is not entirely true. A Facebook page such as “WH 40 k Humor”, featuring only Internet memes dedicated to the wargame Warhammer 40.000, can hardly be considered as central to the semiosphere. Furthermore, the users of these areas are often actually the same people, who adopt different behaviours and online lifestyles, according to the website they are visiting at a certain moment; this is the key semiotic difference between empiric actors (people sitting in front of their device) and narrative actants (functions, role figures as textualised).

⁹ This phenomenon of “aberrant decoding”, in Eco’s terms, is causing a steady polarization, when not a full radicalization, of the Internet around specific themes. Politically incorrect jokes ended up in attracting politically incorrect ideas, drawing off a part of its original users and attracting a new sort of audience (cf. the #GamerGate case).

The aforementioned case of #GattinisuSalvini, therefore, should be interpreted as an umpteenth example of the clash between these two regimes of meaning. The usage of the Web for political propaganda, which implies a one-to-one superimposition of the politician over their social profile, is the least playful thing imaginable. Matteo Salvini is well-known to the Italian population and the Italian online audience for his own catchphrases and “memes” (e.g., “Ruspa!”, which means “Bulldozer!”; a plain and simple invitation to destroy the Romani nomadic camps set over the Italian territory) and the regime of meaning of the Internet has to posse it; not (only) for a matter of political ideology, but also for a matter of *media ideology*. And it does so, then, by using its distinctive weapon: *trolling*. It is very interesting to see how, in this specific case, the cat was chosen as a symbol of that part of the Web that is utterly playful, but also fiercely ironic and caustic. Thus, the cat becomes one of the symbols—just like the mask of Guy Fawkes, used by Anonymous in the 2008 *Operation Chanology*—representing an idea of the Web as something programmatically *independent from reality* and ready to start a fight in order to proudly preserve this separation.

3 The Cattetta Stone: Lolcats from Text to Language

Interestingly enough, cat pictures are typically shared both on the Internet and on the Social Web. There appears to be something that makes cat memes extremely popular across all online lifestyles, adaptable to their different patterns of creation and sharing of images. In order to understand this ubiquity, in this paragraph and in the next we will try to outline a brief profile of cat-memes and to analyse their structure.

One of the most striking examples of successful meme is indeed represented by cats, and more precisely funny cats: lolcats [13] [14]. Their success is remarkable, not only as concerns quantitative measurements (big numbers, widespread diffusion, persistence in time etc.), but also, and moreover, for qualitative features, namely the structural ones. They stand as a perfect example of the playful creativity David Crystal [6] indicates as typical of Web languages (and of languages across the Web) and of the *generativity* defined by Jonathan Zittrain (and already widely employed in the linguistic and semiotic lexicons) as fundamental to the success of a given system online [27].

“Lolcats” refers to pictures of funny cats (funny for their expressions or behaviours etc.) coupled with captions full of mistakes, which aims at imitating the broken English a cat would speak. The name of these *image macros* clearly derives from the acronym *lol* (“laughing out loud”) widely used online.¹⁰ Lolcats started appearing in 2005 on *4chan*, in a dedicated day: every Saturday—promptly renamed Caturday—the site was flooded with funny images of cats accompanied by purposefully full-of-mistakes captions. The practice of creating lolcats spread rather quickly across the Web and the first dedicated websites were created: “Caturday.com” (2005), “Lolcats.com” (2006), and “I Can Has Cheezburger” (2007) (Fig. 3).

¹⁰ An entry with this name was created in 2006 on *Urban Dictionary*, the online “bible” of slang.



Fig. 3 Happy cat

The first image posted onto the latter portrayed an entranced/bewildered cat accompanied by a caption with the name of the website itself (“I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?”). The image dated back to 2003, since it was originally used on the home page of the Russian cat-food brand *Happy Cat*; whence its name.

As it is clear, the *Happy Cat* meme was born as a *remix* of a pre-existent text, based on a decontextualisation and a playful resemantisation. The *punctum* of the meme (the feature that “stings” the viewer, in the terms of Roland Barthes) is undoubtedly the almost-human expression of the cat (already present in the hypotextual source), whose *whimsicality* (as media scholar Limor Shifman would say [23]) easily “contaminated” the subsequent textual interpolation: the ungrammatical and broken caption. That cat was weird and their language could not be different. This “mistake” element seems to be a true memetic constant; a feature that can be easily found in the vast majority of mainstream memes, in diverse forms and shapes (the memetic “mistake” category encompasses everything ascribable to the domain of “incongruity”, from grammar, to behaviour), and that can be considered their original generative spring (humour, in general, is often triggered by such a component) [21].

Due to the unexpected popularity of its front image, website “I Can has Cheezburger” gained a wide popularity itself and helped the lolcats phenomenon spread even more, raising the interest of the national American press (the “New

York Times”, for instance, dedicated several articles to the subject¹¹). Web users who created lolcats called themselves *cheezpeeps* (the “people from Cheezburger”) and grew exponentially. As time passed by, the intentional mistakes of the captions started to grow more and more, systematically, becoming full-fledged rules and ending up creating a true alternative grammar (studied systematically, for the first time, by sociolinguist Iliaria Fiorentini [13]). These “mistakes” are mostly morphological variants (phonologically motivated misspellings, such as “cheezburger” for “cheeseburger”, or the extension of the third person verbal form to the other persons, as in “I has” for “I have”), syntax errors (there is no inversion of the verb and the subject in the interrogative form), and other peculiar practices concerning verb inflections, suffixes, repetitions, lexicalisations etc. Starting as a simple broken English, lolspeak became first a sort of pidgin (from the contact between English and an “imagined”—rather than “imaginary”—cat-language) and then a creole proper.

The *Happy Cat* meme, in other words, had the same heuristic potential of the Rosetta Stone, the stele that allowed, through a linguistic *collatio*, to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Using a single sentence—“I Can Has Cheezburger?”—as a reference, users kind of reverse-engineered a language that *did not exist* (perfect case of what Eco [8] defines as “hypocoding”) and that has been named, according to its different evolutionary steps, *lolspeak* or *kitty pidgin*. As a further testimony to the completeness of the language, the Bible has been translated into lolspeak (lolcatbible.com, 2007–2010) and an automated translation service, from English to lolspeak, has been implemented (speaklolcat.com, 2007). According to linguist Susan Herring [17], this “cat-language” represents a “Special Internet Language Variety” (SILV), together with other Web-languages of a clear peripheral origin (Herring herself explicitly mentions the strong subcultural element implicated) such as the *Leet* and the *Chanspeak*. Written by thousandths of people around the world, lolspeak has both a comic and an identitarian purpose nowadays: on the one side, it is a parody, while on the other it draws the line between who belongs to the community and who does not.

Born within the newly-born *animal-based image macro* genre (probably started by the Advice Dog), *Happy Cat* has also been used as a *sample* (it is being used as a part of other memes, such as *Not Even Doom Music*) and, after a process of hypercoding, as a *ready-made* (a classic-era meme, it stands as a symbol of the macro-category of the Internet memes altogether).

4 The Many Faces of the Feline Hyper-meme

The anthropomorphic expression at the basis of *Happy Cat*’s success is also the main feature of another very famous cat-meme: *Grumpy Cat*. In September 2012, several pictures of a cat called Tardar Sauce were posted on the macro-forum *Reddit*. Its frowning and scowling expressions encountered immediate success

¹¹ As it generally happens when a “new trend” seems almost impossible to be make sense to mainstream media; see the case of *Pokémon Go*, in 2016.

among *redditors* and the images became promptly object of memetic practices. First of all, the most impactful image of the set become a *ready-made*, to be posted as a comment expressing disapproval or annoyance. The same image is also used as part of a series of image macros—remixes that involve the addition of captions mirroring the unfriendly nature of *Grumpy Cat* (Fig. 4). Finally, there are also countless remakes: picture of other cats with equally grumpy expressions which make reference to the original meme, but sometimes start to have their own memetic life. The meme was so successful that actual merchandising started to be made, including (predictable) t-shirts and plush, but also rather original items such as the *Grumpuccino*: a coffee-based beverage produced by Bundesen. *Grumpy Cat* become, therefore, a true *meme icon* [21], a sort of “holy card” or religious icon of the Web, whose image is at the centre of a microcosm of textual interpolations.

Human-like expressions are not always enough: several memes feature cats wearing more or less complex costumes, from simple ties to complete suits. *Business Cat*, for example, wears a little yellow tie and a white collar: it is used as an image macro coupled with captions that mix business tropes with typical cat behaviours (“I need all the ideas on the table.—So I can knock them onto the floor” or “You used a laser pointer in your presentation.—*Promotion*”) or puns based on the same “catifying” mechanism (“Get in my office, right meow!” or “It’s time of your purrformance review”). *Business Cat* is part of the series of *Advice Animals*, born with *Advice Dog*, and therefore is part of the category of symbiotic memes [21]: the image is always the same, while the caption changes according to the context and the objective of the customization. *I should Buy a Boat*, on the other hand, is a ready-made (with some remix variants) that portrays a cat in an elegant blue suit reading a newspaper at the kitchen table. The image was retrieved from a video of Icelandic singer Björk (*Triumph of the Heart*, 2005) to which the caption “I should buy a boat” was added, verbalizing an attitude of the cat that we infer from the purely visual features of the picture. Finally, *Chemistry Cat* is an image of unknown origin (probably a stock-image) that represents a white cat with glasses and bow-tie apparently engaged in an experimental lecture about chemistry. The



Fig. 4 Grumpy cat



Fig. 5 Business cat, I should buy a boat cat, and Chemistry cat

picture is used as an image macro accompanied by chemistry-related puns, which have nothing to do with cats. If *Business Cat* was still the bearer of the entire semantic charge of the cat, the latter seems exhausted in *Chemistry Cat*, whose cat nature is a mere contextual signal indicating the presence of a pun (Fig. 5).

Besides anthropomorphisations, other memes focus on cats' idiosyncrasies and weirdness. It is the case of *Ceiling Cat*, an image of a cat curiously peeking from a hole in a ceiling. The image, making a strong reference to cats' curiosity, has been coupled with the caption "Ceiling Cat is watching you masturbate" (Fig. 6). Similarly, the meme *If it Fits I Sits*,¹² is based on the eponymous sentence, which invariably accompanies pictures of cats curling up in the most unexpected—and apparently uncomfortable—places (Fig. 7).

Other cat memes, while not being connected to each other by the use of the same image or sentence, are based on common clichés (they are still forms of remix); we can think, for example, to the images and GIFs of cats sitting on cardboard boxes ignoring the expensive perches purchased by their owners, cats going crazy in the attempt to capture the red dot of a laser pointer or cats terrorized by a cucumber. All these tropes of feline virality collaboratively constitute the online *thematic role* of the cat, to which are attributed a series of narrative programs formalized and translated into memes.

There is, moreover, a series of samples based on single pictures of cats. The most popular is probably *Long Cat*: the picture of a particularly long cat that, duly photoshopped, makes it appear higher than a skyscraper or towering over the clouds. Another example is *Bullet Cat*, a running cat that looks like a furry sphere. Many memes feature several instances of the hovering cat in different contexts, sometimes mounted by other creatures, often borrowed from popular franchises or fandoms (Fig. 8).

The memetic success of cats is not limited to pictures, but encompasses other type of images and videos—as *Nyan Cat*, a cat-pop tart hybrid that voyage through space leaving behind itself a rainbow. The pixellated video has become a true symbol of the Internet due to its surreal nature and its surprising mythopoietic potential (Fig. 9). The original animate GIF was created by Christopher Torres

¹² The grammar mistake (first person pronoun and third person verb) is intentional and mirrors the lolSpeak.



Fig. 6 Ceiling cat



Fig. 7 If it fits I sits

while the sound was added later by another user that chose the equally surreal Japanese song “Nyanyanyanyanyanyanya!” and transformed it in a video with millions of visualizations and thousandths of remix variants.¹³

Not all cat memes are visual texts either. In the *Rules of the Internet*—a list of prescriptive and descriptive norms that works as a sort of Constitution of the Internet [24]—there are three rules mentioning cats: “Rule 48: A cat is fine too.”; “Rule 49: One cat leads to another” e “Rule 50: Another cat leads to Zippo Cat.”. The impenetrable appearance of these rules is due to the elitist opacity that characterize the Internet, often dense of obscure references. Rule 48 is related to the self-produced manga “That’s Why I Assault Ren”. The main character of the comic

¹³ *Nyan Cat* is also the “loading” icon on *Know Your Meme* (an online collaborative encyclopaedia keeping track of old and new memes), testifying the meaningfulness of this particular meme for memeh-enthusiasts.



Fig. 8 Long cat and Bullet cat



Fig. 9 A screenshot from Nyan cat animated GIF

is a paedophile that repeatedly tries to abuse of an underage girl. When, cornered, the girl transforms into a cat and believes to be finally safe, the man undo his pants claiming that “A cat is fine too...”. Rule 49 is a quote from Ernest Hemingway, known for his love for cats, but also a reference for the exaggerated number of cat pictures circulating online. Finally rule 50 refers to *Zippo Cat* a video (later transformed in a sequence of images), that films a man that soaks a kitten of lighter fluid and then burns it alive with a Zippo. The video arose a lot of criticism and become an historic symbol of the morbid and disturbing texts that can be found in the depths of the Internet. The politically incorrect and culturally unacceptable themes referred to by two of the mentioned rules—paedophilia, bestiality, cruelty, and violence towards animals—make them perfect examples of the contents

featured in the most peripheral areas of the Internet—a place where disturbing content is seen as an initiation for its users, and in which the pleasure for programmatically offensive textualities is central [1].

Excluding these last examples, the memes that we have listed, despite being all born within the Internet, had always and extremely broad circulation: many of them enjoyed success also in the Social Web. Not all cat memes come from the periphery: several of them are born as direct expressions of central social media; we can think, for example, at remake practices such as *Cat Beard* (which, at the same time, involves a selfie) or the politically oriented *Cats Against Brexit* (Fig. 10).

5 Under the Sign of the Cat: Cultural Unit, Memplex, and Secret Semiotic Totem

In fact, we are facing a recurrent macro-isotopy, which turns the digital cat (or, at least, the cat in the digital environment) into a meme per se, a meme *in itself*, a sort of powerful *hyper-meme*—a cat is *always* a potential meme, any other meme can be *catified* etc.—featuring countless variations, iterations, and proliferations. Its success and productivity, which allows us to consider it a true *memplex* (namely, a “meme factory”, in memetics’ *stricto sensu* terminology), are probably due to the coexistence of several important features, all of them being agglutinated within the cultural unit linguistically labelled as such.

The first feature is: being a vaguely anthropomorphic animal or being easily anthropomorphizable; cats can be “read” as engaging into and can be “used” to convey human expressions and emotions; as centuries of fables and proverbs have taught us (and antispeciesist scholars point out, underlining how dangerous such cultural habit can be, for both the human and non-human animal). Cats, then, are the perfect memetic figure, as they can be used as a substitute (or as an addition) to emoticons and emojis, in order to embody, in a humoristic fashion or ironically, human feelings and behaviours. The second feature is cats’ *derpness*, a term used in online conversations to refer to the naivety and the spontaneous silliness that has been generally ascribed, over the Internet, to the users of the Internet by other Internet users themselves (*Rage Comics* characters, for instance, are all named “Derp” and “Derpette”). Derpness, then, fits quite well for describing the surreal, contradictory, and inexplicable—at least, for the human animals—behaviour of cats in real life.¹⁴

Cats’ silliness is largely redeemed for being a *cute silliness*: cats are fluffy and *kawaii* (“cute, lovable, dinky”, in Japanese, and in nerds and geeks’ jargon, which is strongly influenced and “code-mixed” by Japanese). This feature is probably the real pivot around which the success of cats online revolves: millions of users share pictures of their cats because they simply find them adorable and, through them, they can relate to each other; thus, the Internet and the Social Web look like they’ll never get tired of cat pictures. While being cute and weird, cats may also be haughty

¹⁴ The last scene from the 2015 Disney/Pixar movie *Inside Out* is sarcastic exactly about this kind of “phenomenological inexplicability” of cats’ behaviour.



Fig. 10 Cats against Brexit

and contemptuous, sometimes naughty and mean; and such “b-side” features fit very well the elitism in which the Internet and all its subcultures are deeply soaked.

The importance of cats in anthropic societies and imaginaries is self-evident throughout the history of Man, from the Antiquity until today. For this reason, it is interesting to see how, in a rather unique encounter between “semiotics is action”, strategic planning, and futurology, the cat was indicated as a possible soteriologic figure in a post-apocalyptic scenario. We are referring to the Ray Cats hypothesis formulated by Françoise Bastide and Paolo Fabbri in an essay published in “Zeitschrift für Semiotik” [3].

Asked to devise a way of communicating the presence of nuclear waste to a human population thousandths of years away in the future—when, possibly, the cognitive, communicative or cultural capabilities of human beings will be changed or even lost as we know them—the two semioticians suggested that the best way would have been to create and raise a new, genetically engineered species of cats, capable of changing the colour of their fur when in presence of radioactivity. Cats are the domestic animals par excellence, and therefore they are likely to accompany humans for all their existence. Stories, on the other hand, are the longest-lasting

human artefacts. It would be sufficient, according to Bastide and Fabbri, to make up a coherent story, a whole new mythology about that, namely to provide such an expression with its own meaning, to accomplish the semiotic task of communication; people would make up stories and tales (accompanied by chants, songs, music, and pictures) about how the changing-colour cats would stand for “terrible danger here!”, in order to make the message travelling through the millennia.

In 2014, this old, whimsical case of “atomic semiotics”—blossomed within an extremely serious research group, created by the U.S. Government and guided by Thomas A. Sebeok—started to spread online, as the story was told by several online media (“Method Quarterly”, the Facebook page of the semiotic journal “Lexia”, “The Atlantic”, “MIT Technology Review Italia”, “Rivista Studio” etc.); it eventually became the topic of a short documentary, *La solution radiochat*, directed by Benjamin Huguet, in 2015. Most importantly, it became a real, unexpected, full-fledged *viral* content. And a little, tender, conceptual meme among semioticians themselves, all over the world.

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