

The force of digital aesthetics: on memes, hacking, and individuation.

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Abstract:

The paper explores memes, digital artefacts that acquire a viral character and become globally popular, as an aesthetic trend that not only entices but propels and molds subjective, collective and political becoming. Following both Simondon and Bakhtin, memes are first considered as aesthetic objects that mediate individuation. Here, resonance between psychic, collective and technical individuation is established and re-enacted through the aesthetic consummation of self, the collective and the technical in the various performances of meme cultures. Secondly, if memes are followed in the making, from birth to their spill-over onto wider social networks, the very expressive form of meme turns out to be borne by specific technical architecture and mannerisms of a small number of platforms, and, most notably, the image board 4chan. The source of memes' various forms of power is concentrated here. Memes are intimately linked to 4chan's /b board, the birthplace of Lulzsec and the Anonymous hacking networks. Memes' architectonics, as an inheritance of a few specific human-technical structures, in turn informs the production of new platforms (memes generators), forms of networked expressions, and aesthetic work in the life cycles of mediation.

Introduction

Aesthetic morphogenesis has been entrenched in digital forms. It's not only that teenagers joke by creating memes and forwarding them around, but political discontent employs the language of memes or viral cultural production in protests. For instance, a high number of the placards at the Bolotnaya Plozshad's demonstrations against Putin on the 10 of December 2011 were humorous, featuring nonsensical slogans, such as 'Bring back the snowy winters' as if specifically designed to be photographed, posted, re-posted, and linked on the Web.

Such creative production attracts envy from PR, marketing and advertisement agencies across the world, who aim at objectifying memetic culture and virality in a skillset, something that can respond to content analysis. Whether a video is 'youtubable' or not, becomes a key question, indicative of a process emerging from below the radar, powered by numbers, which moulds societal emergence, both online and offline.

How does something that has a primarily aesthetic sensibility exhibit the capacity to propel a political voice, an idea, problem, discontent, a genre? Can it be claimed that digital aesthetics mediate the becoming of political events, social problems, and various other kinds of individuation, such as the psychic, collective and technical and if so, in what manner?

The original aim of this article was to explore preposterous, uncultured, weird, humorous and 'silly' creative cultural production, and specifically, memes, that circulate online as indicative of something larger than they initially seem, as an expression and the performance of processes of individuation and as objects of relationships that sustain individuation. Through the process of writing this article, it became clear that the aesthetics that mediate individuation that I focus on through a reading of Bakhtin and Simondon, not only perform through memes acting in psychic, collective and technical individuation, but is open in its own way to an individuating process yielded by other techno-cultural systems. These complex intersections and Moebius strips of techno-human ecologies emerging by employing each others' histories, mannerisms, forms, cultures and energies is a picture the article concludes with.

Terminology

As they have emerged on the internet, memes are digital images, often superimposed with text (known as an image macro), separate pieces of text, formulaic behaviours, animations and sometimes memetic hubs of videos (a viral video is not necessarily a meme unless it exhibits memetic features) which emerge in a grass-roots manner through networked media and acquire a viral character, becoming globally popular. Such virality manifests in a twofold way: by an ability to spill over from the birth place of the meme (if such is to be established) or a singular location, into diverse online channels and platforms and to other forms of media and by an ability to mutate (a meme does not come into being unless people contribute by altering it, responding to it, and enacting it). Such a definition relies heavily on the self-reflection of meme culture as expressed by the Knowyourmeme platform,¹ among others, an addition to the vivid cultural phenomena of memes that has been developing an introspective grass-roots research methodology and conducting crowd-sourced research into memes.

According to Knowyourmeme, a meme is not directly made but becomes such only when the following conditions are satisfied:

1) it has sufficiently spread beyond its 'original subculture', preferably over to other meme hubs and picked by more mainstream platforms as indicated above; its 'route of spread' is significantly wide and rich;

2) its spread is genuinely viral, 'organic' (meaning the meme is not a result of a marketing effort) and not 'forced' (though both forms can and do become memes);

3) it is an Internet culture-related phenomenon (music videos, film excerpts and similar objects that are circulated online are considered to belong to mainstream pop culture, not Internet culture);

4) it has exhibited enough mutation (there is an 'existing volume of spoofs, mashups, remixes, parodies, recontextualizations, and re-enactments'). Here lies the foundational differentiation mechanism within forms of cultural virality: if a video was watched few million times, but not reposted, remixed, responded to, and re-dubbed, it remains a viral video, not a meme.

A meme, therefore, is not only 'content', but a behaviour, or rather systems of human-technical performances. A meme emerges from multiple sites, agents and ecologies, which dynamically interlock to form networks that propel its coming into being.

In writing on viral cultural production it is commonplace to refer, often rather uncritically, to the term's exodus from Richard Dawkins' 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. Here the meme was first proposed as an element analogous to the gene, a unit of cultural information that is able to spread and survive by replicating itself (something further developed in the field of memetics by Blackmore, Dennett and others). Memetics was used to explain religion, sexual behaviour and the cultural evolution of species. However problematic memetics as a field has been, it has stirred some interesting debate throughout the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Matthew Fuller has discussed the type of attention memetics implies, as a methodology, geared as it is towards fluctuations between seriality and singularity, and argued that focusing on the medial character of memetic units requires memes to exhibit the characteristic of 'monitorability', relying on the idea that cultural units can be unitized and tracked. Memetics is ambivalent because of its founding scientism, but it also leads to new kinds of attention and research methods that take the domineering and purposeful human actor as well as the dictate of 'culture' out of the picture.² The inviting strengths of memetics are also its weaknesses. As Fuller argued, memetics, in the mode of Dawkins and related proponents, ignores both ecological thinking and sensual perception, the multiple various epigenetic processes through which memes stabilize and become manifest such as the larger aggregations of meaning- and especially nonsense- making machines.

Tony Sampson offers a history and a critique of memetics as a neo-Darwinian enterprise engaged with culture, psychology and representation in his recent *Virality*. Sampson argues that while succeeding in denying a designer god role to humans, memetics merely grants it to 'nonnaturalistic designer gods', simplifying the philosophical question of evolution (here, he follows Keith Ansell Pearson).³ Sampson concludes, while relying on other similar statements, that memetics was in fact its own best meme. Another germane but curious aspect of the history of

¹ Internet Meme Database, Know Your Meme, website, <http://knowyourmeme.com/> <accessed 24.09.2012>

² Know Your Meme, Forum section, General and Meme Research subsections.

<http://knowyourmeme.com/forums/general>, <http://knowyourmeme.com/forums/meme-research>, <accessed 24.09.2012>

³ Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies. Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005, pp.111-116.

⁴ Tony Sampson, *Virality. Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 69.

memetics is the suggestion that Internet is the best fit transmitter for memes, hence moving the discussion of memes almost entirely into digital media.⁵

Years on, memes are confined to the signification of ‘catchy’ cultural material on the Internet. Even while disassociated from the full apparatus of Dawkins’, Dennett’ and Backmore’s memetics, and disloyal to the original genetical-memetic principles of fidelity, fecundity and longevity, contemporary Internet memes, having essentially highjacked the term, still miss out on the rich interpretative and critical work being done if the lure of their name is to be followed. I am interested here in Internet memes as techno-aesthetic methods of becoming, whether of subjective, political, technical or social phenomena. Such becoming is not necessarily reproductive and, however stereotypical and imitative it might be, is not (only) about collective copying, but entails questions of shifting scales, morphing plateaus, the enlistment of actors of multiple kinds of materiality into its production. It also has capacities for novelty, aesthetic work and diversity.⁶

I would like to suggest that Internet memes are quite unique, and despite their terminological indebtedness to Dawkins and the fact that some predecessors can certainly be established, they are worth a careful historical differentiation. To start with a comparison, the famous photographic portrait of Che Guevara, I would argue, is not a meme even in its multiple alterations either in the vocabulary of memetics, or in the sense of an Internet meme, – it is rather an icon (a kind of sign differentiated from those of the index and symbol, as in the triad originally proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce⁷). The icon as an object bears a constant relation to its subject and has some shared quality with it that it comes to represent, whereas a meme stands in a significantly weaker position in relation to such tight symbolism. Memes, by contrast, become the aesthetic performance through which individuation takes place, whether of idea, of a subject, of a process, a function or an event.

Finally, it might also be useful to travel deeper into the etymology of the term: the original Greek root *mim-* is related to mimes (*mimos* – a term meaning both an imitator or actor and short satirical plays, part of ‘low’ culture and pantomime), mimic, and, of course, to mimesis. It is quite notable that the discussions of mimesis, initially held by Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle with opposite conclusions, established it as one of the earliest categories of aesthetics, as processes through which art constitutes itself and alongside which it acts and can be understood; whereas we are now considering the aesthetics of Internet memes, therefore questioning the aesthetics of aesthetics, the aesthetics of art’s modes of relations to truth as they become widespread. The above owes to Badiou: in his interpretation, Plato’s mimesis is art’s falseness, the harmful ‘imitation of the effect of truth’, whereas Aristotle’s mimesis endows art with a cathartic, ‘therapeutic’ function, innocently resembling truth.⁸ Simplified, such positions linger on in the discussions of digital culture, overshadowing memes, regarded either as a silly wasteful endeavour or a useful enunciations of teenagers’ subculture, more on which will be presented later on in the text.

Simondon and Bakhtin

The starting point of this paper, reiterated above, is the idea that memes, but also viral videos and some other type of Internet objects and online acts, are 1) an aesthetic expression which is performed with the promise of social response and that 2) such expression and such performance are among the processes through which individuation (or subjectification) occurs. Here, I rely on thinking more recently presented by Bernard Stiegler, who draws on Gilbert Simondon, as did Deleuze and Guattari in their understanding of subjectification, but also on Bakhtin, by suggesting that whatever individuates, whether it is a human subject, or a political act, does so through creative (aesthetic) expression, where such expression enters into and sustains a relationship to others.

Core to Simondon’s notion of human individuation is the understanding that individuation, the becoming of being, is a continuous process, an oscillation between the pre-individual and the individual (where pre-individual reality sustains and feeds the process of individuation that is never complete). An individual, thus, may have its own problematic and be a part of larger system of problems, retaining the potentialities of hyper-saturated pre-individual state.⁹ There is also a dynamic movement between the pre-individual and the collective, which is the process of individuation of a collective unit (or collective individuation). Simondon calls a reciprocal effect between individual (psychic) and collective a process of transindividuation (something very

⁵ Sampson, *Virality*, p.68.

⁶ This echoes Sampson’s critique of memetics, Sampson, *Virality*, p.72.

⁷ *The Essential Peirce*, v. 2, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp. 289–99.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, pp.2-5.

⁹ Gilbert Simondon, “The Genesis of the Individual” in *Incorporations*, ed. J.Crary, S. Kwinter, New York: Zone Books, 1992, p.306.

positive in Stiegler's conceptual apparatus, to be highlighted in the next section). The psychic and collective individuation bestow a transindividual - 'a systemic unity' of psychic and collective individuation.

Two more elements of Simondonian theory need to be emphasized for the purpose of this article. Simondon suggests that the process of individuation is ignited by a problem, 'falling out of step (phase) with itself',¹⁰ becoming incompatible with itself. 'The psyche represents the continuing effort of individuation in a being that has to resolve its own problematic through its involvement as an element of the problem by taking action as a subject'.¹¹ It is the problem itself where potentiality lies; supersaturation with potentialities and tensions is the starting point of the emergence.

Simondon also emphasizes that mediation is the 'true principle of individuation,'¹² where mediation is witness to the existence of different orders of magnitude, which, when communication is established, organize, through amplification (mediatory process) into 'structured individuals of a middle order of magnitude'.¹³ Simondon calls ontogenesis a spectacular 'theatre of individuation'.¹⁴ Furthermore, such a theatre, in relation to living beings, performs not only at the limit of its own structure, the frontier with the outside world (as in physical individuation), but also relies on 'genuine interiority'. Relations – between pre-individual and individual, interiority and exteriority, individual and its milieu – are endowed with a 'status of a being,'¹⁵ a 'way of being'¹⁶; a relation for Simondon is an aspect of individuation, the becoming of being itself.¹⁷ Such an understanding justifies the being which is non-identical with itself, being that has not yet become - as such a way of being is core to the analysis of Internet cultures that I will return to below.

Individuation involving communication between interiority and exteriority, between different orders and problems of different orders of magnitude, between an individual and a collective bestows an individual that is both 'the agent and the theatre of individuation'.¹⁸ Simondon, I think, emphasizes here the duration of the process of individuation as both passive and active, occurring both inside and outside, at the frontier, on a smaller scale and out of scope, gradually producing differentiated structures and networks (and unfolding from a charged, hypersaturated lump of matter and energy through incompatibility, through differentiating problematics, through transduction).

Simondonian approaches offer the means for an analysis of Internet cultures and digital aesthetics that is capable of accounting for an individual becoming in relation to the collective one, and in relation to technical becoming, where such relation is the becoming, the individuation itself. The shifting scales and iterative nature of such multi-vector processes are highly suited to a study of processual formation and manifestation of creative work online, where digital aesthetics imbued with its technological mediation establishes a theatre of individuation, whether of living beings, ideas, events or artefacts. Such becoming that has not yet reached or might never reach a completion, or be aesthetically valorized, is core to many digital aesthetic processes. Here, to give an example, memes and 'families of memes', memetic viral videos, responses to videos, re-enactments of photographs, and instructions – a range of performative creative expression is produced in a manner of a 'grey zone' between the pre-individual and individual and the collective, between culture, art and politics, through a swathe of seething emergence that has the capacity to reach certain completion or produce brilliance (for instance to produce an art movement or an art work, or a political event), but also includes try-outs, objects soon forgotten, failed individuations, or folds into processes that yet continue their unfolding, or joins in with the repetitious and exploitative, or yet resists being mapped out.

To link Simondonian systems of individuations to the question of aesthetics, and cultural objects and processes on the Internet in a radical and meaningful way, I would like to use Mikhail Bakhtin's work.

In fact, Bakhtin was the first person to propose the concept of ethico-aesthetics (and here I specifically refer to his use of this term before it was redeveloped by Guattari) and offers a theory of

¹⁰ Ibid. p.300.

¹¹ Ibid. p.306.

¹² Ibid. p.304.

¹³ Ibid. p.301.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.305.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.306.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.312.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.309, 311.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.307.

singularisation (correlating to individuation in Simondon's sense) that relies on the interaction between aesthetic reality, ethics and the 'real world'. Bakhtin wrote in the 1920s: 'In Christ we find ... the synthesis of ethical solipsism and ethico-aesthetic kindness toward the other'.¹⁹

The Guattarian proposition of aesthetic paradigm (and ethico-aesthetics) sees the current condition of the world as one in which the aesthetic mode of operation increasingly proliferates into or is exploited by other strata, traditionally positioning themselves as distinctly different from aesthetic concerns. What Guattari presented in the early 1990s became increasingly clear in recent years, with the proliferation of the phenomena such as creative industries and creativity in the workplace (creative management), creative cities, immaterial labour, and participatory politics. Aesthetics becomes a field of production of value; increasingly, areas of life move on to resemble or act up as aesthetic.

Bakhtin's thinking on ethico-aesthetics and the role of the aesthetic register resonates interestingly with that of Simondon and Guattari, which, supplementing each other, allow for a wider range of manoeuvres. For Bakhtin, 'wholeness' (Lazarato interestingly comments on the Spinozist take on the term²⁰, while Simondon uses the term 'unity') becomes singular through aesthetics. The process of singularisation, for Bakhtin, is primarily and profoundly aesthetic, and it is as aesthetics and through aesthetics, and moreover, in aesthetic events, that singularisation (individuation in Simondon terms) can occur (but is never completed). Bakhtin wrote: 'A whole integral human being is the product of the aesthetic, creative point of view and of that point of view alone.'²¹

More than once, Bakhtin writes about the aesthetic need, the aesthetic function, the aesthetic reflex inherent to life.²² Bakhtin uses the term, emotional-volitional 'sensing in'²³ as a means to describe the function of aesthetics; it is a function of an iterative relation that is required to complete/consummate the self and the other.²⁴ This relational movement constructs / singularizes the individual and the world to their completeness at the same time as maintaining their openness as a relation that is not only two-way but multiplicitous. The expressive power of aesthetics in Bakhtin, I would like to argue, should not be reduced to representation; the emotional/volitional relation singularizes, consolidates not only the body, in Bakhtin's terminology, but the 'soul' as well. 'The problem of the soul is methodologically a problem of aesthetics,'²⁵ he writes, as the inner life is something that 'descends upon me.'²⁶ Such body and soul, of self and the other are a responsibility of aesthetics, which is, thus, heavily involved in the multiple processes of singularization, or individuation. As is well known, Bakhtin's system presupposes the architectonics that unites I-for-myself, I-for-the-other and the-other-for-me. The aesthetic singularization applies to I-for-the-other and the other-for-me (here the completeness happens on the border, at the boundary²⁷ - evoking the Simondonian theatre of individuation), but not to I-for-myself (which possesses an interiority in Simondon). The I-for-myself avoids completing/consummating itself and is supposed to be

¹⁹ *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays* by M.M. Bakhtin, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p.56. Russian source: Михаил Бахтин, *Эстетика словесного творчества*, Москва, Искусство, с.51.

²⁰ Maurizio Lazarato, "Dialogism and Polyphony", available online at: http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/lazarato_dialogism.pdf, <accessed 24.09.2012>

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p.83.; Russian source: Михаил Бахтин, *Эстетика словесного творчества*, Москва, Искусство, с.74.

²² In *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* the phrase is translated by Liapunov as following: 'an aesthetic reflex of the living life' (ТРА, 1993, p.15). In Russian the same term is used in the phrase 'Pavlovian response'. Here, aesthetic reflex is indeed related to the self-reflexion of life which it is not (next line), but can be more interestingly interpreted if taken as it stands, as a reflex of life, almost an aesthetic function inherent to life.

²³ "I must sense into this other human being...", author translation from the original of *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Reality*; Russian source: Михаил Бахтин, *Эстетика словесного творчества*, Москва, Искусство, 1979, p.24. In English translation by Vadim Liapunov: "I must empathize or project myself into this other human being", in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, p.25.

²⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' in *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, pp.24-29 and elsewhere.

²⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' in *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, p.89.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Aesthetic activity always operates on the boundaries", author translation from the original of *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Reality*; Russian source: Михаил Бахтин, *Эстетика словесного творчества*, Москва, Искусство, 1979, p.76. For the English equivalent by Liapunov, see Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' in *Art and Answerability. Early Philosophical Essays*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990, p. 85.

primarily ethical. More than that, the aesthetic process of singularisation, to be successful, must also be ethical.

Aesthetics and ethics are brought together and set in motion, through what Bakhtin calls the act. Aesthetics actualizes, individuates, by putting in play a movement of becoming, becoming an act which is ethical. At the same time, aesthetics refers to the entirety of the act at a particular moment and to the whole event, of which acts are part. Ethics is unfinished, non-singularised without the aesthetic singular, but aesthetics also singularizes the act itself (so it is aesthetics all the way down, aesthetics for the ethics to become). Ethics needs to be simultaneously inside the aesthetic in the act or meet aesthetics on the outside to equal each in the wholeness of the event.²⁸ The singularity and unity of those various planes is what the acts/event bring together.

To sum up, what I would like to take from Bakhtin for the purposes of this argument is the inseparability of ethico-aesthetics, performed together in a time/space, act/event continuum, and aesthetic consummation as the act of the production of the self, of the other, of the world and of the act itself.

Individuation as psychic, technical and collective in meme aesthetics

To reiterate the conceptual history outlined above, the Simondonian theory of individuation allows for an account of individuation that is both psychic and collective without recurring to psycho-analysis, while taking into account the theatre of individuation (and the element of performance) and for the technical apparatus of mediation that is core to such processes. Bakhtin is central to this argument because his work allows for the analysis of aesthetic objects, performances, relations and networks as productive of something traditionally perceived as being outside aesthetics (individuating humans beings, collectives, technologies, objects) and not limited to already 'completed and evaluated' aesthetic activities.²⁹

A first application of such theories to understanding memes, viral videos and certain other forms of cultural production online might be in suggesting that there is a special relation between memes and transindividuation, memes and teenage individuation, both psychic and collective. It is often claimed that memes are mainly made and popularized by youth; and where social media are concerned, there is an extended literature on teenagers' various uses of Facebook and various other platforms and their influence over self-image formation, friendship formation, romantic life and so on.³⁰ Dragan Espenschied claims that meme cultures perform the role of new kinds of subcultures for teenagers,³¹ serving as cultural platforms to affirm youth collectivity, to individuate psychically and collectively in a way that is both dissimilar to previous subcultures and unknown/annoying to parents.

Since individuation is aesthetic as discussed above in relation to Bakhtin, because it allows for and is based on, sensing into the other; the other sensing into you, you sensing into the collective that is in the making, in the technically mediated movement between the pre-individual, the individual and the collective. Memes and digital objects of cultural exchange become aesthetic objects at the boundary that mediate and ignite such multi-layered individuation. Such individuation is not only psychic; it is essentially collective, technical and physical: it is the individuation and consummation of ideas, norms, snippets of codes, codes of practice, cultural events and political acts, creative forms, sets of behaviours, gestures and performances, conceptual figures, youth practices, and technical platforms that unfolds online.

Today, more than before, such an aesthetic reflex of multi-scale multi-vector individuation does not only apply to technical individuation itself, it is also borne through technical mediation, which is performed with and in relation to other mediations. Moreover, digital technologies co-create spaces and actors which become de-facto networks where various kinds of individuation occur (e.g. as a teenager, or as an offence individuating on Facebook that spills over onto other platforms) and where they cross-pollinate each other with cultural forms, manners and fates.

Technology was always a part of individuation,³² but this process has advanced further. Technological digital media are not only supplementing or replacing memory techniques, changing

²⁸ TPA, p.28.

²⁹ TPA, p.79. Indeed, when Bakhtin offers a critique of theories of aesthetics, he suggests that 'aesthetics which is a theory of aesthetic activity is often replaced by a study of already completed and evaluated aesthetic activities'.

³⁰ Mizuko Ito, Sonja Baumer, Matteo Battanti, danah boyd, and others, *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out. Kids Living and Learning with New Media*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, MIT Press, 2009; Zizi Papacharissi, *A Networked Self. Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, New-York – London: Routledge, 2010.

³¹ In a private conversation.

³² Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*. Volume 1, 2 and 3. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 2009, 2011.

the management of literacy and visual culture, but the theatre of individuation also performs online, where the actors, as well as the structures propelling them are digital and real-time. The term 'digital' here entails that such technical media are significantly easier to alter and manipulate, to be spread and responded to, and that they are themselves subject to those same very processes of individuation and differentiation, performed through aesthetic work and in conjunction with other individuating scales and agents, which transform the agents they mediate whilst being transformed by them. Processes of individuation - psychic, collective and technical - though previously necessarily mediated, that may previously have occurred privately or leaving a light trace of documents, meetings and events, until they reached a certain level of maturity (or consummation), contemporarily often unfold from a semi-clad, raw and bare state, in public, on the network. To simplify, one might befriend a group of teens and witness, in the material form of various kinds of online content creation and exchange performed through the technical tools, their individuating dynamic, the individuation of ideas, or norms they espouse and the individuation of technologies themselves, to mention just a few aspects, which is then worked through other individuations to enunciate kinds of cultures, technical platforms and behaviours spinning off various scales of those amplifying individuations.

Generally speaking, there is a wide divide in scholarly work about such digital culture: scholars such as Clay Shirky argue that creative activity on the networks can be (and de facto mostly is) empowering, liberating and positively individuating³³ (without recourse to such terminology), people such as Sherry Turkle and Katherine Hayles, each through a different angle, argue that it may shorten attention span, and make one lonelier.³⁴ Bernard Stiegler would argue that technology is both poison and cure, whose results could be transindividuation (positive) or dis-individuation. Here, Stiegler describes a 'battle for intelligence' that needs to be launched against 'short circuits of individuation', where technologized and externalized knowledge, memory, and bodily gesture are managed by cognitive industries, exhausting 'libidinal energy.' For Stiegler, current processes of individuation have the tendency to be maintained by technology in such an automated manner, that their only result is stupidity.³⁵

In a certain way, making *Friday*³⁶ (a music video gone viral as the most disliked video on Youtube and popularized as such on Twitter) and re-enacting it sarcastically, or watching or watching someone watching nyan-cat³⁷ (a video of an animated cat with a Pop-Tart body that flies through space leaving a rainbow behind to the soundtrack of a loop from a jingly cheery Japanese pop song) for 10 hours, is an act providing aesthetic consummation of the self and collective through an aesthetic problem. The aesthetic problem here might be the individuation of the conceptual figure of an idiot³⁸, or of a certain kind of normativity, whether that of gender, time management or a pop song, or of an idea of falseness, of the allowances of Youtube and the production mechanism locked into it, amongst other things. *Friday*, for instance, was produced by a company called ARK Music Factory as a present (for which 4000 dollars were paid by the singer's mother). The company produces music videos for young musicians (now inevitably to be put in circulation on social networks in the hope of being discovered). Here, the psychic individuation of the Friday girl (Rebecca Black) precipitates and relies on the technical individuation of larger systems of which Youtube is part, collective individuations mediated by Youtube, individuation of certain musical cultures, American models of teenagehood and many more.

³³ Clay Shirky, 'The Political Power of Social Media. Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change'. in *Foreign Affairs*, 1, January/February, 2001, pp.1-9.

³⁴ Sherry Turkle, 2011, *Alone Together. Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, New York: Basic Books; Katherine N. Hayles, 2007, "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes", *Profession* 2007, 187-199, available online: < <http://media08.wordpress.com/2008/01/17/my-article-on-hyper-and-deep-attention/>>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

³⁵ Bernard Stiegler, "The Carnival of the New Screen: from Hegemony to Isonomy" in *The YouTube Reader*, eds. Snickars. P. and Vonderau, P., Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009; Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

³⁶ Rebecca Black, *Friday*, music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfVsfOSbJY0>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

³⁷ Nyan Cat 10 HOURS REACTION VIDEO! (Yes, I actually watched it for 10 hours), Youtube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6etnDBV2gY>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

³⁸ Olga Goriunova, "New Media Idiocy", in *Convergence*, forthcoming in 2013.

The affectivity that connects the self, the pre-individual and the collective here enters into a relation with a larger system of individuation of which it may become part. A mistake should not be made in thinking that aesthetic objects and practices mediate original free outpourings of creative and playful cultural emergence. It has been argued that such Internet cultures are indeed the engines of cognitive capitalist machinery.³⁹ On the other hand, it is important not to a priori dismiss such individuations or explain them ‘away’. Memes and viral videos are products of an apparatus with which the objects work together and which resonates with other kinds of individuation, including technical individuations. When a video goes viral, the viral here is not (or not only) the unexplainable event or act of cognitive labour producing data footprint to be capitalized upon. It is also the resonance between different kinds of psychic and collective, and technical individuations of various kinds of entities, processes and problems. Being attentive to what it can be productive of, - whether, potentially, of aesthetic value, socio-political meaning, or an organizational form, alongside other much less exciting processes, - enables seeing the complex interplay of forces feeding into each other at the unfolding of our world.

Short inventory of aesthetic problems

Two questions follow from the above: whether there are specific classes of objects, events and entities which have a tendency to individuate in particular through memes (teenage, political, humorous, Japanese manga cartoons, kawaii, cuddly infantile play), and why there are successful and failed memes (how is a resonance established that draws in mass circulation, mass response?).

These are uneasy questions. Memes are not innocent mediations, they are loaded forms, produced in their specificity by a combination of particular cultures, behaviours, technical structures and histories (to be presented below) and formulating new human-technical formations in turn. On the one hand, as a largely and at least initially teenage production, memes can certainly be seen as tightly linked to more specific sets of problems, ideas and questions individuating teenagerhood, play, norms, transgression, and the unfolding relation to and of society. Because memes that escape smaller subcultural niches and circulate in the mainstream social media rely on mass success, one would be inclined to think that memes precipitate collective individuation and the transindividual, and tend to favour phenomena related to larger assemblages of power, normativity, and history.

The *High Expectations Asian Father* meme⁴⁰, for instance, can be quite usefully analysed through this idea of the ironic, sarcastic performance of certain kinds of normativity experienced throughout childhood and teenage years. Here, the social constitution of performance of this meme family as the constitution of self by relying on the network (and here Judith Butler is evoked), a performance of well-established discursive formations (such as those recently made more visible through *The Tiger Mother* publication and its publicity campaign; newspapers covering research that demonstrated that Asian families are the only ethnic group in Britain in which the generally high academic achievement of children does not correlate in any way with the social position or income of parents⁴¹) is a theatrical mediation of individuating subjects, stereotypes, real life practices, and cultural differences residing in a particular space / time (in particular, Asian families in North America and the UK). Certain meme cultures can be seen as a Rablaisian exploration of the topics of sex or violence, or initiation into certain male cultures in relation to the norm, by male teenagers. But pictures of Putin leading cranes to winter homes and, subsequently, smelt to their spawning places, as well as being featured as an alpha salmon and penguin⁴²; critical memes

³⁹ For one of the most influential accounts, see Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture*, London: Verso, 2005.

⁴⁰ ‘High Expectations Asian Father’ at Know Your Meme platforms, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/high-expectations-asian-father>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

⁴¹ Warwick Mansell, “Hidden tigers: why do Chinese children do so well at school?”, *The Guardian*, 7.02.2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/feb/07/chinese-children-school-do-well?INTCMP=SRCH>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

⁴² News on Putin leading cranes to their winter homes started a wave of photo spoofs. Howard Amos, “Vladimir Putin leads endangered cranes on migration route in hang glider” in *Guardian*, 06.09.2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/06/vladimir-putin-cranes-hang-glider>, <accessed 25.09.2012>. Some collages can be seen here: http://super-hazanov.ya.ru/replies.xml?item_no=2282 and here: <http://demotivation.me/j5a4ip9xemalpic.html> <accessed 25.09.2012>.

involving David Cameron and a string of parodies of Nick Clegg's apology video⁴³ extend the discussion outside of the problems of teenagerhood. Certain memes precipitate the collective, the transindividual as part of themselves; they rely on such processes and call them into being. Other memes individuate subjects and conceptual personae through their performance – those of an idiot (nyan cat), a freak (planking), a joyful bon-vivant (Mr.Trololo), the politically concerned (pepperspray cop), and dissident, to name just a few.

On the other hand, memes are themselves products of individuations. Memes are part of an aesthetic force that individuates, but they also work from within their particular techno-aesthetic form, or structure, for instance, of an image with the superimposed text in sans-serif typeface, which prescribes, entrenches and molds what transpires through it. Here, their techno-aesthetic structure can partake in prescribing a meme's success or failure, but it is also a processual completion of a set of individuations that brought the architectonics of the meme into being, which needs to be tracked.

The meme as an aesthetic form is itself produced, then inflects and processes through itself various other kinds of becomings, reflecting the mediation that its own form and manner of working are indebted to. It acts as an aesthetic form, but also as a part of a larger techno-media landscape that offers techno-aesthetic consummation. The individuations memes are able to mediate may tend to be of particular kinds because memes themselves are forms sharpened on the 4chan image board, to be discussed below, and were only launched into more mainstream spaces of the Web as cultural forms after they had reached a state of relative completion, like haiku. Further, a crucial part of their aesthetic form is the wider assemblage of technical mediation that is used to circulate memes. This aspect of the techno-aesthetic form of the meme and the success of a particular meme is 'performing the network', is in playing the networks. All of those relational mediations constitute the way memes work and the kinds of individuations they amplify.

Following in the making: playing the network

A way to understand the formal constitution of a meme as a performative ritual, as an object that gains traction and morphs on multiple networks, and that has a particular physiology is to trace memes in the making: follow the human-technical mediations and the mechanics of online tools and networks through which memes become. Memes travel (through channels and influences), change registers (become political, become creative, become gory), change scales (from micro to macro; from niche platform to mainstream social network), they are made (in software environments, through online software, on platforms) and they work (through hardware, posts, links, cameras, mobiles, news, hashtags); and this established systematicity yields meme aesthetics.

As soon as the opinion of people producing memes is considered, the most striking and recurring motif is the linkage of memes to both rubbish and power. Memes are nonsensical rubbish, it is maintained, minuscule creative acts, that work as an exercise in power.⁴⁴ Networks are played to make memes work, and such playing is where power resides. Furthermore, it does not take very long to arrive at an understanding that there is a very firm connection between memes as they are known and Anonymous (LulzSec, AntiSec subgroups), a currently notable hacking network.

4chan and Anonymous

It can be argued, with a certain degree of generalization, that memes as a genre largely originate from a web-site, an English-speaking image-board, 4chan. 4chan was launched in 2003 by a 13 year old American boy, Christopher Poole, who discovered a Japanese image-board 2chan, was a fan of anime, and built 4chan to discuss Japanese pop culture, largely following the 2chan structure. 4chan has the structure of a text-board with 49 themed boards, where there is no registration and posting is anonymous (anonymous is a default username). There is no archive on 4chan (since 2008, there is 4chanarchive, but it does not automatically store all threads, a thread needs to be suggested for inclusion in the archive and such a process is moderated), and participants have to lure or encourage each other into reposting their images (this is how some images become popular and their culture is sustained).

4chan has nearly 18 million unique site visitors a month.⁴⁵ Hence, 4chan is 'the most trafficked image-board,' one that was not searchable by Google until a few months ago, and is not

⁴³ See #lolCam meme and a series of parodies on Nick Clegg's apology video.

⁴⁴ Consult *Encyclopedia Dramatica* on memes: <https://encycopediadramatica.se/Meme>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

⁴⁵ Lee Knuttila, 'User Unknown; 4chan, anonymity and contingency' in *First Monday*, Volume 16, Number 10, 3 October 2011. <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3665/3055>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

friended by businesses. It is a brutal website, full of ‘unpleasant discourse: disparaging language, distressing gory images and unbound arguments⁴⁶’, mixed in with something else. A sub-board of 4chan called ‘/b/’, associated originally with everything that is not /a/ (animation), a ‘notorious group’ linked to trolling is full of content that is ‘is obscene and frequently barely literate — a nonstop stream of language and imagery that’s often racist, sexist and homophobic’⁴⁷, a place mainly interested in the ‘lulz’⁴⁸ (or lols, abbreviation for ‘laughing out loud’, the most valued activity on 4chan, which acquired a status of an ontological category that is lived aesthetically and performatively, a very important part of meme culture too that gave name to the Lolcat phenomenon) - is the place where the Anonymous hacker group was born. In fact, Poole claims: ‘/b/ is responsible for pretty much... anything that comes out of 4chan that makes it into the public ...that people become familiar with ...has come from the Random board.’⁴⁹

In the following description and chronology I rely on Gabriela Coleman, an anthropologist studying free software coders, 4chan and the Anonymous network, who is best positioned, through her previous history of engagement with 4chan, to speak about the emergence of Anonymous. Coleman states that Anonymous as a trolling network, ‘preying on younger social media users’, ordering pizzas in large quantities to be delivered to a target company or individual, DDoS-ing (launching distributed denial of service attacks), Doxx-ing (exposing real identities, posting ‘preferably embarrassing’ private docs online) and began in 2006. Coleman further claims that the emergence of political personality, of political mind on /b/ board took place around 2008-2009, first through the project Chanology (against the Church of Scientology which deprived the world of lulz by forcing the removal of a leaked Tom Cruise video), occurring both online and offline, starting in winter 2008. That is where the *V for Vendetta* Guy Fawkes masks were first used.

Coleman argues that by September 2010, Operation Payback (support for the BitTorrent site Pirate Bay against an Indian firm paid by Motion Picture Association of America MPAA to DDoS it) established the formation of Anonymous’ political mind. Coleman emphasizes that there is no fixed group membership and frequently actions are performed by different people, but maintains that it is precisely through such coordination of Internet pranks, chaotic experimentation, and the experience of protesting (often physically), through action, that the political sensibility of Anonymous was born.⁵⁰

The history of Anonymous cannot be said to be propelled by an ethical political project (even with irreverent tactics): a lot of their trolling is or initially was pretty nasty (for example, they attacked people on a forum discussing epilepsy by posting GIF images flashing at high speeds that were hidden in threads with innocent titles). Their political projects taken on a timeline are nearly random in terms of their object (though can be loosely united by the ‘against censorship’ theme): as Coleman firmly states, the organization has no structure, no leaders, and all planning is done on mostly open IRC channels.⁵¹

For instance, one of the most reknowned subgroups, Lulzsec and its prominent campaign in support of Wikileaks started in the following way, as Coleman explains: ‘Lulzsec – Wikileaks support started from trolling Aaron Barr, chief executive of a private security company HBGary Federal who claimed he’d discovered the main actors of Anonymous that he was going to make an announcement about’. Within 2 days, all emails stored on the servers of HBGary Federal were hacked and published on Pirate Bay. Barr’s Twitter account was hacked into. Lulzsec put a notice on HBGary Federal’s website: ‘This domain has been seized by Anonymous under section #14 of the rules of the Internet⁵².’ In the documents put online, emails and presentations were found that

⁴⁶ Gabriela Coleman, “Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action”, The New Everyday. A Media Commons Project, 2011, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action>, <accessed 25.09.2012>; Gabriela Coleman, “Gabriela Coleman on Anonymous and Lulzsec”, podcast with Jerry Brito, Technology Liberation Front, 13.03.2012, <http://techliberation.com/2012/03/13/gabriella-coleman/>, <accessed 25.09.2012>.

⁴⁷ Coleman, Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Christopher Poole, ‘Meme factory’, 12 September 2009. Lecture at Paraflows 09 Festival, Vienna, Austria; see the transcript at <http://digiom.wordpress.com/2010/04/06/moot-on-4chan-and-why-it-works-as-a-meme-factory/> <accessed 25.09.2012>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Rule 14 is from 4chan’s “Rules of the Internet” list: “Do not argue with trolls—it means that they win.”

alleged that three private security companies were working on a plan for the Bank of America's law firm, aiming to undermine Wikileaks. Following that, Lulzsec decided to support Wikileaks and Julian Assange and started attacking websites associated with the supporting of the FBI (this wave of hacks was largely documented by mass media in December 2011).

This link between Anonymous and its various hacker subgroups, memes and their birthplace - /b board on 4chan, is where the power that is described in relation to memes resides. It may be seen as the link between meaninglessness (or, as knowyourmeme calls it, lack of content) or complete obscenity and the emergence of action, of position taking, again, both meaningless or distressful or quite precise and acutely aware of itself. The differentiation or individuation, the open-ended emergence of a political campaign, a sweet meme of a Lolcat, or an attack, mediated through the masterful orchestration of network architecture, software shortfalls, human errors, bespoke code, the dark web, through the enlistment of torrent networks, encryption services and so on, is what unites both memes and Anonymous. The individuation of a political collective, a position, a cultural trend, an aesthetic form, or of a series of pictures arising from the same place through the differentiating human-technical mediation is what exploring memes brings to light.

The unique question memes raise is that of the kind, scale and range of phenomena that unfold online through various objects and processes of digital aesthetics and technical assemblages that both yield them and are then played back by them. The constitution of such aesthetic mediation, which remains thoroughly technical, is a truly new aspect of digital aesthetics. It is a new aesthetic form that individuates through larger human-technical assemblages and also individuates something through itself, thus inevitably changing, infusing and selecting such becomings that such digital aesthetics offers to contemporary forms of the unfolding of life.

Architectonics of memes

The technical structures of 4chan and the peculiarity of /b board, briefly presented above, that previously included no registration or captcha, and no automated archiving or search, ensure that images posted across different topics disappear if they are not well-liked and are not constantly reposted by others. Such constraints or traits form human behaviours and technical manners that become part of the aesthetic forms of memes.⁵³ Poole explains: 'The boards are limited to a set number of pages and so ... if we had a board with ten pages, ten threads a page, you can only have a hundred threads at any given time, so if somebody posts a new thread, at least one thread is being bumped off, so there's just no retention on the site. ... Post something remotely funny, repost ad nauseam, because again, if you don't repost it, and this is known as meme-forcing on 4chan, if you don't repost it, nobody will see.'⁵⁴ When and if the image accumulates popularity on 4chan, it would most likely eventually spill over to other platforms. For example, the Lolcat meme family started as Caturday on 4chan. As mentioned above, 4chan was described as a meme factory, before the term memefactory was established as a genre of a Web platform (to be discussed below).

Encyclopedia Dramatica suggests an hierarchy of technical 'machines' working memes through. An offensive diagram depicts dogs eating each others' excrement with 4chan first in a row, followed by reddit, then Digg!, to be finished off by Facebook, suggesting a route through which a particular meme spills over from 4chan, through iterations and platforms, into 'mainstream' culture. In fact, 'playing the network' means, in relation to memes (even if they were born on 4chan), using, for example, Twitter smartly and pointedly, and generally employing a combination of channels, where a meme gets amplified by boingboing, buzzfeed and other platforms. Those platforms and networks form assemblages that become extensions of 4chan's human-technical mannerisms.

If memes, at least in the early history of this aesthetic form, are spill-overs of some of 4chan in-jokes, then one fascinating conclusion is that memes are not in fact about social media (4chan is not social media). Memes' architectonics, the way memes acquire certain form, a set of rules along which they are often produced, rituals through and around which they work, and how they travel and entice and require people to enact them is largely an inheritance, a reflection of 4chan's platform structure. Memes as a genre are the creation of 4chan as a platform, where what makes a meme an aesthetic form and is part of the apparatus of memes has a history as part of the techno-human mechanics of 4chan.

This is not the complete story. A few years on, and there are meme generators (memegenerator), meme aggregators and, generally, a number of online tools which enable the

⁵³ It is worthwhile noting that the process is not that clear: some memes originated on Reddit, and used to originate on somethingawful (sa) in the early 2000 before 4chan was established by a member of sa.

⁵⁴ Christopher Poole, 'Meme factory'.

easier creation of memes.⁵⁵ Such platforms offer the user ‘exploitables’ (an image ready to be topped with text), already sorted into meme families, or allow the user to upload an image, and create or modify superimposed text (that comes in a ‘meme’ font) and publish the result on selected platforms. Meme culture has lost its innocence, but similar developments happened elsewhere, for instance, in viral video production. Youtube offers software editing functions online, as part of its general interface. Thus, Youtube genres, such as “response to” video, families of viral videos with changed soundtracks, manipulated timelines, or cover versions are in-built functions of Youtube, which, coupled with computers’ or phones’ often in-built cameras and microphones not only contribute to the creation of aesthetic forms, but are, in fact, results of certain aesthetic forms that have been developed. Whereas cloud computing as a “philosophy” is hardly attributable to re-enactments on Youtube or to memes, certain human-technical platforms and features are certainly consequences of techno-aesthetic formulations gaining traction, where such formulations are themselves, as has been shown, consequences of other human-technical platforms and their features. Such multiplex individuations, streamed through each other, help reconsider the role and importance of aesthetics, digital aesthetic objects, their mediation and the apparatuses through which they are mediated, in processes of individuation that are, technical, psychic, and collective. The individuations of political discontent, business ideas, programmers’ and designers’ workloads, of corporate forms as well as teenage transgression become enmeshed in digital aesthetics and its unfolding, which is in turn fed by such individuations.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the term aesthetics was used in a few ways. Aesthetics as a technology-imbued mediation of individuations that enable memes to act as theatres of psychic and collective individuation, whether in the becoming of an American male teenager, or that of Asian learning culture, a certain political discontent or a creative urge. But here, the aesthetics of memes is itself produced by the techno-human structure of the /b board of 4chan, where the aesthetic consummation of the performance on the board and of the board itself joins in with wider factors in media ecologies to produce both the meme form and the Anonymous group. The political activities of Anonymous, including their more recent support of Tunisian uprisings, meme cultures and ‘memefactory’ platforms are all individuations, individual, transindividual and technical, political and cultural, that have been ignited by the ecology of b/ board.

Possibly, what is most interesting about such a process is how a techno-aesthetic arrangement, such as 4chan, is able to produce strong cultures, movements or aesthetic forms that reflect its internal architecture and act as self-organising, self-regulating mechanisms, that then, in turn, inform the production of new techno-social tools and arrangements, such as meme factories or political actions and social figures such as hacking groups. And what following memes demonstrates is the circular movement of mutual formation of technical infrastructures imbued with aesthetic theatres of individuation and the mediated forms of culture, politics and new human-technical platforms, ultimately, pointing at the new kinds and manners of aesthetics.

⁵⁵ The “Lolcat entrepreneur” Ben Huh (ex-owner icanhascheezburger), described by Wired as “the Internet’s meme maestro” found investors to acquire a blog dedicated to Lolcats in 2007, icanhascheezburger (the beginning of massive craze for Lolcat culture) for 2 mln. He established Cheezburger network that has dozens of sites where people aggregate memes, submit their image macros, research and document memes collectively (memefactory, knowyourmeme, thememebase). The company has 75 employees.