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## The Pepe the Frog meme: An examination of social, political, and cultural implications through the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd

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# **Feels Good Man: An analysis of Pepe the Frog in the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd**

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**Key Words:** Memescape, Meme Studies, meme, Darwinian absurd, Pepe the Frog, intertextuality, Internet studies

## **Introduction**

This article offers an examination of the meme known as Pepe the Frog. Through the 2010s, the Pepe character became viral. In 2015, the Pepe the Frog meme was crowned “biggest meme of the year” by Tumblr (Hathaway, 2015). However, only one year later, the Pepe character was branded as a hate symbol by the U.S. Anti-Defamation League (*Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2017a). Having begun as an innocuous joke, the Pepe meme took on a range of other complex characteristics. One of the most important was its incorporation into alt-right politics. We discuss this incorporation, especially as it relates to Donald Trump’s deployment of the meme.

We propose that the Pepe meme became such a viral phenomenon as a result of the ways in which the meme articulates a mood of Trump-era politics. In order to unpack this proposal, we situate the arguments within the theoretical context of the Darwinian Absurd, especially using the work of Kathleen Robin Hart (2012). The overarching aim of this article is to use Pepe the Frog as a case study to illustrate the various ways memes can be deployed as political tools and examined as cultural artefacts.

We will begin by introducing some background and a brief history of the Pepe the Frog meme by placing the text within the context of the “memescape.” This phrase, coined by Bradley Wiggins, is a “portmanteau of meme and landscape to imply the virtual, mental, and physical realms that produce, reproduce, and consume Internet memes” (2015, p. 1893). After a brief history of Pepe as a meme, we draw from Kathleen Robin Hart’s arguments around the Darwinian Absurd in order to read the Pepe character as an expression of the political mood, in order to argue that the generation and integration of the Darwinian Absurd is related to a range of socio-political themes, such as race (as in Ghetto Pepe), the phenomenon of alt-right ‘trolling’ (or

bullying), and the exploitation of the Pepe character in the Trump campaign (by both supporters and the Administration).

We then move to an analysis of the meme as it functions across the broader memescape. By using the work of Derrida and Kristeva, we analyse the role of intertextuality in generating the Darwinian Absurd with a particular focus on the recurring theme of the humanoid-amphibian, or ‘frogness.’ This examination reveals the complex mechanisms through which the alt-right movement mobilises and draws cultural currency from broader Internet culture and the ‘memescape’.

This is a clear departure from the study of memes in the field of Internet and New Media Studies. Though there is much existing work on memes in these disciplines, some of which we make use of in this research, those works tend to focus on spreadability of memes in the context of participatory culture as a function of social exchange (Jenkins, 2009; Wiggins and Bowers, 2014), or the emergence of the meme as a genre (Wiggins and Bowers, 2014; Schiffman, 2014). The purpose of this article is not to place the Pepe the Frog meme within the existing literature nor replicate the existing narratives on the emergence and history of meme culture which have already been well-executed (see Wiggins and Bowers, 2014; Schiffman, 2012, 2013, 2014). Rather, this research seeks to extricate the meme from this dialogue in order to launch a different conversation about cultural artefacts and their role in the reproduction of the Darwinian Absurd as it is constructed and expressed through digital contexts. In the contemporary era, in which the West is witness to a renewed left-right divide in the political consciousness (see Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2012; see Bornschier, 2010), the Pepe the Frog meme emerges as a textual artefact through which we witness Darwinian Absurdism and textual ‘play.’ Understanding Pepe in relation to Darwinian Absurdism and the frog meme genre is critical to understanding that the Trump campaign’s use of the meme (both the Administration and its supporters) emerges from a complex range of intertextual connections that constitute Internet culture, which then work their way into mainstream dialogues and the broader political landscape.

### **A brief history of Pepe as a ‘unit of culture’**

Pepe the Frog, as a meme, can be understood as a “unit of culture that spreads from person to person by means of copying or imitation” (Schiffman, 2012, p. 188). Thus, the term ‘meme’ suggests that Pepe the Frog is a non-closing textual artefact produced through digital collaboration. Wiggins and Bowers note that, much like memes themselves, the word ‘meme’ “reveals a term that has mutated and been appropriated and repurposed since its beginning” (2014, p. 1888). It is generally conceded that the current usage of the term in Internet vernacular

originated from Richard Dawkins' coinage of the word in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), where he insists that human evolution is provoked just as much through cultural, 'memetic' leaps as genetic ones. Dawkins proposed the meme simply as a cultural unit or idea which "sought replication for the purpose of its own survival" such "as slogans, catch phrases, fashion, learned skills, and so on" (as cited in Wiggins and Bowers, 2014, p. 1889). As many concepts do, the term finally leached out of the academic realm and into the popular vernacular.

However, the application of the term 'meme' for viral digital media has been widely contested. The issue at stake is the problem of attaching a metaphor to a complex system of culture, which tends to over-simplify or generalise the actual mechanics of the way content might spread. Wiggins and Bowers note that the 'meme' metaphor proposes a model "that confines the memetic model to the biological and evolutionary" and that "this model serves as a false analogy for the digital understanding and usage of meme" (2014, p. 1889). Henry Jenkins has also taken issue with the term, explaining that it relies "on a biological metaphor to explain the way media content moves through cultures, a metaphor that confuses the actual power relations between producers, properties, brands, and consumers" (Jenkins, 2009). Though we concede that Jenkins has a valid point, we propose that these etymological implications do not preclude other approaches. This, we argue, is because the term 'meme', like any metaphorical representation, does support *one way* of understanding how memes emerge and mutate, which may run alongside other, non-metaphorical approaches. In this article, the resonance of the 'meme metaphor' is significant because, as will become clear later, we deploy the Darwinian Absurd, a perspective based around a notion of phylogenetic ancestry and bound to concepts of genetic/memetic evolution.

The Pepe meme itself features an anthropomorphic frog; a bipedal humanoid characterised by green skin and large bulbous, frog-like eyes and lips. However, the Pepe meme did not begin its lifecycle as a meme. Rather, the origin image was borrowed from a cartoon panel. That is, the origin character for the meme initially emerged as 'Pepe the Frog' from a cartoon strip created by artist Matt Furie. It debuted in Furie's e-zine comic strip *Boy's Club #1* published by Teenage Dinosaur sometime around 2006 (Playback, 2008). Furie has indicated that, in fact, the Pepe character was introduced on MySpace as early as 2005 (Haskell, 2015).

It was one specific panel in Furie's comic which launched Pepe's career as a meme. The panel in question first circulated among the 4chan community in 2008 (Collins, 2015). It is claimed that a user on 4Chan's /b/ board uploaded a scanned image of a single panel from the comic strip ("Know Your Meme," 2009) and the Pepe meme was born. In the original cartoon strip, another character, 'Andy,' surprises Pepe the Frog by walking in on him while he is using

the toilet to urinate (Furie, 2016: 42). However, it is noted by Andy that Pepe has pulled his pants down the entire way to the floor. In the final panel, which shows Pepe in a later scene playing video games, another anthropomorphic character named ‘Wolf Man’ is captioned with the remark: “hey pepe—I heard you pull yer pants down to go pee [sic],” to which Pepe simply replies, “feels good man” (Furie, 2016, p. 42). From this panel, both the Pepe figure and the phrase “feels good man” were combined to form a viral image macro, which is a meme which features both image and text.

In its next evolution the Pepe meme mutated into Sad Frog. The meme archiving database, *Know Your Meme*, traces the Sad Frog origin meme to an archived 4chan thread from January 22, 2009 in which a user has inverted Pepe’s smile and changed the catchphrase to “feels bad man” (Know Your Meme, 2010). According to the Know Your Meme database, “Sad Frog may be seen as the antithesis of Feels Good Man” (Know Your Meme, 2010). In August of the same year, the image was posted in the 4chan Body Building Forum with the text changed to “not good man” (Know Your Meme, 2010). The phrase “you will never [x]” also emerged as a viral meme—the x in this instance referring to the variety of statements that succeed the phrase “you will never” to indicate disappointment or dissatisfaction. The Sad Frog icon grew in popularity until the phrase “feels bad man” was eventually listed on Urban Dictionary in November 2010 (Know Your Meme, 2010).

In 2011, users of social networking sites had begun to report what they felt was concerning activity with boards associated with high frequency of Pepe memes, in particular, 4chan’s /r9k/ (Robot9000), a board which was used as a kind of ‘trading post’ for users’ awkward or depressing stories. These often referenced the Sad Frog meme in order to illustrate the anecdotes using image macros (Know Your Meme, 2015a). According to Know Your Meme’s chronicle of the Pepe the Frog lifecycle, the /r9k/ board became increasingly filled with “negative” and racist comments, which led to its deletion. However, the board, along with all the Pepe memes, would be restored only nine months later (Know Your Meme, 2015b).

By 2012, Sad Frog had spilled over into the Tumblr community and shortly after began appearing on more mainstream social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and finally Instagram around two years later (Know Your Meme, 2015b; Anderson and Revers, 2018). In April 2012, yet another version of the meme, known as Smug Pepe, emerged as a viral phenomenon. This would later re-emerge in connection with Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. We will return to this development in detail shortly (Know Your Meme, 2015b).

From 2012 to 2014, Pepe the Frog became more diverse and was altered in ever more outrageous and deviant ways as it evolved and percolated across the various networking sites.

*Know Your Meme* reports that in circa June 2014 an Instagram account titled Ghetto Memes began posting far more offensive Pepe scenarios than had been previously seen (Know Your Meme, 2015b). A search of the Reddit 4chan community, dated at September 2018, continues to reveal the darkest aspects of the meme's incarnation, featuring the once-peaceful frog character engaged in all manner of scatological, pornographic, violent and politically or culturally offensive activities (Reddit). It has been noted in several sources that a part of this period of the meme's evolution was informed by the active campaign by 4chan members, and other Internet users who consider themselves as alienated by the wider Internet community, to re-appropriate their original creation by making Pepe as unattractive to the mainstream public as possible—or as they are termed by these users, “normies” (see Nagle, 2017). This shift is attributed to the occasion in which both Katy Perry and Nicki Minaj, both popular singers, posted Pepe in their respective tweets (Kiberd, 2015). At this stage of Pepe's lifecycle, the meme was so popular and widespread it was awarded Tumblr's 2015 “Meme of the Year” (Hathaway, 2015).

From 2015, Pepe was understood as a character which could be reconfigured across a wide variety of memes, and the image became more overtly political. This was one year before the November 8, 2016 U.S. election in which Donald Trump would take out the presidency. The *ABC News* reported that: “Pepe became a tongue-in-cheek symbol of the “alt-right” fringe movement and its loosely connected ideologies of white nationalism, neo-Nazism and anti-immigration.” The same report also noted that “Pepe memes promoting Donald Trump's presidential campaign became so ubiquitous that President Trump himself tweeted an image blending his likeness with the cartoon frog in October 2015” (*Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 2017b). This is the point in the Pepe narrative in which Smug Pepe re-emerges in direct relation to the U.S presidential race. Like much Internet phenomena, it can be difficult to pinpoint an origin moment, but the most likely explanation that has been offered for Trump's uptake of the meme and its incorporation into his campaign is that Trump felt that he *knew* that he would win the election and wanted to humiliate rivals who had mocked his entry into the race (see [Pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com](http://Pepethefrogfaith.wordpress.com), n.d.). According to C. W. Anderson and Matthias Revers,

Trump retweeted a Pepe depicting himself in October of 2015, apparently strategically utilizing the connotation of this symbol, while the alt-right used Pepe not only to spread their propaganda but also to support their candidate, the association seemed undeniable and the meme got fully politicized. (Anderson & Revers, 2018, p. 31)

Trump piggy-backed on the hubris and arrogance conveyed by the Smug Pepe meme in order to both intimidate opposing factions and sweep up supporters from the darker corners of the Internet

who were beginning to identify Pepe with white nationalism and right-wing politics. These were the people whose views were allied with what was becoming known as the alt-right movement. At this point, artist Matt Furie re-entered the dialogue about the Pepe meme. Reporting his anger and frustration that his character had become an “icon of hate,” he called the development a “nightmare” in an essay published in *Time Magazine* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017b).

It seems that the Pepe icon was officially launched into the mainstream political arena as the result of an incident during a Hillary Clinton campaign speech in which she was condemning racism and Islamophobia in America, to which an audience member can be heard yelling, “Pepe!” (Cope, 2017; Hillary Clinton interrupted by Pepe shout, 2016). In September 2016, only one month before the U.S. election, memes depicting the frog as Hitler and other anti-Semitic iterations became so prevalent that the U.S. Anti-Defamation League officially listed the Pepe the Frog character as a hate symbol (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017a). As a direct reaction to this move, Furie approached the Anti-Defamation League and the two parties decided to work together in the #savepepe campaign to reclaim the character from its status as an alt-right symbol (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017a). The campaign did little to stem the circulation of racist Pepe memes and so, in May 2017, Furie took the decision to ‘kill off’ Pepe by drawing a final panel depicting the frog in a funeral casket (Vincent, 2017). Since the ‘death,’ Furie has claimed that he will attempt to resurrect Pepe from the dead through a crowdfunding project which may provide the funds to launch legal action against those using the image without permission (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2017a).

After Pepe was ‘killed off,’ Fantagraphics has since published a *Boy’s Club Anthology* (Furie 2016). Despite Pepe’s virtual death, the meme continues to circulate, indicating that despite Furie’s attempt at artistic control, the icon truly belongs to the Internet. Users on a variety of social media sites still trade what are known as ‘rare Pepes,’ that is, Pepe memes which feature artistic, unusual or uncommon uses of the Pepe character and which can be bought and sold using cryptocurrency and even fiat currency (Bates n.d.).

### **Frogness and the Darwinian Absurd: Pepe as primordial self**

Here, we read the Pepe icon through the *internal* mechanisms by which the meme is constructed in order to argue that the generation and integration of the Darwinian Absurd is related to a range of socio-political themes, such as race (as in Ghetto Pepe), the phenomenon of alt-right ‘trolling’ (or bullying), and the exploitation of the Pepe character in the Trump campaign (by both supporters and the Administration). We turn here to Kathleen Robin Hart’s discussion of the

relationship between humour, play, and animality, or what she terms the “Darwinian Absurd” (2012), in order to argue that Pepe’s *frogness* is critical to the meme’s construction of, and relationship to, the Absurd. For Hart, the grand narrative of evolution that is embedded in the Western psyche enables a trajectory of humour to “focus on the foibles of humans who forget or deny their animality” (p. 479). The notion of human animality is both confronting and pleasurable because “it permits us to enjoy the sudden change of cognitive state that occurs when our mental patterns or expectations are violated (Morreal)” (p. 479). We use Hart’s approach here because it provides a fitting framework for the way in which Pepe is utilised as a bridge between the subject and the animal through which the Absurd might emerge.

As an amphibious humanoid, Pepe facilitates an encounter with the primordial self, which is channelled through humour and play. Meredith Sabini might call this an encounter with one’s “phylogenetic ancestry,” which, following Carl Jung, Sabini explains functions as in a deep-seated collective remembrance of an evolutionary background (2008). Sabini asserts that:

A process may unfold whereby the modern self discovers and then comes into relationship with this phylogenetic foundation, which Jung formally termed the collective unconscious and referred to informally as *archaic man* or the *two-million-year-old in us*. (2008, p. 34; original emphasis)

Through an unconscious play with frogness, Pepe is both product and reminder that our social hierarchies are related, even in their most ancient origins, to that of the non-human animal. This relationship invokes a tension which is mediated and buffered by the cadence of ‘joke’ or ‘play’ “because play calls attention to our basic lack of control, we can suspend hierarchy, and acknowledge our commonality with animals, defined as the creatures lacking conscious self-control” (Hart, 2012, p. 484). Thus, the ‘play’ of Pepe—the constant mutation and sharing—is an acting out of this Darwinian Absurd. In a broader sense, the Pepe meme emerges from the Internet’s inherent collaborative process. This points to a wish to express notions *about* the social, or, perhaps, the ways in which a subject might interact in that social field (Sabini, 2008, p. 34).

There are also patterns of disgust in the social understanding of the Pepe meme, which can be linked to the Darwinian absurdity of transhuman frogness. This notion is perhaps best illustrated by popular culture’s use of frog-like humanoids to conceive monstrous and horrifying creatures. In the film *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), the monster, known as the Gill-Man, embodies the amphibious-humanoid, which both captivates and repulses the audience, particularly in his desire to abduct the human woman, Kay for what may very well be a psycho-sexual motive. Crucially, the foundation of the plot rests on a group of scientists who mount an expedition into the Amazon jungle in order to uncover evidence that suggests that land animals



are directly descended from sea animals. The danger and repulsiveness of the frogman emerge from its seeming closeness to human selfhood and the solidification of a link to the primordial self.

In this instance, disgust emerges from the interplay between the monster's amphibian/animal embodiment and its very human hetero-masculine desire for a human female. However, it is not the amphibiousness of the monster that repulses—it is the humanness of the monster that is deeply disturbing. This theme is played out in the plot where the creature abducts the only woman on board the vessel (Kay) and takes her back to his lair. There is an implication here of fixation and sexual desire, which blurs the lines between animality and humanity and thus leads to feelings around disgust. Hart draws from previous work to note that “as ‘metaphorically construed non-animals’ (Hart and Long, p. 51), we can be traumatised when confronted with the truth of our animal being (Goldenberg)” (2012, p. 479). In a similar sense, the Pepe character, in relation to the humanoid-amphibian, is a part of the long-standing play in fiction, and with fictional characters, to construct and express a relationship to the Darwinian Absurd. The humanoid-amphibian character has been a recurring preoccupation in the Western canon, to name only a few; Mr. Toad from *Wind in the Willows* (1908), the Hynerian race from the TV series *Farscape* (1999-2003), the amphibian man from the film *The Shape of Water* (2017), and The Deep Ones from H.P Lovecraft's fictional universe. The humanoid-amphibian hybrid has an even longer history; it has been noted across ancient mythologies and, later, recognised in medieval cryptozoology (Bane, 2016). In a cultural sense, we might say that the play of disgust as it manifests across the frogman mythology, and the preoccupation with the frogman character, serves as one channel through which to explore notions of the Darwinian Absurd. Exploring these themes is critical to the broader argument of this research in order to fully address not only *how* the Pepe character indicates Darwinian Absurdism but *why* the Pepe character provided such a fertile site of meaning for appropriation and exploitation by the alt-right community. That is, the meme lent itself to exploitation of the Darwinian Absurd and can be used (although not necessarily) to frame notions around offense and disgust.

In drawing a further parallel in this discussion to Pepe's human-frog hybridity, we refer to the branch of Pepe memes known as Ghetto Pepe, which has also been mobilised for political purposes. These iterations of the Pepe character demonstrate deviant, hypermasculine, and scatological aspects as a deeper, perhaps more dangerous, form of ‘play’. Here, the Darwinian Absurd is invoked in the distinction between the profane and the sacred. In this particular branch of the Pepe meme, the Pepe character engages in all manner of perverse and often sexually violent behaviours. It is assumed that the creators of these kinds of memes regard the content as

‘funny’ or at least ‘fun’. Although, there are other motivating factors at play such as; to troll, to bully, to intimidate, and so forth. This is perhaps most visible in the clear manifestation of racism apparent in the Ghetto Pepe sub-genre of the meme. Here, The memes are coupled with stereotypical tropes of blackness and black street culture. In these instances, there is an underlying, but clear, assertion of white superiority, which points to the alt-right’s mobilisation of the meme as a political manoeuvre.

We can read this deviant Pepe as another expression of the Darwinian Absurd, which speaks to the confusing and contradictory nature of contemporary mainstream politics that recent commentators have noted present us with “violations” of conventional standards (Reicher 2017). For example, in Hart’s elucidation of the Darwinian Absurd, she refers to Beckett’s absurdist literature, in particular, the use of animals in the black comedy *Watt* (1954), to explain the way in which animals are used to blur the ostensibly cardinal lines between animal and man. Hart writes that:

In Beckett’s *Watt*, animals participate in the subversion of religious themes, from the Catholic magazine editor’s concern with rodents that eat the host, to the missionary trampled to death by an ostrich, to Watt’s experience, upon falling into a ditch, of hearing a mixed choir that, as it turns out, may really have been a chorus of frogs. (2012, p. 479)

The use of frogs in the text as a symbol of absurdity provides a fitting parallel to the study of frogness as a function of the Darwinian Absurd. The Pepe character, as a frogman, enacts a similar function in that it subverts and extends the limits of the self, resulting in the experience of both disgust and humour. Take for example the instance of “Poo Poo Pee Pee” Pepe, an iteration of the meme which features the character participating in various processes of defecation and urination (Pepe the Frog Wikia, n.d.). In these manifestations, Hart might suggest that:

The levelling of humans with animals, however, occurs not just through the evocation of specific animals and human bodily vulnerability, but also via the representation of various cognitive functions as unconscious and automatic. [...] The automatic, almost instinctive nature of Watt’s persistent ruminations is at odds with the cultural assumption that problem solving and specialness to God separate humans from animals. (2012, p. 479)

Therefore, underlying the anxiety of the Darwinian Absurd frames the possibility that our engagement with the social structure is less a conscious, intellectual experience and more an exercise in unconscious reactions and relations. The utter absurdity of the Pepe character, as it traverses the digital landscape, points to these kinds of confrontations between the baser and the loftier aspects of social interactions.

Pepe the Frog's disruption of convention and etiquette resonates with our overall argument by pointing back to some of the major tensions emerging throughout the Trump 2016 campaign. In the contemporary political landscape, Trump's successful presidential campaign has been identified as the epitome of paradox. In a well-articulated summation of this paradox, Stephen Reicher explains that:

What was thought to be a weakness [lack of political experience] is touted as a strength. Here, then, Trump's constant violations of political rules, so often seen as presaging his decline, actually served to consolidate his ascendancy. Furthermore, the lack of support from heavyweights of the Republican establishment—including Mitt Romney and George H. W. Bush—only helped to increase his poll ratings. His failure to follow the rules of politics and his rejection by the political class validated his in-group status in the eyes of an antipolitical audience. Supporters confirmed that he is 'one of us,' not 'one of them.' All this helps to explain what the *Guardian* newspaper called 'the paradox that has been at the heart of the Trump phenomenon'—that is, 'How can a billionaire businessman from New York be the one who 'gets' the struggling working class?' (Reicher, 2017).

The Internet expresses this double logic in the imbrication of Pepe the Frog *as* Donald Trump. The Pepe/Trump artefact is now one of the most common iterations of the meme and has been used to express a range of political moments that took place during the 2016 election campaign. Much like Pepe the Frog's symbolic use as an icon that shows blatant disregard for the limits and rules set out by social convention (for example, in the origin meme Pepe 'pees with his pants down,' which sets the tone for the following iterations of the meme in which Pepe enacts all manner of social disruption), Donald Trump's disregard of propriety has been linked to his success in politics. Tanya Luhrmann points out that Donald Trump had been "the most rule-violating candidate this country has seen in decades," arguing that:

Trump repeatedly says and does things that most pundits think should destroy his viability: Many Mexican immigrants "are rapists." Women who have abortions should be punished. Asked whether he'd publicly reject the support of the former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, he said, "I just don't know anything about him." None of this has blunted his appeal [...] Trump may be appealing *because* of his transgressions, and not *despite* them. (Luhrmann, 2016; original emphasis)

In a time when a white, male, billionaire and industrial tycoon can ostensibly symbolise the average disenfranchised American, the resulting cultural response crafted through social exchange, comes in the form of a Frog-President. This image thoughtfully expresses the paradoxical and absurdist nature of the contemporary zeitgeist. However, the imbrication of Trump *as* Pepe does not (necessarily) indicate a deliberately ironic take on this paradox. In fact,

as we mention above, many of the Trump-Pepe memes are crafted and created by pro-Trump, right-wing supporters who believe that the iteration of Trump as a ‘Smug Pepe’ articulates the final triumph of Trump as the political underdog. It can be read as an expression of hubris, or gloating over those who would believe that Trump would lose the campaign. Therefore, we might suggest that in the Pepe meme universe there are two parallel yet contradictory themes emerging simultaneously. One is the Frog-President as a moment of alt-right triumph, one is the Frog-President as the ultimate political paradox.

### **Genre, Intertextuality and the generation of the Absurd in the memescape**

Here, we read Pepe in relation to the way that the mechanics of intertextuality give rise to a sense of the Absurd. Pepe’s enactment of the Darwinian Absurd is not an isolated cultural artefact but is produced within the wider matrix of meme culture. Understanding Pepe in relation to the frog meme genre is critical to understanding that the Trump campaign’s use of the meme (both the Administration and its supporters) does not emerge in a cultural vacuum but instead emerges from a complex range of intertextual connections that constitute Internet culture. By appreciating these links, we can show how Internet culture and its use of memes influences, and is influenced by, the broader political landscape. As we discuss above, Pepe’s frogness functions in textual relation to the presence of other amphibian-humanoids represented in popular culture, such as the frogman monsters depicted in film throughout the twentieth century. However, Pepe’s frogness also emerges in textual relation to other frog (or frog-like) characters *within* the memescape, indicating a preoccupation with frogness which functions as a self-referential universe.

Pepe’s popularity is reinforced by the ‘frog meme textual universe’ because Pepe resonates with, and calls forth, so many other memetic collisions between animality, humour, and the Darwinian Absurd. When one meme is consumed—all are consumed. This is because all memes in the memescape affect each other’s signifying systems through the processes of reverberation and subcultural collusion, a process we will now examine. Thus, understanding of memes *as* genre provides a grounding for the intertextual play of memes.

In her comprehensive work on meme culture, Limor Schiffman uses the concept of genre in order to theorise the different kinds of meme and the generic work each meme genre performs (2014: 99-100). Each meme category does the work of genre as each is a “socially recognized type of communicative action” (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992, p. 299) and “shares not only structures and stylistic features, but also themes, topics, and intended audiences” (Schiffman, 2014, p. 99). In framing the meme through the concept of genre, we can approach the Pepe meme

as a subgenre of a broader genre; that is, the ‘Pepe meme genre’ falls under the rubric of the ‘frog meme genre’ and thus points us to another set of intertextual implications.

As indicated by Schiffman, interacting with, and contributing to, the memescape “requires a sophisticated meme literacy” (2014, p. 99), which can be theorised in relation to intertextuality. In her work, Schiffman unpacks meme literacy in relation to generic constructions, and we use that as a launching point to further excavate the deeper intertextual implications of this literacy. Meme culture’s preoccupation with frogs—a kind of ‘frog echoism’—has been recently noted in mainstream discourse. In the e-zine article “The evolution and secret destiny of frog memes,” author Nick Douglas attempts to explain why there are so many memes featuring frogs or frog-like characters; Wednesday Frog, Kermit, Bachelor Frog, Hypnotoad, GTFOF, Dat Boi and Google Deep Dream Frog. Douglas concedes that there are many animal meme genres with subgenres focusing on one specific character from that animal species, “But none of these make us stop and think: ‘Huh, that animal is oddly popular for memes’” (2016, para. 6). We suggest that this ‘frog echoism’ points to the nature of intertextuality which operates in a complex and multi-dimensional textual meme universe. This is important because it reveals the complex mechanisms through which the alt-right movement mobilises and draws cultural currency from broader Internet culture and the ‘memescape’.

To examine this notion, we deploy Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic rendering of the concept of intertextuality. Kristeva coined the term ‘intertextuality,’ which was used to draw together a psychoanalytic perspective with works from several other major theorists whose ideas focus on the interrelationships between texts, especially those works of Barthes and Bakhtin (Becker-Leckrone 2005). For example, following Bakhtin’s dialogism, Kristeva’s intertextuality traces the ‘inter-speaking’ nature of the textual universe (Kristeva, 1986, p. 40). Kristeva’s intertextuality can be understood as the “transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another” (Kristeva, 1984, p. 59-60). Through this process:

the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transposition of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated. (Kristeva, 1984, p. 59-60)

Kristeva’s use of the term ‘transposition’ implies an overlapping, but one that works multi-dimensionally and holographically—both forward and backward in time, as well as spatially. To exemplify this in context, we refer to the Nazi Pepe meme (of which there are countless iterations). The transposition of a swastika, perhaps the most powerful symbol of the twentieth

century, with the Pepe character as icon, ‘demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality’ and shatters the location unto which the signs are ‘intertextualised’. That is to say that the collision of ‘the swastika icon’ (and its signifying system) with ‘the Pepe icon’ (and its signifying system) transmutes each sign into a newly-realised textual dimension in which they are forever fused. Not only is each signifying system forever changed but what each sign *did* signify is retrospectively undermined and continually pluralised. For example, the Pepe language that was undergirded by an attitude of tolerance and understanding (manifest in the originary catchphrase, “be nice man”) is never recovered in its original cohesiveness. Nor is the signifying system of the swastika, the symbolic epitome of post-WWII anti-Semitism and cultural trauma, which is now also a symbol of neo-right-wing media literacy and its online presence. Both sign-systems are changed through the meme-making process and the intertextual collisions within the memescape. The memescape operates in this way like a textual echo chamber and works to reveal the similarities between ostensibly very different signs. Signs provoke meaning within other signs. When the Pepe character is transfused within another icon, that icon is revealed in a different meaning-making schema. What is absurd about Pepe suddenly becomes absurd about the other sign.

Intertextuality is not only about similarity but difference, or more specifically, *différance* (Derrida, 1982). In another ‘absurd’ aspect of the Pepe meme, it is utilised as a tool to communicate particular ideas; yet these ideas are never resolved, never settled and ‘closed’ but only ever one unstable composite in a widespread possibility of ideas. In reading Pepe through *différance*, absurdity is revealed in the untenable resolution between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* emerges from his sophistication of Saussure’s 1916 work in a *Course in General Linguistics* (Deutscher, 2005, p. 29). In Saussure’s explication of the ‘sign,’ he breaks down the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified, to wit, each ‘sign’ that offers itself as meaningful is, in fact, an empty play of negative reflexes. In Saussure’s words [translated], signs are “purely differential, not positively defined by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is that they are what the others are not” (Saussure, 1959, p. 117). This is to emphasise the relationality that functions as the basis of the linguistic network; no sign is autonomous nor unto itself. This point is critical to understanding how and why Pepe produced so many textual nodes in the constellation of meme culture that mutated and thus generated conflicting and contradictory signification systems that could be *simultaneously* signs that point to positive community bonds as well as the spiral of alt-right permutations that now litter the Internet.

Derrida also extended this idea of *différance* in order to expound on the endless relational play within the linguistic system, not only on the two-dimensional plane of Saussure's original schema, but with an added complexity of spatial and temporal 'delays.' *Différance* itself, as a Derridean neologism, plays upon the 'slippages' in the written sign, a term which appears to 'misspell' the French word '*différence*' in order to both refer to, and exemplify, the verb *différer*— "meaning both to differ and to defer" (Deutscher, 2005, p. 31). For example, let us take Penelope Deutscher's example of the sign 'dog,' the endless deferral of language can never arrive on a resolution of the meaning of 'dog'. When one attempts to define 'dog,' one is met with only more abstractions—more signs which fill in a negative space and so, "The meaning of the dog is suspended differentially across such associations and never quite settles" (p. 30). To extend and join in on this relational play, we could say that: The meaning of *the frog* is suspended differentially across such associations and never quite settles. In part, the absurdity of the Pepe meme, in its sheer ability to continue to diversify and mutate *ad nauseum*, is exemplary of the signification system which does not—cannot—close. This is the nature of Internet culture and the memescape, which has been exploited by a range of socio-political trends, most specifically by the alt-right agenda, in order to gain visibility and currency within more mainstream dialogues.

## Conclusion

By reading Pepe the Frog in relation to the in the tradition of the theme of the amphibian humanoid, we have mobilised the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd. By doing so, this argument traces deep-rooted associations with animality and the ways in which Pepe expresses a 'take' on the contemporary mood, which appears at once clearly defined and utterly chaotic. Perhaps the epitome of this expression is the culminating image of President Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog—which was shared by Trump and his son, Donald Trump Junior (Revesz, 2016).

Further, by using Pepe the Frog as an illustrative basis, this paper has argued for a consideration of the meme genre as political and deeply complex. Methodologically, the Darwinian Absurd contextualises the Pepe the Frog meme in a new way—a very different way to existing studies in meme and Internet culture which usually focus on spreadability and community. By reflecting anew, we might render the meme genre as a contemporary force that spreads out much further than Internet subcultures, and, as we have seen by the discussion above on the use of Pepe in the 2016 U.S. election campaign, the meme genre has political and social implications far beyond that of mere innocent or trivial 'play'.

Rather, this meme emerges as a location of contested and conflicting meanings which thus narrates the many and varied dimensions of meme culture at large. As we have noted, the Pepe the Frog meme has been deployed as a political weapon, as vernacular play, and—through the use of Derrida and Kristeva—as a non-closing textual artefact that feeds on the complexity of Internet culture. In what can only be described as a career in absurdity, Pepe the Frog as a character has been drawn together with the iconography of Donald Trump, Nicki Minaj, Adolf Hitler, and a host of other bizarre personas which serve to abstract the origin image even further.

By tracing this meme's career, we reveal that the evolution of Pepe the Frog in the memescape, also in popular culture, is no accident of random online exchange. It reveals something to us about the time in which we live and the nature of the politics—and politicians—which rule our global community. If we read the culture's icons as a sign of its mood, what does Pepe indicate to us? Pepe indicates transgression between the human and the non-human; an almost primordial sentiment through which political, social and moral conventions have been *crossed*. For example, earlier, we covered the sentiments of several media commentators who impressed upon us the offense, disgust, even shock, that has characterised some of the actions, decisions, and statements made by the Trump Administration, and the subsequent alt-right culture wars that have been played out in such a fertile site of political unease. It is no coincidence that Trump's image (another icon of our times) has become quite literally fused with the image of a frog-humanoid hybrid whose transgressions and mutations have left social rupture in their wake. Instead, Trump was able to use Pepe to capitalise upon the growing culture of trolling used by the alt-right contingent as a tactic of intimidation and 'in-joking' to vilify and Other ethnic and non-white groups, in particular African-Americans and the Jewish community. In this way, Trump deployed the meme as a political weapon. When viewed as such, the meme becomes an important cultural artefact.

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