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## A POSTDIGITAL ANGEL OF HISTORY? ON ‘MEME THEORY’

SCOTT WARK



Fig. 1: *Distracted Angel of History*. Digital Image. Originally seen on Twitter, late-2018. Archived at: *Know Your Meme*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1290289-distracted-boyfriend>

### 0.

I found the image above, an instance of the ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ meme, some-time in 2018. I thought this meme was funny at the time—and also crass, casually misogynistic, and layered with far too much irony. My opinion hasn’t changed in the intervening period. But nor has my fascination with this meme.

I’m going to use this meme in a way that’s deliberately, bluntly, and somewhat stupidly literal. What if—bear with me—this meme perfectly represents a (post-)digital version of Walter Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’? What if it perfectly figures how ‘one pictures the angel of history’ and the ‘wreckage... in front of his feet’ blown in by the ‘storm... we call progress’<sup>1</sup> in our postdigital present?

1 Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” In *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard

# 1.

In the essay that probably did the most work to popularise the term, Florian Cramer, argues that the 'simplest definition of "post-digital" describes a media aesthetics which opposes... digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness.'<sup>2</sup> For Cramer, this concept is best understood by reading artistic practices as symptoms. The early internet had a certain aesthetic and a particular iconography: acid green text, dark screens, the backwash from CRT monitors illuminating faces open to possibility. Now, consumer technology is advertised at us using *gauche*, primary-coloured scenes peopled with elongated, barely-humanoid figures using what's known as 'Corporate Memphis' style.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he argues that the tendency for younger creatives—not to mention consumers—to remediate and rehabilitate older technologies, like vinyl records, ought to be read as a pervasive reaction against digital technology and its promises. Cramer's 'post-digital' names an aesthetic that embraces the old, the noisy, the unpredictable and the unruly in reaction to digital technology's contemporary banality. It registers the routinisation of the possibility that digital technology once held.

Cramer developed the concept of the post-digital as a kind tongue-in-cheek dialectical periodization: of course, we're not really *after* the digital, because the digital pervades everything we do. But whilst the specificities of the dialectical process that Cramer identifies—the proliferation of *new* media reaching a degree of ubiquity that sparks a backlash, in the form of an aesthetic, defined by the embrace of the *old*—feels somewhat dated, the condition he identified has not.

Our contemporary post-digital situation is still one in which media overwhelm us. We may have gotten used to the novelty of everything being digital, but we have arguably yet to formulate or formalize techniques for thinking media in this situation. If, for Cramer, the way in to this problem is through aesthetics, I prefer to think of it as a concrete condition for thinking media today.

The pervasiveness and banality of digital media has created a situation in which thinking media requires us to think *with* media that are, because of their scale, their opacity, and their proprietary nature, quite *unthinkable*. The question we need to ask is this: how are we supposed to think media, to determine what they are, in conditions in which they are constitutively *indeterminate*?

That's the situation. But you probably came for the memes. The thing is, this is the situation in which we have to try to think internet memes. What I'm saying is that Internet memes can be used to help us think our way through our contemporary post-digital media situation.

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University Press, 2003), 392.

2 Florian Cramer, "What is "Post-Digital"?" *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About* 3 (2013).

3 Josh Gabert-Doyon, "Why Does Every Advert Look the Same? Blame Corporate Memphis," *Wired*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/corporate-memphis-design-tech>.

## 2.



Fig. 2: Disloyal Man with his Girlfriend Looking at Another Girl, also known as Distracted Boyfriend. Antonio Guillem, November 2, 2015. Digital image. Archived at Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Disloyal\\_man\\_with\\_his\\_girlfriend\\_looking\\_at\\_another\\_girl.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Disloyal_man_with_his_girlfriend_looking_at_another_girl.jpg)

By the time I found this example of the ‘Distracted Boyfriend’ meme, the meme itself was kind of over. It persists today as a particularly widespread and popular memetic form, but it’s no longer novel. It survived an attempt by the Swedish government to identify it as misogynistic.<sup>4</sup> It even survived an image belonging to its series being used in a political campaign by Fidesz, the far-right party of Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán.<sup>5</sup> Through overuse and by attracting incidental mainstream attention, in other words, it’s become part of online culture’s backdrop, another fixture.

And yet here I am, writing an essay about this meme. Why? Because its arbitrary conjunctions have something to tell us about the conditions in which we’re forced to think media today.

This meme began its life as a stock image: a photograph or illustration of an everyday scene that one can purchase to lend a little vitality or visual interest to a website’s lifeless scaffolding. The original retains this recognisably-banal aesthetic, but it also has something more. The leering histrionics of its titular character, distracted by a passing woman

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4 Jon Henley, “Distracted Boyfriend Meme is Sexist, Rules Swedish Ad Watchdog,” *The Guardian*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/26/distracted-boyfriend-meme-sexist-swedish-advertising>.

5 “‘Distracted Boyfriend’ Couple Star in Hungary Pro-Family Ads,” *BBC News*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-47557217>.

and so turning from his—or so we're given to assume—girlfriend, breaks the stock photograph mould. If this is a scene from everyday life, it's not one in which we're supposed to recognise ourselves. This image is supposed to be part of a series, but it stands out—and has become singular.

From this cursory engagement, we can draw three preliminary points. This relationship between singularity and seriality is a complex one. Though already part of a series, the singularity of this image allowed 'Distracted Boyfriend' to transform from a viral image—something copied and shared without modification<sup>6</sup>—into an iterable and reiterable internet meme. These steps are worth noting, because they represent one means for a meme to emerge out of pervasive, circulating media. Moreover, as their popular scholarly proponents would have it, internet memes are collective online-cultural products.<sup>7</sup> But as they are also media, they can't be separated from the prevailing technical-aesthetic conditions in which they're produced.

### 3.

What does it mean to call the post-digital a condition? I don't mean it to be thought of as a condition in the sense of a 'condition of possibility.' That kind of ontological thinking is beyond this essay's ken. Rather, by 'condition' I mean the concrete conditions in which one is forced to think media.

I have in mind here two of Friedrich Kittler's claims. First, the one that gets quoted all the time, both because it's gnomic and suggestive and because it is literally the first line of his most famous book: 'media determine our situation.'<sup>8</sup> But second, from an older, denser essay—and here I'm paraphrasing, because it's much less quotable—that media constitute the conditions of possibility for theorisation itself.<sup>9</sup> This latter claim isn't meant to be a grand one. In a section of this essay describing how philosophers actually *do* philosophy, Kittler points out that philosophising—let's say, for the sake of sounding at least a little less pretentious, *theorising*—requires an entire "apparatus" of tools to actually be done.<sup>10</sup> The essay is old, so the apparatus he describes includes lists books, pens, notes, bookmarks, marginalia, and index cards; the library, the stacks, the desk. The contemporary equivalent might include PDFs, word processing or note taking apps, highlight functions, and bibliographic managers; or, the search engine, the publishers' platforms, the desktop.

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6 Marissa Olson, "Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture," in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2015).

7 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (The MIT Press, 2013).

8 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford University Press, 1999).

9 Friedrich Kittler, "Forgetting," *Discourse* 3 (1981): 88–121.

10 Kittler, "Forgetting," 93.

The analogy holds insofar as these tools have a degree of equivalency. But times have changed—and so have media. Media's contemporary ubiquity and pervasiveness create a different set of conditions for the production of knowledge in general and theoretical knowledge in particular.

#### 4.

In yet another essay, Kittler famously proposed a tripartite 'elementary definition of media': media are that which 'record, transmit, and process information.'<sup>11</sup> Matthew Fuller has recently been moved to add a fourth term to this elementary definition. What we call 'media' today 'have in many cases become a subset of computational systems'.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the app that I use to take photographs on my phone is a kind of media, in that it records, transmits, and processes information; but it is also dependent on my phone, itself a kind of media. Identifying media as media requires what Fuller calls 'analysis': 'the breaking down of complex entities into what, at a certain scale, can be read as nominally fundamental units, and working out their immanent, potential, or emergent relationships.'<sup>13</sup>

Kittler's media were discrete: gramophone, film, typewriter; their apotheosis, the computer—itself a product, so he claimed, of a twentieth-century war machine. Today, media are profligate. Phone, app, and, finally, the image it produces; all are media made possible by computation, rendered *discretizable*, or apprehensible as singular objects, by Fuller's fourth feature, the capacity to analyze. The thing about this fourth capacity, though, is that isn't necessarily something that we can do without help. Most of us aren't peering at a program's code—or, indeed, the electrical impulses that are computation's material basis<sup>14</sup>—and isolating *this* or *that* as media. Media do that for us.

I don't mean to claim that our tools think us. I'm not in to panpsychism. All I'm saying is that thinking media requires using media to think. It's a relatively banal claim, in one sense: tools shape thought. It lacks the grand framing of Kittler's war machine, too; its motivating force, advertising, is also much more banal. But given the scale at which media operate, the degree to which they pervade our everyday lives, their contemporary ubiquity, this claim has a little more force.

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11 Friedrich Kittler, "The City is a Medium," *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (1996): 717–29.

12 Matthew Fuller, "Software Studies Methods," in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. Jentery Sayers (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 250–57.

13 Fuller, "Software Studies Methods," 254.

14 Friedrich Kittler, "There is No Software," *CTtheory* 32 (10 October 1995): <http://www.cttheory.net/articles.aspx?id=74>.

## 5.

The term ‘tools’ is somewhat misleading. I’m typing this out on my 2018 Macbook Air (a cute Rose Gold model). It’s easy to see this as a tool, an equivalent to Kittler’s ‘apparatus.’ But our media situation is a specific one. Ours is the age of massively-distributed media systems. For parsimony’s sake, let’s call it the age of the platform.

The platform is a specific kind of computational architecture defined, most simply, by its programmability. Most social media are platforms. So are most of Google’s main products, Amazon’s marketplace, and Apple’s devices. But so, too, are cloud computing systems, which allow customers to hire out computing power to perform complex and intensive processing tasks remotely. All of these systems are different; what unifies them is their capacity to act as ‘platforms’ for other applications or processes.

This essay is supposed to be about memes, so let’s focus on the sites where they’re most often encountered online: social media platforms. For my money, Anne Helmond’s early theorization of social media platforms is still the simplest and the best. According to her, these systems have been created to ‘decentralize [sic]’ the production of media *content* to their users, but ‘recentralize [sic]’ the collection of data produced *by* those users to the platform itself.<sup>15</sup> As you no doubt know, this data forms the basis of their business model.<sup>16</sup> But that’s not our focus. By standardizing and streamlining the capacity for users produce and share media content—by, in fact, requiring users to do so in order for them to have any content at all—platforms have massively intensified the *amount* of media in circulation.

This asymmetrical infrastructure and excess of circulating media aren’t really homologous with ‘tools.’ They constitute a new ‘situation’—what I interpret as a set of concrete mediatic conditions. Moreover, the excess of circulating media they make possible is so overwhelming, and subject to such frequent change as it’s produced and reproduced by its participants, as to be hard to determine at any one moment.

Cramer’s post-digital dialectic presents the interplay between new and old as the defining conflict that generates media aesthetics today. But perhaps this is the right frame with the wrong conceptual drapery. In the constantly interplay of new and old—or new becoming old—perhaps what persists, as online culture reproduces itself with every refreshed feed, is not a particular aesthetic, but simply a sense of perpetual ruin, perpetual obsolescence, new becoming old through bland repetition.

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15 Anne Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready,” *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1–11.

16 McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead* (London: Verso, 2019).

## 6.

Let's try to draw all of these conceptual threads together by returning to my original conceit: 'Distracted Boyfriend' manifesting a post-digital 'angel of history.'

Why slap a cropped image of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* into a 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme? Whilst it made me giggle when I first saw it, the Venn diagram representing people who read Walter Benjamin and regularly consume memes must be, if not vanishingly small, then not far off. Nevertheless, someone thought it would be funny. So, let's take it at face value.

The joke is a fairly simple one. In 'On the Concept of History,' Benjamin invokes the figure of the angel of history to give form to the unfolding of historical time. He does so by describing the central figure in a print by Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus* – that's the weird figure in the meme above. In this short passage, Benjamin describes this angel as wide-eyed, open-mouthed, and spread-winged, seeming 'about to move away from something he stares at.'<sup>17</sup> Benjamin sees this figure's face as being 'turned toward the past,' looking on the unfolding of time and seeing not a 'chain of events,' but 'one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet.' Only, he can't do anything about this catastrophe, because 'a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them.'<sup>18</sup> The joke, if you weren't in on it already, ought now to be clear: the angel as 'Distracted Boyfriend' turned into figure of abstract-historical catastrophe.

Briefly, I want to note that I know that explaining jokes is just about the worst thing one can do in an essay. But there's nothing for it now but to keep going, to see if we can make this particular one funny once again.

In the bit of the passage that's most resonant of all, Benjamin says that '[t]his storm drives [the angel] irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky.' He finishes by saying this: '[w]hat we call progress is *this* storm.'<sup>19</sup> There's a lot riding on this line: a thesis about the historical-materialist need to disentangle our conception of "history" from the idea of 'progress'; a sense of doom generated by the contemporaneous emergence of Nazism, which forced Benjamin to flee Berlin; an attempt to return a sense of Messianic purpose to Marxism's promise of a revolution-to-come. All of which can be projected on this meme but which, at the same time, it repudiates. Or not.

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17 Benjamin. "On the Concept of History," 392

18 Benjamin. "On the Concept of History," 392

19 Benjamin. "On the Concept of History," 392



This particular meme can't possibly bear all of this conceptual baggage. It's just a joke, substituting Klee's angel, and Benjamin's conception of it, for a gross and leering man. But even if it couldn't even begin to thematise a world-historical 'catastrophe,' it still has a lot to tell us about the how one *ought* to picture progress in our postdigital media situation – and about the debris it leaves.

## 7.

What would it mean to take this meme as a post-digital version of Benjamin's 'angel of history'?

Insofar as the concept of the post-digital is a tongue-in-cheek periodisation—both aware that it's insufficient whilst also, as a failed attempt at portioning out history, revealing something about our times – it necessarily contains a conception of history within itself. This conception of history is concerned with the present and its aesthetics, rather than high-falutin' concepts like progress or revolution. But it's a conception of history nonetheless.

In this conception of history, media *are present*. That is, their sheer ubiquity conditions the present as the present's concrete conditions. We might be able to get at the shape of the present by seeking to understand the large-scale forces that structure it—like, for instance, the platform. But we can also get at it by sifting through its debris. Like internet memes.

The dialectic Cramer outlines is less a form, a shape of things that have come and will again, than a function. Because media are everywhere, so too are their debris. This condition of ubiquity (of media become post-digital because of their pervasiveness) and ruin (of media's constant obsolescence) is necessary for the emergence of meme culture. But it's not sufficient. It also requires an excess. Internet memes *present* the conjunction of technology, cultural production, and aesthetics that make their production possible *to us*. They do so by manifesting these conditions in and as they are iterated and are reiterated; or, in other words, as they circulate, in excess.

The indeterminacy that characterises our post-digital media situation might be a product of computational infrastructures, like platforms. But these infrastructures are proprietary, opaque, black-boxed – inaccessible, in general, to you or I. In excess and as they circulate, what internet memes manifest is a condition of being overwhelmed by media—and being forced to think within this condition whilst also, and necessarily, thinking this condition. Of being *platformed*. This is something we *can* think.

## 8.

So perhaps this particular 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme is actually the angel of history we deserve in our post-digital present. What can we learn from it? A few things.

First, it's very, very easy for media like internet memes to become overdetermined, to stand in for much more than they can bear. But regardless of how far one might wish to push a particular conceptual conceit, the *form* of thinking these kinds of media force on us, as they circulate in excess and as a kind of post-digital debris, is something we can use. To recall Kittler, insofar as media constitute the conditions of possibility for theorisation itself, *we can only really think media today through this kind of debris*.

These are the rudiments of a kind of theorisation that I call 'meme theory.' We've been dragged into the wake of a force that keeps 'piling wreckage upon wreckage.' Let's call this figure what it is: not an angel, but an internet meme; not an internet meme in particular, or even internet memes in general, but cultural practices and mediated modes of production that continue to be iterated and reiterated in circulation, changing what it is that media *are* too quickly for us to keep pace. All we can do is toss our concepts—of memes, of media, and of their computational infrastructures—into the wake and salvage what we can.

More programmatically: to conceptualise media today, our theoretical practices have to remain responsive to those media. This isn't so high-falutin' after all. It's just a practice, a way of doing things, that recognises the banal and yet pervasive conditioning influence media exercise on our concepts of them.

## ADDENDA

### I.

The thing about the angel of history is that it has always been a meme.

Or: a proposition, in the form of an image, that mutates with its mediatic conditions of production; and, that reflects, in each of its usages, how these conditions change, inasmuch as the angel's *messianic* indeterminacy stays the same.

At least, that's one way of reading Benjamin's other most famous essay into the present.<sup>20</sup>

### II.

Is all of this too much for the meme concept to bear?

Probably. In any attempt to work out the relation between a concept and its objects in a concrete situation, though, we find what I'm calling 'meme theory.' Benjamin's angel is simply a

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20 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [Third Version]," in *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 252–83.

particularly useful figure for bringing the ruins of our contemporary post-digital present into frame. After all, that's what memes do: they figure.

If the figure of the angel of history is a meme, the 'Distracted Boyfriend' meme's backward gaze tells us something else about our present. The thing about the dialectic that I pinched from Cramer and applied to this meme is that it has its own remainder, or irrecoverable excess. In Cramer, that excess is those technical 'systems' that we are forced to either over-identify with, or to repudiate<sup>21</sup>—systems that, he tacitly argues, we cannot overcome no matter how hard we try. Leaving aside his focus on aesthetic practices, we can use this dialectic of identification and repudiation to think through *meme cultures'* irrecoverable excesses.

Amongst many other things, 'Distracted Boyfriend' figures a kind of pervasive, low-key misogyny common in contemporary society and often heightened online. What online culture thinks is *formally* subversive, and therefore ironically funny, might change; but no matter how often this culture's proponents protest that it's all 'a joke', the joke can never wholly encompass this toxicity. Irony in memes—and online-cultural irony in general—can never use the *form* of memetic play to fully nullify the cultural-political charge of these kinds of determinations. This is why even the crassest of memes always flirt, seemingly incongruously, with politics.

Do we not get the angels we deserve? If so, it's no wonder that what this post-digital angel figures, amongst everything else, is toxic masculinity. The 'storm. . . we call progress,' indeed.<sup>22</sup>

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