"Nothing, Nothing, Nothing"

Exploring Overlaps Between Current Internet Memes and Dadaism.

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INTRODUCTION

Today's most recent memes that live and breed on the internet are often laden with absurdist overtones, with emphasis on the nonsensical in order to hopefully create something humorous or satirical. Not all memes are for everyone; I often have to question if I find them funny or not, but with pages on the online forum, Reddit like r/surrealmemes having over eight hundred thousand members (*Surreal Memes*, 2016) , it is evident that something about this kind of humour resonates with today's extremely online generation. But why do we relate to the absurd and nonsensical? Why do we like memes that are purposefully devoid of logic? In a time of political unrest, climate change and recent pandemic it's easy to feel like the world itself is lacking reason and rationality. This feeling of disillusionment is what gave way to the Dadaist movement of the 1910s/20s. This essay will examine the overlaps in themes and ideas within the dadaist movement with the memes we come across online today; with a particular focus on surreal memes and anti-memes. By looking at writers who described what encompassed the Dada spirit and agenda, this essay will draw comparisons to academic writings and reflections of current internet meme culture. This essay will look at the presence of the nonsensical and absurd in both dadaist work and recent subversive/deep fried memes, as well as the idea of art/ anti-art and meme/anti-meme. Lastly, this essay will examine whether or not memes and dada art can be compared; as dadaism is absurd in response to the absurdism of the time, can we say that memes are doing the same?

In her essay reflecting on her life amongst the Dadaists, Gabrièle Buffet-Picabia writes about the work of her husband, Picabia. She describes Picabia's photo collages as "mechanical drawings, adorned with mottos that were often subversive and sometimes poetic" (Picabia, 1949, p.262). It could be argued that Picabia's work

mimicked that of a typical meme, or rather a typical meme mimics his drawings. The juxtaposition of a mechanical drawing with subversive or poetic text is similar to the combination of unrelated image and text combinations that we might find online today in the form of a macro image. Although today's memes use this contrast to try to create something irrational and humorous; Picabia's work aims to say something about the higher powers and the absurd established systems of the time. However could it be suggested that a modern meme is trying to achieve the same goal. In an age of economic crisis, recent pandemic and looming global warming, is it far-fetched to suggest that the memes created today are a direct reflection of the disillusionment one might feel in today's climate. Gabrièle Buffet-Picabia says the goal of the Dadaists was to "replace the illogical nonsense of the men of today with illogical nonsense" (ibid, p.266), can the same be said for today's modern internet meme?

SECTION 1

Introduction to Dada

Dadaism began in the 1910s in Zurich, Switzerland, with many other streams of dada popping up around Europe through the mid 1920's. It is difficult to pinpoint who exactly started and coined the movement, but one particular group of artists were essential to the formation of Dadaism. Soon after the outbreak of the first world war, Hugo Ball found himself in Zurich, Switzerland. Ball was a writer and a producer, but also a philosopher, novelist, cabaret performer, journalist and mystic (Richter, 1964). Switzerland was a neutral zone during the first world war and granted shelter to political refugees at the time (ibid).

> It is impossible to understand dada without understanding the state of mental tension in which it grew up… Guided and perhaps plagued by his conscience,

> Ball became the human catalyst who united around himself all the elements which finally produced Dada… There can be no doubt of Ball's unswerving search for a *meaning* which he could set up against the absurd meaninglessness of the age in which he lived. He was an idealist and a sceptic, whose belief in life had not been destroyed by the deep scepticism with which he regarded the world around him.
> Richter, 1964 p.13.

Ball set up the Cabaret Voltaire on the first of February 1916; an artist nightclub that would host parties for artists to showcase their poetry, music or artwork. It was an exhibition space as well as a performance space, it was a hub for like minded artists and thinkers to share ideas; bringing together artists such as Hans Arp, Richard Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzra. (ibid.)"The Cabaret Voltaire fostered a unity which resulted from an act of no will, an enthusiasm based on mutual inspiration.." **(**ibid, p.13)   and this mutual inspiration that they shared was an absolute distaste for bourgeois society and the horrors of war. The Bourgeois was the upper middle class society, and the dadaists did not agree with their values around life and art. "The core of Dadaism was based on what might be called an absurdist spirit, which was itself based upon a wholehearted and unremitting attack on all the norms of industrial-age bourgeois culture.." (Flam, 1981, p.xii) .The Dadaists revolted against the social, ethical, political, artistic and philosophical norms at the time through their creation of absurd anti-art, nonsensical phonetic poetry and other forms of art and performance, all of which were displayed and performed at the Cabaret Voltaire. The Dadaists and their ideas spread throughout Europe and the USA; setting up other Dadaists groups in New York, Berlin, Paris, Cologne and Hannover. Dada continued through the early 1920s until its downfall in 1924 (Richter, 1964).

Meme Background

The term 'meme' was first coined by Richard Dawkins in 1979. In his book *The Selfish Gene,* the term originally refers to the spreading of ideas from person to person. Different from genes, memes are passed on through teaching or experience, and often take the form of images, tunes, ideas etc. Today the term 'meme' is almost always associated specifically with internet memes; which, if put in Dawkins' simple terms, can be defined as ideas spread from person to person via the internet (1979, cited in Davison, 2012). However a meme is often much more than that. In his 2012 article *The Language of Internet Memes*, Patrick Davison defines an internet meme as "a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission*"*(Davison, 2012, p.122)*.* Memes aren't just ideas on the internet, they're jokes, often becoming one large inside joke shared amongst online communities. These jokes come in many forms from short videos to GIFS to still images; usually with some accompanying text.

Some of the very first 'internet-like memes' existed before the internet. There are examples of 'internet meme'-like images appearing in the 1980s with trends like *Demotivational Posters*: a series of posters by *Despair Inc* which parodied the motivational images seen across US offices and classrooms at the time (Miltner, 2018.). There are even earlier examples with symbols like 'Kilroy' spread throughout the US during WW1; an image of a bald man with the accompanying text 'Kilroy was here' (Shifman, 2014)*.*

Memes began appearing online on single server sites like *Hamster Dance*; a site which hosted a series of GIFS of cartoon hamsters, and later grew to exist on larger scale 'viral' sites like Icanhascheeseburger.com, featuring famous memes such as LOLcats (Miltner, 2018.). These early internet memes influenced, and still continue to

influence more recent memes; with sites like Twitter, Instagram and Reddit growing in popularity, there was more space for more formats, ideas and subgenres to be created. The most common types of memes that are encountered online today can be divided into categories, based on which age category the creator belongs to; millennial meme culture (memes created by those born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z meme culture (memes created by those born between 1997-2012).

 While millennials grew up during a recession, slowly losing trust in the political systems of the time (Bruenig, 2017) there is a rise in macro images following a very particular format; usually depicting a funny 'reaction image' accompanied by opposing or relatable text. These memes are often self deprecating and were popularised by the shared feeling of hopelessness or unhappiness with life (ibid). While millennials found comfort in the deep relatability of memes that depicted their exact feelings or experiences, more recent or Generation Z memes aren't as direct in their execution. However, that relatability is not lost. The absurd or deep fried meme shows a collective humour found in nonsense; a rejection of logic as an expression of hatred towards the current state of the world. Memes can let you know that others also feel existential, that they also see the absurdity in day to day life, "memes can therefore induce a strong feeling of togetherness by pointing out a shared perception of reality" (Neghabat, 2021, p.140). There is a comfort in knowing that these feelings are a shared or even common experience. It could be argued that memes could act as a sort of coping mechanism, building resilience through a sense of community. "It is a powerful feeling knowing one's not alone in one's discomfort." (Golsch and Lorraine, 2019, p.150). This shared experience of the awareness of the absurdity of the world puts Generation Z memes more inline with the thinking of the Dadaists.

While millennial memes act as a direct reflection of the psyche of a generation, Generation Z memes are also a reflection in a different, more indirect way; closer to that of the Dadaists. Instead of stating exactly what is wrong with the world, they express their feelings about it through their work, images and poetry that are completely nonsensical, a reflection of the nonsense found outside of the work. For this reason, this essay will focus specifically on internet memes produced most recently by members of GenerationZ, and more specifically the absurd 'deep fried' or 'surreal' memes and the anti-meme.

SECTION 2

The Absurd and Nonsensical: comparing the presence of the absurd in Dada works and internet memes.

The war caused a great feeling of unrest throughout the early nineteen hundreds. While many stood by and "behaved as if they did not know what was going on around them" (Arp,1949, p.293), the Dadaists loathed the senselessness of the war and the resignation towards it. Absurdism is defined as the belief that life is meaningless, and all search for meaning is senseless (Blackburn, 2008). In a period of mass confusion the Dadaists choose to let go of reason and to face the absurdism of the war directly, they choose a "voluntary break with reason, a kind of auto-inoculation of the absurd by the absurd" (Picabia, 1949, p.263).

Similarly, many of today's internet memes purposefully lack meaning and choose to not follow any logic. While a typical joke gets its humour from a clever punchline, the humour in today's meme often lies in the lack of any joke at all; the humour is found in the absence of reason.

Figure 1. Raoul Hausmann, *Spirit of our Time: Mechanical Head*, 1919, wooden mannequin head with attached objects, 32.5 x 21 x 20 cm

As previously discussed, the mismatched elements of typical memetic images are reminiscent of Picabia's drawings and collages that he created during this affiliation with the Dadaists. These works featured in a number of Dadaist publications such as *391* (created by Picabia himself), *Der Dada*, and *Athnologie Dada*. These publications featured a combination of writing, drawings, photographs and collages

by Picabia alongside other notable artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Raoul Hausmann. Raoul Hausmann was similar to Picabia in many ways; he was the founder of the Berlin Dada group, and was the first sole editor of *Der Dada* (Hugnet, 1932). The magazine featured "collages made with strips of newspaper, photographs devised by Haussmann… composed at random and not very seriously…" (ibid, pp.146) alongside poetry and illustrations by fellow Berlin Dadaists. Similar to other Dadaist publications, the three issues of *Der Dada* focused on "intentional disorder" (ibid, pp.146). This can also be seen in Hausmanns work, creating photo collages and objects that were provocative and nonsensical. Many of the Berlin Dadaists worked in this way, using these methods to abolish logic (Richter, 1964, pp.114).

> They cut up photographs, stuck them together in provocative ways, added drawings, cut these up too, pasted bits of newspaper, or old letters, or whatever happened to be lying around- to confront a crazy world with its own image"
> idid, pp.114

Hausmann describes photomontage in his article *Definition Der Foto-Montage* as being focused on contrast of material, scale, perspective and shape; creating paradoxical images of objects and scenes that could never exist; men with machines for heads, distorted faces and completely abstracted forms (cited in Richter, 1964). He also creates his objects in the same exploratory manner; like his piece *Mechanical Head (Spirit of Our Age)*, a mannequin's head with a blank expression, technological objects attached in various ways all around (figure 1). Similar combinations of unrelated images and texts can be seen in surreal or deep fried memes. These memes are bizarre in appearance and derive their humour from their use of absurdism. Popular trends like *Meme Man*, a poorly generated 3D render of a human head, can be seen as characters featuring in these kinds of memes across reddit sites like r/surrealmemes and eventually making their way to Instagram

Figure 2. *Meme Man* Example, Accessed from:
https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1111111-meme-man#trending-bar

and Twitter. Figure 2 depicts an example of such a meme, combining Meme Man

with an image of Patrick Bateman; originally from the 2000 film *American Psycho* but

later adapted to become the *Check 'Em* meme, an image that was commonly used

on the site 4chan ("Dubs Guy/ Check' Em", 2009). The overlaid green text writing

'GETT' further references the original *Check 'Em* meme ("GET", 2001).

Using similar methods to the photomontages of Hausmann, this image combines

dismantled elements of various memes and internet vernacular to create an

ultimately nonsensical 'surreal meme'. While there are remnants of the original memes coming through, the final outcome is quite bizarre, with the blank, uncanny gaze of the *Meme Man* poorly photoshopped onto the low resolution image of Patrick Batemen.

The Dadaists also utilised the absurd and nonsensical in their writings. "The great step by which total irrationality was introduced into literature took place with the introduction of the phonetic poem"(cited in Richter,1964. pp.118) quotes Hausmann on his reflection of abstract poetry. With a wish to be liberated from the confines of an orderly, rational language, Dadaists turned to chance and nonsense to create their abstract poetry. Starting in Zurich, where Hugo Ball stated that "the next step is for poetry to discard language as painting has discarded the object" (cited in Richter, 1964. p.41), phonetic or sound poetry spread throughout Europe amongst the Dadaists. The words used in these poems did not exist; they were gibberish, recited as if they were not. In Ball's first ever phonetic poem, *O Gadji Beri Bimba,* he writes "gadji beri bimba glandridi laula lonni cadori" (cited in Richter, 1964. p.41). The remainder of the poem continues in a similar manner, using non-words and nonsense. Some poems contained no words at all, using symbols or lines that don't resemble the familiar alphabet (Richter,1964).

This use of nonsense language has become popular amongst memetic trends over the last few years. Some are not quite as abstract, such as the phonetic translation memes like *Wenomechainsama,* where the lyrics to "Summer" by Calvin Harris are distorted and translated into long gibberish words alongside images of non related figures, for example dogs (figure 3). The iteration shown in figure 3 gained almost one million views in two months (*Wenomechainsama*, 2022). Although the origins could be traced back to the misheard lyric memes of the early 2000's, where pop

song lyrics would be intentionally misinterpreted to generate new humours or 'silly'

lyrics, the more current trends rewrite the lyrics as they sound, creating almost

unreadable non-words (ibid). Although very similar to the Dadaist phonetic poems,

these memes are still reliant on a level of rationality, whereas the dada poems fully

embraced nonsense.

Figure 3. *Wenomechainsama* Example, Accessed from:
https://knowyourmeme.com/editorials/guides/what-the-heck-is-wenomechainsama-heres-an-expl
ainer-on-the-misheard-lyric-meme

An example of truly nonsensical, absurd meme can be found in Chloe Partlow and

Patricia Talarczyks 2021 article which surveyed 308 members of Generation Z in an

attempt to find a collation between level of humour and level of absurdity in memes.

A meme which they deemed to be highly absurd is seen in figure 4.

Figure 4. *Soup Time*, Accessed from: Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021 ,p.6

The meme depicts "a unique cross of a cat and George Costanza from the American sitcom *Seinfeld"* (Partlow & Talarczyk, 2021 ,p.6) holding a baseball bat, underneath the text "soup time". The meme was given an absurdity rating based off of a system derived by Partlow and Talarczyk, receiving points based on certain criteria. The meme received points for its low-quality and incongruity, "the joke has no relevant context to make it more humorous and is not based on a common topic

of humour." (ibid, p.6). This meme is completely arbitrary and ridiculous, like the phonetic poetry discussed previously.

Regardless of the apparent lack of care and reason behind the choices made by both the Dadaists and the creators of these surreal memes, their careful use of the chaos of nonsense proves to be effective.

Anti-Art & Anti-Meme

From definitions explored in this essay thus far it is understood that memes in their most basic form are images, videos and text that are shared from person to person online. Often humorous in nature, internet memes are easily manipulated and invite the viewer to create variations of the original, leading to numerous meme formats and tropes. With the vast number of users online and the open access to these easily manipulatable images or formats; some users choose to add to the original joke, creating new humorous punchlines; other users choose to take the meme in a new direction, opposite to that of what is expected. "The anti-meme is an interesting phenomenon that challenges the humour, virality, and manipulability of memes" (Kumar, 2020). Anti memes subvert typical meme formats and are devoid of conventional humour. The anti-meme aims to mock a variety of popular memes and meme formats; while typical memes aim to "induce humorous responses in its receivers" (Dynel, 2016), the anti-meme aims to "take an existing meme, alter it and thus show its unreasonable or arbitrary nature" (Dowes, 1999). The anti-meme wants to point out that although the original meme is found humorous by some, it could also be interpreted as ridiculous or unamusing. Contrary to what its name may insinuate, anti-memes aren't pointing out that memes in general are redundant, just certain formats or tropes.

In his book, Elleström (2002) establishes a basic classification of the levels of irony; verbal ("opposition between what is said and what is meant") situational ("an outcome is incongruous with what was expected") and structural irony, ("situational irony acted out in a text") (2002, cited in Kumar, 2020). The anti meme plays on these types of irony…

> The anti-meme serves to draw the viewer in with the promise of humour due to its use of an established meme format, only to make the viewer realise that they have effectively wasted their time in attempting to process what they were sure was a joke when there was, in fact, no joke to be found or arrived at. According to the classification mentioned above, an anti-meme would be thought to use structural irony, as it uses a text-and-image combination to create an unexpected situation (a lack of humour).
> Kumar, 2020

The anti-meme subverts the viewers expectations, while appearing to be a typical meme however not behaving as one. Here we can return to Dowed's definition; the anti-meme points out the fundamental uselessness of certain memes, and does so in varying degrees (Dowed, 1999).

Figure 5, a meme discussed in Kanika Kumar's essay on the anti-meme, is an image macro; the text above that is describing the person's desire to not consume more than one drink of alcohol is opposed with a contrasting image of a person consuming a lot of alcohol, thus implying the person's clear lack of self control or discipline. The humour here is found in the contradiction and exaggeration, as well as the level of relatability one might feel towards it. This is a typically used, popular format in which the "comic interply" (Kumar, 2020) between text and image provides the humour.

In contrast, Figure 6, depicting a very similar image macro, displays the text declaring the users desire to not consume alcohol; however in this anti-meme, as opposed to a contrasting image, we see an image that is inline with the desire; in which it shows a man refusing alcohol as intended.

Me: I'm just gonna have 1 drink

5 minutes later:

Figure 5. Accessed from: Kumar, 2020

Me: I'm not drinking tonight

Me: 3 hours later:

Figure 6. Accessed from: Kumar, 2020

This anti-meme lacks all conventional humour found in the original joke, instead the humour is found in the use of situational and structural irony; the viewer expects a typical punchline but instead gets nothing. In this example, the anti-meme takes its form in the lack of humour and ignores the typical intended way in which this meme format should work; other anti-memes use absurdity to subvert the viewer's expectation of what a meme is.

An example of this can be found on the Reddit site r/antimemes. Users make different iterations of the original meme: a macro image with the text and accompanying images; "woman stand, woman go" followed by an image of a man and then an image of a mango, playing on the words "man go". The humour in the original meme is found in the use of the pun, exploiting the similarities between "mango" and "man go". In the anti-meme, where the viewer would expect the image sequence to be completed by an image of a mango, fulfilling the role of the pun, instead there are other images creating nonsensical, anti-jokes. For example, the image of the mango is replaced by other fruit; see figure 7 where the mango is replaced by an apple. This became a popular anti-meme template on the reddit site r/antimeme, with the images becoming more abstract and further away from the original meme overtime. In order to comprehend these multilayered images the viewer must have a knowledge of the history and evolution of the meme, for example figure 8. Without this knowledge, these memes appear to be completely arbitrary and unintelligent, thus fulfilling the role of the anti-meme. By going against what a typical meme is or should be, anti-memes render the original meme redundant or unfunny (Kumar, 2020).

While the anti-meme relies on a lack of humour, the dadaists played with a seeming absence of creativity in order to make their anti-art. The Dadaists were concerned

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Figure 7. *The real mango.* Accessed from:
https://www.reddit.com/r/antimeme/comments/105ws1i/the_real_mango/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3

Figure 8. *Anti anti anti meme meme meme.* Accessed from:
https://www.reddit.com/r/antimeme/comments/106q25v/anti_anti_anti_meme_meme_meme/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3

with making non-art or anti-art; in particular Marcel Duchamp. Anti-art wanted to be

unidentifiable as works of art; the viewer cannot recognise these works as works of

art because they subvert their expectations of what art should be. Duchamp often

achieved this through his creation of the "ready-made"; a term coined by Duchamp

himself to describe his explorations into ordinary everyday objects.

> These works are scarcely recognizable as the products of creative activity:
> they are so unorthodox and so far removed from patterns, centuries-old, of
> the material and conceptual substance of painting and sculpture.
> Janis, 1945, p. 307

His objects were the "logical consequence of Duchamp's rejection of art and of his

suspicion that life was meaningless"(Richter, 1964, p.88). One of Duchamp's most

notable works of anti-art was his piece *Fountain* (1917). Fountain (figure 9) was a

standard urinal, presented on its back and signed 'R. Mutt, 1917'. Signed by a man

who didn't exist, and placed in such a way that made a once useful object redundant,

this piece embodied what anti-art was; neither conventional art nor object (Haworth,

2000). Duchamp presented the work to the *Society of Independent Artists,* a group in

which he was a founding member. Although the society was contractually bound to

accept and display works by all members, they rejected *Fountain* as they claimed it

could not be considered a work of art (ibid).

> Responding to press interest in the affair, the board issued a statement
> defending its position: 'The *Fountain* may be a very useful object in its place,
> but its place is not in an art exhibition and it is, by no definition, a work of art.'
> cited in Haworth, 2000

Similarly to anti-memes these anti-artworks go against conventional norms of what is

expected and subvert the viewers ideas associated with art at the time. Dadaists felt

that art represented bourgeois society, so by making anti-art they were also being

anti-bourgeois (Huelsenbeck, 1920). "Art should altogether get a sound thrashing

and Dada stands for the trashing with all the vehemence of its limited nature" (ibid,

Figure 9. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, replica, 1964, Porcelain, Unconfirmed: 360 × 480 × 610 mm

p.44). However there is an irony in this, can there be an anti-art? The Dadaists were "calling for the collapse of a society and its art on which they themselves were still in many ways dependent" (Ades, 1974. p.4). Again this is comparable to the anti-meme; they still aim to be satirical despite their disregard for conventional humour, anti-memes are still memes at their core (Kumar, 2020).

However, when the anti-artworks of the Dadaists represented their distaste for bourgeois culture and a disillusionment for the war, what does the anti-meme say about its creators?

SECTION 3

Do Internet Memes act as a Reflection of Our Time?

While speaking on abstract poetry, Ball states that he wanted to "Abandon a language ravaged and laid barren by journalism"(cited in Richter, 1964. Pp.42). The poetry embraced the absurd in order to escape the confines of a language so associated with the war. Similarly, the Photomontages were "cut up at will in such a way as to say, in pictures, what would have been banned by the censors if we had said it in words" (ibid pp.117). Although the Dadaist claim "dada does not mean anything" (Tzara, 1981, p. 77) and were continuously concerned with "nothing, nothing nothing" (cited in Ades, 1974, p.4) they simultaneously made it very clear that this obsession with nothingness was in fact a political statement, and a direct reflection of their discontempt for the war. Their use of the absurd was very intentional, returning to Gabrielle Picabia's quote; that Dada wanted to *"replace the illogical nonsense of the men of today with illogical nonsense"* (Picabia, 1949, p.266).

Thus far this essay has established clear overlaps, both thematically and visually, between the works of the Dadaists with current memetic images; but can it be argued that both share the same agenda: to escape the absurd realities of the time through the absurd and nonsensical.

There are some memes that aim to speak directly on political topics, making statements about society and higher power systems, similar to the Dadaists. In her essay for *The Critical Meme Reader*, Yasmeen Khaja recalls the memes she encountered during the COVID-19 Pandemic, specifically in Kuwait. The government was receiving criticism after they imposed unclear, contradictory rules around curfew and lockdown across the country Khaja, 2021.

One of the most keenly felt critiques of the political system and government of Kuwait that came out of this pandemic was delivered in the form of a meme: an animated WhatsApp sticker of a 100 fils coin flipping between sides labelled *lockdown* and *no lockdown.* The message this sticker carries is simple: state decisions feel like nothing but a coin toss.
Khaja, 2021, p.70

Figure 10. *Curfew, no curfew. Digital animated sticker.* Accessed from Khaja, 2021, p.70.

Unlike the nonsensical narratives and absurd images seen in 'surreal' or 'deep fried' memes, the memes Khaja reflects on have a clear message. In Anahita Neghabat's essay for *The Critical Meme Reader*, she states that memes like this "let you know that others also see the ridiculousness, the absurdity, and violence of these politics" (Neghabat, 2021, p.140).

However, these directly political memes, although sharing similar ideas about highlighting issues within our political systems, are less in line with the work of the Dadaists but rather the work of the Situationists. Limor Shifman, in his book *Memes in Digital Culture*, compares these overtly political memes with the act of 'culture

jamming', a method used by the 1950's Situationalists (Shifman, 2014). The example

he gives is shown in figure 11; an image of a thin model in front of the Tommy

Hilfigure Logo, in which the words Tommy Hillfigure are changed to read "To my ill

figure". This meme highlights the issues in the fashion industry and their preference

for their models to sustain unhealthy body types and hence promoting unrealistic

body image (ibid) The image is similar to the works created by the Situationist

International, in which they used culture jamming or detournement to challenge

dominant culture and create subversive messages through the appropriation and

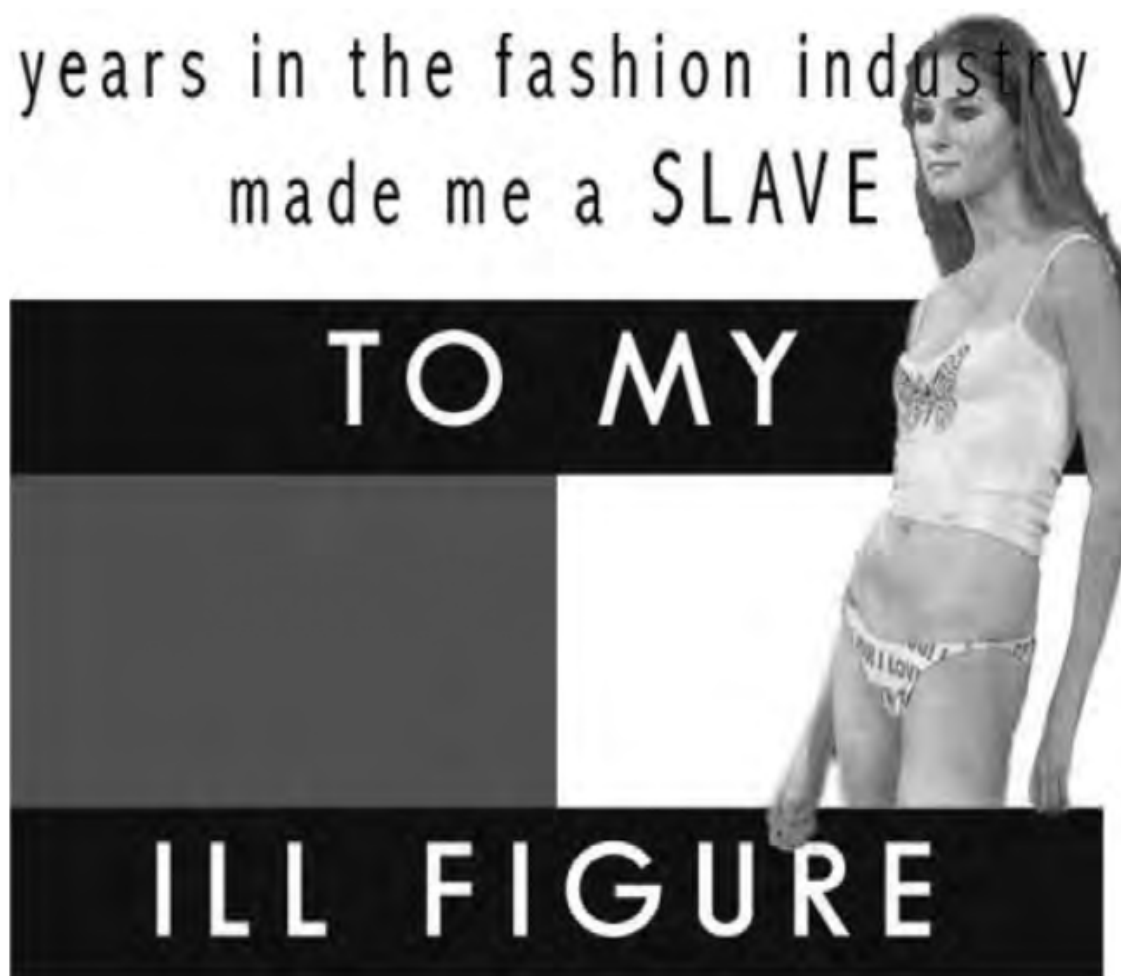reuse of elements of mainstream media. (Matthews, 2005).

Figure 11. Accessed from Shifman, 2014, p. 131.

The Situationalists and these overtly political memes both speak on important issues in a very direct manner; the message is very clear. As discussed in this essay so far, the Dadaists portray messages in a less direct way through their use of absurdism and nonsense and their creation of anti-art. Although not as direct as the memes discussed above, are 'deep fried' and 'surreal' memes political in their own right, using similar methods to the Dadaists to achieve a similar goal?

In their book, *The Ambivalent Internet*, Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner discuss Poe's Law: due to the anonymity of the internet, it's difficult to decipher sincerity from mischief (Phillips & Milner, 2017). The very nature of the meme is its virality, made to be shared and altered. The memetic tendencies of the images, videos, GIFS etc. which encounter online mean that they are almost untraceable in terms of original authorship. Context is extremely important when it comes to internet memes, and it's rare.

> The process by which people connect with something online, put their spin on it, and then recirculate their personal variation on an existing collectivist theme is, in fact, the driving engine behind memetic resonance and vernacular creativity more broadly…Further, as it's not always clear where something is coming from or what the original creator meant to communicate, it is often difficult to know how to interpret – and therefore respond appropriately to – a given text.
> Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 112.

It's difficult to argue that *all* memetic images online today that appear to be concerned with existentialism or the absurd are doing so as an expression of the creator's feelings towards their own life, and the greater world as a whole. While the Dadaists writings and reflections act as an indicator of their clear disillusionment with the war and with bourgeois society, there is a lack of evidence, due to the nature of memes, that indicate they were made under the same political or nihilistic pretences. It could be argued that the 'surreal' or 'deep fried' memes are merely following a

trend cycle; not born out of a genuine concern with the absurd but rather mimicking or replicating what's popular at the time.

In his essay Davison expands on his definition of internet memes by explaining the ways in which they manifest (Davison, 2012). He breaks down the process into three parts, with the outcome (*manifestation*) being prefaced by *behaviour* and starting with an *ideal.* In the case of this proposed process, behaviour refers to the action taken and the ideal refers to the concept or idea conveyed (ibid, p. 123). Applying this process to surreal or deep fried memes, it can be said that these memes manifest as strange and absurd images through the behaviour of manipulating and collaging images and text in a nonsensical way. But what is the ideal? Can the presence of the absurd in both the behaviour and manifestation be an indication of an absurd ideal?. Could it be argued that the mere presence of the absurd and the use of nonsense in the first place are an indication that these memes do, in fact, reflect a generation's feelings towards the current state of economical, sociological and economic crisis? Why might one use absurdism?

The Dadaists were not the only artists throughout history to use absurdism in their work as a response to world events. In her 2018 show at the Met, *Delirious Art: Art and the Limits of Reason,* Kelly Baum showcases examples of absurd or 'delirious' art from 1950-1980 (Baum, 2018). This exhibition makes it evident that there are trend cycles that collate the presence of absurdism in art to the state of world affairs at the time. The exhibition showcases over 100 pieces, featuring work made in response to World War II, work that was against Modernisation and the social order that came with it during the 1950's and work made during the 1960's and 70's by activists of the civil rights, antiwar, feminists, and gay liberation movements (ibid). Baum states that "delirious times demand delirious art" (ibid, p.19) and that is evident

from her exhibition and book. It could be argued that delirious art (or in the case of this essay, internet memes) insinuates a delirious time. Throughout recent decades, artists have consistently returned to creating absurd art when faced with challenging times that make them question reason.

Studies carried out in the US during 2020 show that Generation Z have some of the highest numbers of reported mental health issues (Garnham, 2022). *The American Psychological Association* (APA) reported that 70% of Generation Z say that anxiety and depression are significant problems for themselves and their peers (ibid). It's also been reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on young people's mental health and stress levels (ibid). The Pandemic also lead to high levels of unemployment, and an inability to access essential services (ie. mental health services) , further adding to these stress levels (ibid). Climate change is another factor, "the impact of climate change is compounding the already extremely challenging situation for mental health and mental health services globally." (cited in Shepard, 2022).

It is clear that we are faced with uncertain times. Baum's exhibition demonstrates how irrational, unorthodox art is often made as a response to uncertain times, similar to which we are experiencing right now. When the young people of today are faced with these issues, it's understandable how they might express themselves through bizarre and humorous imagery.

CONCLUSION

It has been established that there are clear similarities, both visually and thematically, between current popular memetic trends online and the work of the Dadaists. Through exploring Dada works of anti-art and comparing them to the

concept of the anti-meme, and by looking at the overlaps in the presence of nonsensical methods and themes in both Dadaism and 'surreal' or 'deep fried' memes, it is evident that many aspects of current memes are reminiscent of the work of a Dadaist. Although, due to Poe's Law, it will always remain unclear the true intended meaning of an internet meme, it can be said that it is likely memes that are created in an absurdist manner are doing so as a production of today's uncertain times. Davisons process of the manifestation of memes tells us that memes must begin with an ideal, and I argue that the ideals that meme creators have are shared with the ideals of the Dadaists: life is absurd. While the Dadaists put urinals in museums to ask questions about the power structures in bourgeois culture, internet memes use incomplete puns and bizarre images of human-cat hybrids to mirror the absurdity seen in the world today.

Although perceived as unorthodox at the time, today Dadaism is an essential and defining moment in art history. By looking at internet memes through the same lens that one might view art and Dadaism, one could appreciate the significance of internet memes in our culture today. Often overlooked as being merely mindless fun online, internet memes clearly give us an insight into the mind of the people who create and enjoy them, as shown throughout this essay. Shifman states in his book…

> While memes are seemingly trivial and mundane artifacts, they actually reflect deep social and cultural structures. In many senses, Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images or urban legends.
> Shifman, 2014, p.15

By observing similarities between the discussed subjects, it could be said that, through embodying their spirit and embracing the absurd, the creators of these memes exist as the modern day Dadaist.

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