

# Circulation and its Discontents

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## Introduction: Meme Magic

To paraphrase Hito Steyerl, Internet memes have “crossed the screen,” bringing nothing but bad news and censurable politics along with them.<sup>1</sup> There’s an almost occult quality to Internet memes’ capacity to boil out of the hellish recesses of the ’net. Or at least, that’s how some parts of ’net culture spin things.

The Internet meme is of a class of media that has emerged with distributed, platform-based networks. In Limor Shifman’s simple and compelling definition, three qualities characterize it: it’s collectively produced; it mutates; and it circulates.<sup>2</sup> While it shares some qualities with like media — viral media also circulate; spam is collectively produced — it also differs from them.<sup>3</sup> Memes are

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- 1 Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” *e-flux journal* 49 (2013), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/>.
  - 2 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 41.
  - 3 On viral media, see 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*, eds. Lauren Cornell and Ed Halter (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 159–66. On spam, see Scott Wark, “Literature After Language’s Algorithmic Normalisation: Spam, Code, and the Digitality of Print in

not only passed along, they are remade, varied, altered. They mutate. At scale and in circulation, an Internet meme's capacity to change and proliferate can be mystifying. No one hand guides it. They appear as if the instrument of an unconscious drive. 'Net culture has a term for this drive's apparent capacity to use Internet memes to wreak havoc and sow negativity beyond the confines of the 'net itself. They call it "meme magic."

Perhaps the most notorious example of meme magic at work is the assertion that a meme of a corpulent green frog, Pepe, might have swung the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In the terrain of what could be true as defined by our new online culture wars, this claim seems both absurd and entirely plausible. In 'net vernacular, meme magic is by turns ironic and esoteric. It is ironic because 'net culture is always ironic, at once embracing the idea that an Internet meme might have contributed to electing a president whilst also disparaging anyone who takes that idea seriously.

Meme magic is also limned with esoteric implications. Sometimes "magic" is spelt with a "k," investing internet memes with an incantatory power to make the fanciful real. Did Pepe effect an election? Did Internet memes invoke Trump's presidency? We don't want to draw conclusions. But let's suspend the reflex to dismiss the concept of meme magic out of hand. As concept, meme magic is absurd. Yet it also captures something that's essential to 'net culture — and to Internet memes in particular — that's otherwise difficult to articulate.

There's a kernel of *incommensurability* at 'net culture's core. We endlessly produce data about what we do online, but we do it for the benefit of others. We do the labor, and often it is what Tiziana Terranova calls free labor, but we don't profit from our digital products.<sup>4</sup> Underneath the apparently free-floating world of circulating texts, images, memes, there is an *asymmetry of*

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Blood Rites of the Bourgeoisie," *Scan | Journal of Media Arts Culture* 10, no. 2 (2013), <http://scan.net.au/scn/journal/vol10number2/Scott-Wark.html>.

4 Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics in the Information Age* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

*information*. The means to produce data is decentralized to us, but the means to collect and process that data is recentralized to the proprietors of the platform-based services we use.<sup>5</sup>

Ownership and control over the vector of information, its means of transmission and archiving, its interfaces and nodes of attraction, turns the asymmetry of information into a relation that could even be considered a class relation.<sup>6</sup> A subordinate class — us — makes information, shares information, passes it around, is sometimes paid a wage, is often precariously employed, or is not employed at all. This subordinate class gets access to *particular* bits and pieces of information; to memes, for example. But this subordinate class does not get to recuperate the value of that information in the aggregate, as a whole.

What the subordinate class of information producers get and what the dominant class who own the vector of information get are incommensurable, and in a double sense. If it were possible to measure what the subordinate class makes and what it gets in terms of information, the sums would not add up. It gets less than it makes. But how would this even be measured? The vector is designed to obfuscate the labor on which it depends.

This double incommensurability creates the conditions for 'net culture's impulse to call what Internet memes do "magic." The expropriation of information value in the aggregate and the capacity to occult the production of culture have the same source, but express it differently. The concept of meme magic teaches us that media theory deals just as badly with this incommensurability as 'net culture does.

Peel back the levels of irony and meme magic operates as what theory used to call the *fetish*. This term has a long and sometimes dubious history.<sup>7</sup> But we're struck by its habit of re-

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

6 McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

7 William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

curring across time and in different disciplines — including media theory. If we treat meme magic as a fetish, what becomes apparent is not only that 'net culture mistakes its occult lulz for reality. Rather, it's that media theory invokes its own magic word to resolve this incommensurability: *circulation*.

The parallel we're drawing might sound far-fetched. After all, circulation is a key term in media theory's lexicon of concepts. Both meme magic and circulation respond to the same set of problems. Each attempts to overcome an incommensurability that divides technics and labor from value or culture. Each attempts to grapple with the production of culture at scale. And each evokes a power that is neither adequately conceptualized nor, we would argue, substantiated.

Circulation's parallels with meme magic show how it operates as fetish when it's used to explain the 'net and 'net culture. We treat its limitations as a failure of our concepts. Our claim is that media theory has failed to see how the incommensurability that platforms actively produce also actively mediates media theory itself. As a result, its concepts reproduce the incommensurability they're supposed to explain.

We use the word fetish because, in the mongrel world of memes, it is a critical concept with some pedigree. The fetish is not just a substitute for the phallus, as Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical appropriation of the term would have it.<sup>8</sup> Our approach draws on both Marxist and anthropological traditions. Whilst we acknowledge that the anthropological tradition of the fetish has a dubious history, we are confident that we can draw on deployments of it that negotiate the term's colonial heritage.<sup>9</sup> The Marxist concept of the fetish explains how we attribute the value of commodities to their physical properties rather than the labor that produces them.<sup>10</sup> The anthropological heritage

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8 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 9 (1928): 161–66.

9 Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

10 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 163ff.

expands the term's purview. It retains its power for us because it gives us the means to name those theoretical gestures by which we claim commensurability between otherwise incommensurable things.

Besides the role of living labor and free labor in the production of data, what the fetishizing of circulation obfuscates is the role that media technologies — *dead labor* — play in the production of culture.<sup>11</sup> More than this, they obfuscate how platforms actively make labor and technics incommensurable. Industrial technology fragmented the body and articulated it as components with machine components. Information technology goes much further, and fragments individual subjects into *dividual* components, weaving each into the information production process to the point where it would no longer be possible to distinguish living from dead labor.<sup>12</sup>

Meme magic might be absurd, but we also want to take a cue from it. It's no coincidence that 'net culture has invoked meme magic just when the extent of platforms' incommensurability has become known and has been politicized in a series of issues. Ours is an age of leaks, malware, hacks, encryption, drones, flash crashes, tech monopolies, tech gurus, the dark web, and DDOS attacks. Much of what makes 'net culture go around seems mysteriously beyond our ken. We are encouraged not to concern ourselves too much with all this, so long as our packets arrive at their destinations and our services stay online. But there's a lingering anxiety that it does matter. Meme magic points in negative to something real and perhaps even something true, beyond perennially refreshing appearances.

Casting down the fetishes of meme magic or of circulation might demonstrate how the media we theorize also mediate our theories of them, but it doesn't resolve the incommensurability that platforms produce. That gesture properly belongs to what we might think of as a *modern* style of theorization — a topic

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 322ff.

<sup>12</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 26ff.

to which we shall return. Rather, there's a kernel of validity at meme magic's core: its recognition that something about 'net culture must remain incommensurable.

Perhaps 'net culture is actually driven by that incommensurability. Through the fetishizing of meme magic and the parallel fetishizing of circulation, we can glean something about what happens to culture when history no longer makes sense. Casting down the fetishes we make of the 'net doesn't make history or the real apparent. It makes apparent the incommensurability that organizes each.

We used to have a word for the practice of clothing what was difficult to know in more tractable guises: *myth*.<sup>13</sup> Shorn of the esotericism, the offensiveness, and the abominable politics—but not necessarily the irony, as Donna Haraway teaches us—perhaps meme magic is just a vernacular theory of contemporary political myth.<sup>14</sup> Within the technological conditions that constitute contemporaneity, perhaps myth has become memetic. So, did Pepe swing the 2016 United States Presidential election? Or is that too a myth? Internet culture seems to respond as though by saying, “When the meme becomes fact, make danker memes.”<sup>15</sup> In this we can find the cultural politics underlying our new online culture wars.

### The Fetish of Circulation

*Circulation* is a concept that circulates almost unnoticed in media theory. It is routinely used to describe what both old and new media do. The concept of circulation is particularly crucial in discussions of 'net culture, which use it to describe how media are distributed, the conditions in which we interact with

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13 On myth as something more than structural, see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017).

14 Donna Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016).

15 Anticipated, perhaps, in Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Jim Fleming (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).

them, and how they generate effects. But perhaps circulation, which appears as a concept, acts more as a fetish.

Our claim is premised on a particular understanding of what a fetish is. As fetish, circulation renders invisible the incommensurability of what information labor makes and what it gets. It also renders invisible the incommensurability of what labor makes and what technics make. With the fetish concept, we can critique media theory's incapacity to grasp its relation to its own conditions of possibility; that is, media themselves as hybrid flesh-tech from which an information asymmetry is extracted.

Put simply, to fetishize is to invest a material object with outsize significance. But the concept of the fetish has a mixed reputation in the history of anthropology, where this understanding of it originates.<sup>16</sup> As William Pietz outlines in his seminal series of essays on the concept, the fetish first emerges from the “intercultural spaces” created when Italian, Portuguese, and Dutch traders started doing business along the West African coast from the late fifteenth century onwards.<sup>17</sup>

The fetish — from the Portuguese *fetisso* — is what European outsiders began to call objects that West Africans seemed to venerate. To these outside observers, these objects were invested with inexplicable material agency and anthropomorphic characteristics. The fetish played a specific role in its historical context: as Pietz puts it, to mediate the “social value of material objects” between the “radically heterogeneous social systems” — Christianity, African society, merchant capitalism — brought in to contact along the West African coast.<sup>18</sup>

At first, merchants had to participate in fetish-based social rituals trade with West African societies.<sup>19</sup> Expanding on Pietz, David Graeber argues that the charge of fetishism helped Eu-

16 L. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

17 William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, 1,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 5–17, at 6.

18 *Ibid.*, 6–7.

19 William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, 2: The Origin of the Fetish,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 13 (Spring 1987): 23–45, at 45.

ropeans to “avoid some of the most disturbing implications of their own experience.”<sup>20</sup> This is why Pietz argues that the fetish is defined by what he calls a “double consciousness” of “absorbed credulity” and “distanced incredulity,” or of participation and disdain.<sup>21</sup> In this intercultural space, West African social conventions posed a challenge to the self-evidence of European systems of value.

What interests us in the concept, however, is not what it says about our “consciousness” of heterogeneous value systems, but a more general fetish function that Pietz identifies: the — anthropological — fetish is a physical object that mediates values that are otherwise “incommensurable.”<sup>22</sup> This aspect of the fetish concept is what provides traction on the present. The fetish lives on in the way incommensurability is processed by the technologies that constitute the Internet, for example under the vernacular heading of meme magic. In media theory’s concept of circulation, we find a version of the same fetish, albeit one that’s less an object and more a process: a mediation.

We can use Graeber’s work as a guide here. For him, the construction of fetishes follows a pattern. With no small dose of irony, Graeber describes the fetish as “a god under process of construction.”<sup>23</sup> The gesture of *fetishizing* marks a point at which “objects we have created or appropriated for our own purposes suddenly come to be seen as powers imposed on us, precisely at the moment when they come to embody some newly created social bond.”<sup>24</sup>

The animism found in the anthropological concept has a broader and recurrent significance. As far as we’re aware, nei-

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20 David Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity: Or, Fetishes are Gods in the Process of Construction,” *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 4 (2005): 407–38, at 411.

21 Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, 1,” 14.

22 *Ibid.*, 16.

23 Graeber, “Fetishism as Social Creativity,” 427.

24 *Ibid.*

ther of us has any gods. But we do have Google.<sup>25</sup> After Pietz and Graeber, we want to ask what contemporary role fetishes play in mediating otherwise incommensurable systems. With a little retrofitting, we can apply what Graeber describes to the contemporary Internet and the operations of its defining infrastructure: the *platform*.

The concept of the fetish has already recurred in media theory in different ways. Wendy H.K. Chun identifies the concept of “source code” as a kind of fetishism, critiquing it as a form of “ideology.”<sup>26</sup> Taina Bucher and others identify and analyze the ways that we fetishize algorithms, using them as polyvalent explanatory devices.<sup>27</sup> These approaches mix a little from the Marxist tradition and a little from anthropology’s concern with incommensurability.

Labor and algorithms are incommensurable, not because they represent different *social* value systems, but because they confront us with epistemological limits. With contemporary media, the question of incommensurability is mediated by the reorganization of epistemology by computation, automation, and what Benjamin H. Bratton calls its planetary distribution.<sup>28</sup> We take our cue from these media theoretical approaches: platforms obfuscate labor; they can do so because their operations are incommensurable.

But our fetish concept doesn’t deal with a physical thing, as in Pietz; or code or algorithms, as in recent media theory. Régis Debray notes that whilst we’re easily able to fetishize “objects isolated against their background,” networks — which hold

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25 John Durham Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

26 Wendy H.K. Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

27 Taina Bucher, “Neither Black Nor Box: Ways of Knowing Algorithms,” in *Innovative Methods in Media and Communication Research*, eds. Sebastian Kubitschko and Anne Kaun (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 81–98.

28 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

platforms together — are “less easily turned into myth.”<sup>29</sup> It’s a stretch to call a platform an object. To call a platform a *hyperobject* (Morton) seems to capitulate in advance to understanding them as ineffable, intelligible only by their resonances.<sup>30</sup> To call a platform a *stack* (Bratton) offers a more analytical container for material technical systems that are complex and distributed, but it may not entirely avoid making a fetish of mediation.<sup>31</sup>

So what’s to be gained by recovering the concept of the fetish and applying it to platforms? The platform itself isn’t the fetish here — though this is one way we might read the concept’s capaciousness.<sup>32</sup> What concerns us is not whether platforms are fetishes, but that they *produce* fetishism by producing its form. We might understand meme magic and circulation as fetishes if we understand how they become this form’s *content*.

### The Content of Circulation

The Internet meme is a paradigmatic case of why *circulation* is crucial for understanding ’net culture. Circulation is constitutive of the Internet meme as thing: the Internet meme can’t be collectively produced and can’t mutate unless it circulates. But circulation is also crucial to the conceptual work of media theory. In theories of the Internet meme, we invoke the media-technical process of circulation to account for one of its most confounding qualities: that an Internet meme might be simulta-

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29 Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*, trans. Eric Rauth (London: Verso, 1996), 34.

30 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

31 As a computational concept, the stack isn’t immune to fetishization. For an approach that uses the stack as technical concept rather than theoretical one, see Till Straube, “Stacked Spaces: Mapping Digital Infrastructures,” *Big Data & Society* 3, no. 2 (2016): 1–12.

32 On the term’s polyvalence, see Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010): 347–64.

neously *this* meme, or an instance; and the meme, or the plurality to which an instance belongs.<sup>33</sup>

Let's take the SpongeBob SquarePants meme as an example. Whether intentionally or not, any new SpongeBob SquarePants meme makes its meaning out of the original children's animated TV show and what 'net culture has already made of its characters. In the 'net vernacular, "Internet meme" oscillates ambiguously between instance and plurality. We can talk about the SpongeBob meme by talking about a specific instance of the meme or to gesture towards an envisaged totality of related instances of it. This totality of related instances of the SpongeBob meme might then shade off toward an adjacent one featuring SpongeBob's offsider, the dull and likeable pink starfish Patrick, and so on.

The relationship between the Internet meme's instance and plurality isn't just a whole-part relation; nor does it recapitulate Charles Sanders Peirce's type-token.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps it is a little like the process that Guy Debord called *détournement*.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is a little like what Jacques Derrida called *iterability*.<sup>36</sup> However, it is not just something that happens in language. An Internet meme's mutations are enabled by a media-technical process. It mutates, we say, in circulation, through acts of collective production that stretch and mould SpongeBob's features to affect the plurality through the instance.

Circulation smooths the ambiguity between the Internet meme's instance and its plurality into something that 'net culture works with intuitively. For media theory, this ambiguity is more problematic. Circulation has never been adequately conceptualized in media theory — or in many of its uses across the

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33 For an early version of this argument, see Scott Wark, "The Meme is Excess of Its Instance," Excessive Research: transmediale "Conversation Piece" workshop blog, 2015, <https://transmedialeblog.wordpress.com/2015/09/30/scott-wark-the-meme-in-excess-of-its-instance/>.

34 Charles Sanders Peirce, "Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism," *The Monist* 16, no. 4 (October 1906): 492–546, at 506.

35 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, New York, 1995), 146.

36 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

humanities and social sciences more generally.<sup>37</sup> What media theory takes to be a concept with purchase on media-technical processes is actually a product of those processes themselves. Circulation functions as a fetish.

This has consequences for our ability to conceptualize either the Internet meme or 'net culture more broadly. To see why, we can ask a deceptively simple question: What actually circulates online? The answer to this question is also deceptively simple: *Content* is what circulates. Content is the form that platforms produce and that our vernacular and conceptual fetishes — meme magic and circulation — both take.

“Content” has widespread currency in tech circles, the media, in public discussion, and even in academic debate. Content is what fills our feeds: it's what we interact with online, what we share, what we download and, of course, what we produce. In discussions of 'net culture, it's often used interchangeably with “media.” So digital media has become digital media content, while the culture we produce online is equated with the online content that the 'net produces. Ironically enough, content becomes a problematic concept without content.<sup>38</sup>

Content is not as self-evident as its widespread currency otherwise suggests. In the simplest of terms, content is that which is contained by something else. We need to ask what content is the content of. The answer to *this* question is the platform, which complicates the seeming self-evidence of content itself. The platform becomes that which enables — or appears to enable — content's circulation.

This circulating capacity of platforms emerges when discrete media can be encoded with markup languages. These languages — like TCP, XML, CSS, Java, and so on — automate the presentation of media in new digital contexts by fixing their parameters. Alan Liu argues that markup languages make content

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37 An early version of this argument can be read in Wark, “The Meme in Excess of its Instance.”

38 See for example Bharat Anand, *The Content Trap: A Strategist's Guide to Digital Change* (New York: Random House, 2016).

“autonomously mobile.”<sup>39</sup> They make something like an image or a video more easily shared, embedded, and controlled.

Anne Helmond calls this the “programmability” of platforms and web pages and argues that it creates the conditions for content to “circulate through modular elements.”<sup>40</sup> Crucially, though, Aden Evans argues that the modular elements through which content circulates are “neutral with respect to content.”<sup>41</sup> So long as these elements support a particular discrete bit of content—a file type, for instance, or a chunk of text—what content actually contains doesn’t matter.<sup>42</sup>

This inverts the concept of content. Content is the content of platforms, but content is not the media or the data that populate our feeds and that we interact with. Content is a set of the parameters that allow modular compartments to be filled.<sup>43</sup> Marshall McLuhan infamously proposed that “the content of any medium is always another medium.”<sup>44</sup> The discourse surrounding online media might invite us to rephrase this claim: the media of content is other content. Content is a placeholder for digital media. *Content is itself an empty form.*

This is a problem for media theory. It throws the media concept into question by distributing it across platform elements. This has interesting implications, but is not our primary concern here. The paradox of content is a problem for media theory because it also empties circulation of *its* conceptual content.

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39 Alan Liu, “Transcendental Data: Toward a Cultural History and Aesthetics of the New Encoded Discourse,” *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004): 49–84, at 57. Emphasis in the original.

40 Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web,” 6.

41 Aden Evans, “Dreams of a New Medium,” *Fibreculture Journal* 14 (2009), <http://fourteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-092-dreams-of-a-new-medium/>.

42 One could add intermediate steps to this argument without negating its core. For example, one could pause over the intermediate role of file formats. See Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

43 Alexander R. Galloway, “The Cybernetic Hypothesis,” *differences* 25, no. 1 (2014): 107–31, at 115.

44 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 8.

We can illustrate this claim by asking another question: What is circulation? In media-theoretical discussions of 'net culture, this question has its own self-evident answer: *Circulation is the circulation of content.*

These slippages and substitutions elide the tautological form of this answer. The process of circulation gets ascribed to media, to memes, as though it's also a neutral term that describes something that just happens in media systems; as though circulation is just a quality of media understood as content. Content is what circulates; circulation is the circulation of content. Rather, content is the death mask of its circulation.<sup>45</sup>

In producing content as empty form, the platform produces the form which our fetishes of 'net culture can then take. Just as popular discourse invokes meme magic, media theory invokes circulation as though it has analytical purchase on platforms, when it's really just an expression of an incommensurability that platforms produce. This paradox points to the incommensurability between the labor and the technics that platforms obfuscate, but that now underwrite the production of culture. The tautological concepts of content and circulation function as a fetish that obfuscates the double incommensurability of what information labor makes with what it receives and of what part of what is made is made by technics and is made by labor.

### The Fetish of the User

The fetish concept provides us with the means for identifying how platforms obfuscate both the labor and the technology by which culture is produced. This is perhaps another kind of (Marxist) fetishism, another way of avoiding the question of labor and of underwriting the notion that the realm of culture is separate to it. This labor that platforms obfuscate is not pure

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45 To mistranslate Walter Benjamin's "the work is the death mask of its conception." See Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 81.

living labor, however. It's a labor inseparable from technics. On the 'net, the labor of producing culture emerges out of meshed hybrids of flesh and tech.

So our version of the fetish concept is a debased derivation of Marx's commodity fetish.<sup>46</sup> What we want to use it to think is neither a kind of false consciousness (after Marx) or double consciousness (*à la* Pietz). Borrowing from both, we want to underscore that what platforms obfuscate is the hybrid productivity of labor and technics. What they render incommensurable on the other side is labor, technics, and finally culture itself.

If the technical component of this triumvirate is obfuscated by content, the labor component has its own empty form: the *user*. Alongside the question of what circulates on the 'net, we might ask the question that resonates more clearly with the fetish concept's earlier formulations: who puts media-as-content into circulation? The common sense answer is the user. The user is the subject who operates a computational device.<sup>47</sup> This, too, is a kind of fetish.

Bratton calls it the *user position*.<sup>48</sup> Or perhaps we can call it, after Olga Goriunova, the *digital subject*.<sup>49</sup> The user position is the necessary and identifiable predicate of the actions we take online. When we like a post or modify a meme, platforms register this action not as one that we take, but as one taken by the user whom the digital subject functions as. Like content, the user is also a platform construct.<sup>50</sup>

A clamor over authenticity has long defined discussions about the digital subject.<sup>51</sup> Recently, it has manifested in prob-

46 Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 163ff.

47 Olia Lialina, "Turing Complete User," *Contemporary Home Computing*, 2012, <http://contemporary-home-computing.org/turing-complete-user/>.

48 Bratton, *The Stack*, 251.

49 Olga Goriunova, quoted in Olia Lialina, "Not Art&Tech," *Contemporary Home Computing*, 2015, <http://contemporary-home-computing.org/art-and-tech/not/>.

50 Scott Wark, "The Subject of Circulation: On the Digital Subject's Inhuman Individuations," *Subjectivity* 12, no. 1 (2018): 65–81.

51 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15–20.

lematic 'net vernacular panics about social media being populated by bots, manipulated by “the Russians” or scammed by “Nigerians.” This reflects 'net culture's understanding of the user's role. It suspects it's a construct. It knows that the user is insufficient for explaining all of the actions that we might take on the 'net. The Internet meme — and 'net culture's fetish of meme magic — make this abundantly clear by probing what it means for culture to be collectively produced by such indeterminate user constructs.

Meme magic makes a fetish of the capacity for the content we create and which we enter into circulation to undergo rapid proliferation, filling feeds and plastering walls. We can also see it as a response to the insufficiency of the user position. The Internet meme is produced by a collective. This collective is constitutive of its capacity to be produced as a plurality and to mutate as it's produced in common. But who are the “we” who constitutes this collective? It appears as a plurality of user positions, all formally the same, all of more or less troubling or compromised authenticity.

Internet memes seem to outstrip such a plurality's capacity to produce rapidly proliferating culture. Alongside the occult capacity of this content itself, meme magic also fetishizes users' capacity to collectively engineer content and to produce large-scale effects. The invocation of meme magic contrives an authentic subject — a collective will — in the gap between the internet meme's effects and a collective of users' insufficiency in explaining them.<sup>52</sup>

This is how we might understand the absurd-ironic invocation of the ancient Egyptian god Kek in recent 'net culture. After the 2016 Presidential election and in the wake of the apparent effect that the Pepe meme had on the outcome, some segments of meme culture began to invoke this Egyptian god and to proclaim Pepe as its contemporary manifestation. Amongst other

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52 On invocation, see Chris Chesher, “Layers of Code, Layers of Subjectivity,” *Culturemachine* 5 (2003), <https://culturemachine.net/the-e-issue/layers-of-code/>.

things, Kek is the god of darkness and chaos. It is often depicted as a frog. In the 'net vernacular, "kek" is another way of saying "lol", or "laugh out loud." These serendipitous confluences provided the basis for a joke religious cult: the cult of Kek.

This is, in a certain sense, ironic. But it also marks out one way that 'net culture responds to the insufficiency of the user position: with forms of what we might call anthropomorphic animism. When the user is insufficient, Internet memes can conjure a degree of seemingly authentic agency: Pepe not only conveys hateful feelings, but comes to personify them.

Or, the cult of Kek that emerges in Pepe's wake is absurd and ironic, again like all 'net culture, but also indicates something true. Namely, that when the living labor (and non-labor) of making 'net culture interfaces via subject positions that are as interchangeable and dubious as user positions, and when 'net culture makes content that in the end is also an empty form, something else will end up being invoked, as if by magic, to cover over the troubling non-identity of object, subject, and everything in between.

Meme magic is then predicated upon a double fetish: that when the user puts content into circulation, something can be made to happen. Here, meme magic and media theory echo one another: invoking circulation is supposed to explain the production of culture by users. With both concepts, the platform obfuscates the productive roles played by technics and labor in the production of culture. With the concepts of circulation and the user, respectively, platforms produce the forms that media theory uses to fetishize technics and labor while also obfuscating their incommensurability. Meme magic's tacit faith in the generative power of 'net culture is homologous to media theory's.

### Mediating Theory

What we have called fetishes—circulation, the user—do not yet account for the epistemological influence platforms have on media theory itself. Platforms produce content as param-

eters, which we mistake for media. Platforms put content in circulation, which we mistake for circulating media. Platforms predicate us as users, which we mistake for agents. The fallacy of identifying media with content, or circulation with the circulation of content, or the subject with the user, is that these identifications don't recognize that the empty form of content or the user position are components of platforms. They're designed to extract information asymmetries for the owners of the information vector from incommensurate hybrids of laboring flesh-tech.

Media theory is mediated by the platform, which presents us with readymade conceptualizations that we uncritically incorporate into our theories. To fetishize today is to mistake these forms for media wonders. Magic and circulation merge to form something like the magic circle that used to dog linguistic paradigms; media become our epistemological beginning and end. If we're to cast these fetishes down, it's not clear that we'll find what's real; but maybe we'll find what's political.

To cast down a fetish is not to critique it. It is not to unmask a form of false or double consciousness. We don't mean to ape the caricature of "critique" that's animated recent turns to realism and materialism.<sup>53</sup> We're not allergic to critique, but we don't want to replicate what we see as a properly *modern* gesture. A kind of reality — history, or the field of incommensurable value systems — is supposed to lurk behind the fetish's veil. What if we know this already?

Perhaps 'net culture is already aware of the limitations of the user fetish, for instance. It even mobilizes the insufficiency of the user for its own ends. What if the role of the fetish concept is not to reveal some kind of reality, but instead to help us sort what's real into what's effective and what's just the form that effects take? The fetish concept helps us to think how media theory is implicated in what it theorizes. Now, we might ask, what is

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53 As most forcefully articulated in Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

the role of the concept itself when it's exposed to the circulations it's supposed to conceptualize?

Platforms actively produce incommensurability: they “black box” their technical workings, leaving us with parameters in which we might enmesh the labor of producing culture and through which the value of our labor might be expropriated. Labor and technics recede, leaving us — *users* — with their epiphenomena: what we call *content*. The Internet meme challenges us to think 'net culture across the incommensurability that platforms produce — in circulation.

When it is understood as the circulation of content, the concept of circulation works in much the same way as “meme magic.” We invoke it to smooth over this incommensurability and the questions of what circulation is and how media circulate. If it's to function as concept rather than fetish, media theory must also reckon with the role that platforms play in producing its concepts — and the conceptual terrain — in which it operates. This would be the premise and promise of a meme theory as a critical media theory: *a media theory that's able to account for its own conditions of production*.<sup>54</sup>

We think of this kind of meme theory as one that refuses to be modern by understanding that its concepts are implicated in the thing it tries to theorize, media themselves. For Peter Osborne, the modern theoretical gesture produces the new by treating “the present as a negation of the past.”<sup>55</sup> Pietz notes that the fetish concept is always limned with this force of negation.<sup>56</sup> To construe the act of casting down the fetish as an act of casting out the false would embrace negativity — and its conception of history as that which is occluded. This is not our project.

Osborne also identifies another theoretical gesture, one that's addressed to the *contemporary*: this gesture joins “the times of

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54 This is the animating concern of Scott Wark's work in progress, *Meme Theory*.

55 Peter Osborne, “Philosophy after Theory: Transdisciplinarity and the New,” in *Theory after “Theory,”* eds. Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 2011), 29.

56 Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, 1,” 9.

the spaces it addresses” — its theoretical material — together in a present.<sup>57</sup> We might think of media theory’s magpie proclivity to mix theory from different domains in this way. This is how media theory produces what Osborne calls the “illusory present of the space of the contemporary.”<sup>58</sup> In this space, theory itself has no history and is no product of labor or technics. In this space, theory participates in and so produces the idea that culture, of which it’s a part, is separate from labor and technics.

It’s no longer possible to assume that culture can be separated from technics. To pretend that it can be, ’net culture invokes meme magic — this is its fetish. Media theory has its own magic word, too: circulation. These fetishes aren’t adequately able to divide labor and technics. Hence what we sometimes read as the “occult” quality we attribute to our technology, which is one version of a misattribution of agency, or what used to be called animism.

We might say that our contemporary technological condition expresses the fact that platforms participate in the modern “purification” of the realms of nature and culture, as per Bruno Latour.<sup>59</sup> But if the project that ’net culture participates in and that the platform constructs is not a modern one, but a contemporary one, perhaps what they respond to is something else entirely. The platform can’t adequately purify labor-technics hybrids because it’s no longer participating in a modern project.

Perhaps, then, what ’net culture produces is not a desire to affirm the limits of this modern project, but a response to its failure. Perhaps what lies beyond the fetishes invoked is not history, but something else. Concepts that can no longer be theorized other than as derivatives of circulation.<sup>60</sup> Concepts cannot be understood separately from their objects, like media, but rather are subject to them. This is a derivative culture caught up in a

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57 Osborne, “Philosophy after Theory,” 29.

58 Ibid.

59 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

60 On the derivative, see Randy Martin, *Knowledge LTD: Towards a Social Logic of the Derivative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016).

different kind of temporality, one whose author or driving agent is no longer apparent.

We want to say, rather, that the 'net confounds our capacity to identify the agents behind, and the authors of, history. It's magic. Or, it's circulation. And it licenses an entirely new and often disturbing cultural politics. Like theory, culture has become contemporary. One of the things this means is that it has lost the modern mythic landscape it once deployed to make sense of the incommensurable.

Following Ernst Cassirer, we can understand myth as something that binds people together through "sympathy," or feeling, rather than "causality," or objective concerns.<sup>61</sup> Myth mixes the abstract and the real in a workable complex by giving emotion expression through form.<sup>62</sup> In Cassirer, this form is what he calls an "image," but we might understand it to encompass other forms of abstraction suited to our contemporary technological conditions. Myth makes feelings real and makes them workable through techniques of what Cassirer calls "ritualization," which we might think of as various modes of collective production. Myth isn't antithetical to politics, but is a constituent of it: it helps bind people into publics.

The modern mythic landscape provided the anchor points of history and agency on which a politics could be built. When the rituals — including the media-rituals — that constitute the modern fall away, so too does its mythic landscape. On the 'net, new rituals emerge. Only, their anchors — a modern mode of history; the agency of the subject — are now insufficient. In response, 'net culture's had to create its own mythic landscape to make tractable what's otherwise incommensurable. The fetish is a species of myth; meme magic is the kind of myth that emerges when history and agency fall away.

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61 Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 38.

62 *Ibid.*, 43.

The 'net community operates without the modern processes of *immunization* to which we've become accustomed.<sup>63</sup> It can no longer detect and neutralize the outside within its inside. Its fetishes establish myths in which the agency to produce culture is fed by the fact that culture is no longer anchored to the possibility that one might be excommunicated if one goes too far. We might think of the Internet meme as one of the techniques that mobilizes myth to cultural and political ends.

To associate a set of antagonistic qualities with an avatar—like Pepe—is to exercise the political potential of myth: to bind an insider 'net culture sect by excluding through offending. So the mythic subject who now acts as the paradigmatic representative of the user position is the one who antagonizes endlessly; who in antagonizing longs to be immunized, if only to affirm that community could, once more, be possible not only on the 'net, but within the field of the contemporary that it helps to produce. This subject, in other words, is the “edgelord.”

What the fetish tells us is that edgelord avatars emerge out of the insufficiency of our concepts to adequately encompass our contemporary technical conditions.<sup>64</sup> It also tells us that our media-theoretical concepts participate in the propagation of the myths that found 'net culture—and its extremes. Perhaps most surprisingly, it tells us that the edgelord's is a political project that is constructive rather than negative. Meme magic invokes new anchors for a culture adrift. We're raising fetishes to propagate myths, only we're not raising the kind that we would perhaps like. If the Internet meme's to be a productive object of theory, theory must use the Internet meme to think beyond this impasse and its founding incommensurability: that platforms obfuscate the role of labor and technics in producing culture; that our fetishes are necessary, but that we might not need to build them in the platform's image.

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63 Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

64 On avatars, see Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: The Rise of a Networked Generation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

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