Reading Between the Memes

Exploring Difficulty in Third Generation Electronic Literature

By Mallen Clifton

In the field of electronic literature, there is an interest in understanding current digital writing practices, termed third generation electronic literature. Many scholars claim that third-gen e-literature lacks an "aesthetic of difficulty." This is a term introduced by Jessica Pressman, who applied it to first and second generation e-literature to describe the complex interpretation that must occur in their analysis. I claim that there is an aesthetic of difficulty found in third-gen e-literature, which I access through my concept "local intertextuality." This phrase draws on the mathematical definition of local to specify intertextuality within a limited range of texts. Local intertextuality can be defined in two parts: firstly, the content directly connected to it through the platform it exists on, through creation by the same author, or interaction from the same users,

among other possibilities; secondly, references to particular meme templates, fonts, and filters. By scrolling through the poster's feed and encountering memes in different presentations, a reader can draw out difficult hermeneutics of the original meme. Moreover, utilizing Michel Serres's concept of the parasite, a reader can draw out difficult politics of the original meme, in our case liberatory politics against monopolistic social media from the outside in. The meme enacts this by realizing the gap that exists between the power of social media and the users it subjugates. At its heart, what this paper argues is that third generation electronic literature can hold an aesthetic of difficulty—you just have to read between the memes.

I. Introduction

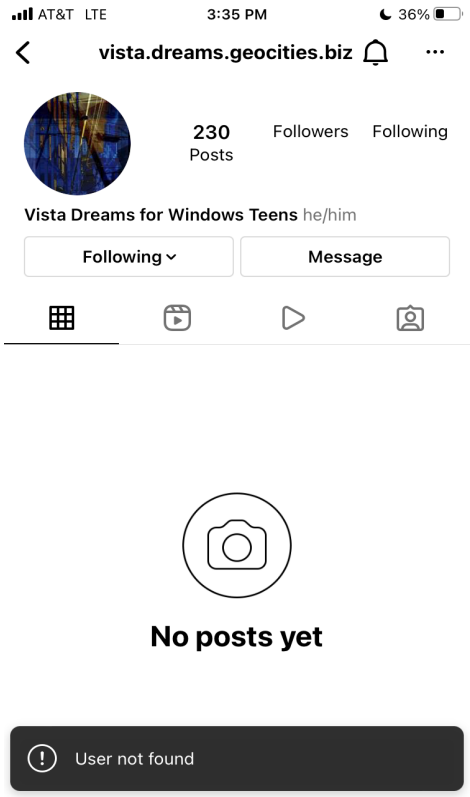

Figure 1: A screenshot of Vista's deleted account.[1]

A week before the first draft of this thesis was due, my source text—the Instagram account vista.dreams.geocities.biz (Vista)—vanished. It had been a long time coming: his[2] alt[3] account had earlier been banned with no official explanation, although it was likely brought on by calling out verified content creators and the cults

1 Vista [@vista.dreams.geocities.biz].

2 As Vista's biography displays he/him and the account generally displays a personal tone, I have decided to use he/him/his pronouns when discussing Vista.

3 An "alt account" is a second, "alternative" account, in contrast to a user's "main account." Various users will employ an alt account to hold a more private space, post off-theme content in contrast to their main account, or various other ends.

of personality they produce.[4] On top of that, his main account was dealing with its own problems: account restrictions, shadowbanning. This meant he couldn't comment on other users' posts, and his own posts were hidden from the main content feed. Any attempts to appeal to Instagram's moderation were ignored—and there was no indication of whether it was a human or machine enforcing it.[5]

As Vista continued to deal with Instagram's oppressive moderation rules, he began expressing interest in leaving his main account. I screenshotted a few posts then, but as the months went by, I started to think he was reconsidering. He got more active, with multiple posts a week, and I began to comment, throwing in my thoughts to his questions about digitized music, broken links, and post-Web online life. He also got more directly political, posting screenshots of Instagram's privacy agreement and analyzing its faults. And then I typed his name into the search bar one day and nothing came up (Figure 1). The only thing left was a glitchy, blank account screen; a lost referent to something more.

Who could tell why the account had disappeared? Had he lit up on Instagram's moderation controls a bit too bright, and had to be removed? Had he had enough of producing content that Instagram could collect mountains of metadata on—likes, comments, geolocation, movement up and down the feed—and finally left it all for a healthier internet ecosystem? Who could say. A few weeks later with no warning, the account returned.[6] I messaged him to inquire about the situation, but he never read it. What happened? Why did it happen? Who could say.

We are at a unique point in time where access to and dissemination of online content is not always up to us. However, the proliferation of this content has always been an area of interest for scholars. Richard Dawkins originated the concept of the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" but it quickly became adapted for a particularly digital context: the Internet meme.[7] Limor Shifman defines the Internet meme as:

> (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which
>
> (b) were created with awareness of each other, and
>
> (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.[8]

4 Vista, "Goodbye, alt.vista …"

5 Vista, "X-post from alt.vista."

6 As of September 24th, 2022, his account is again gone.

7 qtd. in Shifman, Memes in Digital Culture, 37; consider any further references to memes as referring to Internet memes in particular.

8 Shifman, 41.

Alfie Bown and Dan Bristow tie the Internet meme to "deconstruction" and "twentieth-century vanguard poetics" because of how the text must be reconsidering in a digitized environment, especially in regards to copying, collaging, and multimedia creation in general.[9] Taken together, we can understand the Internet meme to be a unit of information transmitted over the Internet that replicates particular forms and ideas, and is produced with digital tools that allow for the cutting, pasting, and copying of other online media.

However, there is another school of thought to analyze memes with: electronic literature. Electronic literature, as defined by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), is "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer."[10] Of course, this "important literary aspect" has always been a bit of a loose descriptor, covering everything from web stories connected by hyperlinks and flash-animated kinetic poetry, to computer art installations that discuss questions about language and literature in their artistic statement.[11] As Scott Rettberg paraphrasing N. Katherine Hayles explains, "in some cases works of electronic literature operate in a literary context beyond the boundaries of what is typically considered literature."[12] And yet Rettberg—the cofounder and first director of the ELO—whose book was published in 2018, still chooses to retain this definition.[13] However, in that same breadth of time, the styles and genres of electronic literature have developed exponentially.

These developments introduce the need to differentiate various eras of electronic literature. Hayles began this work in 2002 by proposing "first-generation" e-literature and "second-generation" e-literature. The first generation covers works written roughly before 1985, which rely more on specialty software and are text-heavy.[14] One well-known example of this is Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story*, written in the style of hypertext fiction such that it allows the reader to take different paths in the story depending on which links are clicked. This was created with Storyspace, a proprietary software whose works could only be disseminated through floppy disks and flash drives. Following this is second generation e-literature, works written after this period that utilize both the World Wide Web and the multimedia options it affords.[15] We can see an example of this in *The Unknown*, a group project between William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg, Dirk Stratton, and Frank Marquardt. This is also hypertext fiction in that one clicks links to discover the story, but it is quite different from first

9 Bown and Bristow, "Introproduction," 18; qtd. in Bown and Bristow, 18; many of the sources I cite about memes come from one book, Post Memes: Seizing the Memes of Production. Unfortunately, as a more recent phenomenon, there isn't an extremely wide array of sources about memes to choose from, and so I had to rely on various essays from this book to inform my writing.

10 qtd. in Hayles, "Electronic Literature: What is it?"

11 Hayles.

12 Rettberg, Electronic Literature, 6.

13 Rettberg, 5.

14 Hayles.

15 Hayles.

generation e-literature. This is because it is written by multiple authors over the open Web (and thus the authors were able to communicate digitally as opposed to relying on physical communication technologies), as well as the fact it utilizes multimedia such as photos and audio.

With the rise of social media and the content produced within it, questions are raised about whether this new kind of content counts as electronic literature, and if so, whether this should warrant the designation of a new era, some sort of "third-generation" electronic literature. Some academics have, in fact, begun to discuss this possibility, delineating its bounds and features, what counts and what doesn't. Leo Flores characterizes the usage of these social media platforms in opposition to the scarce software of first gen e-lit and open Web popularity of second gen e-lit.[16] Nick Montfort compares and contrasts this with his own designations of pre-Web, Web, and post-Web.[17] Jessica Pressman maps these generations to literary modernism and postmodernism.[18] As the area of third gen e-lit begins to emerge, memes are quite heavily discussed, being one of the generation's most popular forms. While some may be hesitant to call memes literature, I will follow conventions in the field of electronic literature, allowing for the broadest possible definition of what counts as literature. Moreover, I am not alone in my designation: many other electronic literature scholars have agreed that memes are a form of third gen e-literature. While doing so, these scholars have analyzed memes from all different angles, looking at their virality, relation to algorithms, or politics.[19] Yet what they all agree on up to now is that memes as third generation electronic literature lack an *aesthetic of difficulty* that first and second gen e-lit hold.

Aesthetic of difficulty is a term introduced by Pressman in her book *Digital Modernism.* Her main argument is that first and second generation electronic literature can be thought of as modernist (as opposed to postmodernist third gen works), which she explains through comparisons of modernist works from the New Criticism movement of the 1900s. In comparing electronic literature to these earlier modernist works, she pulls out an aesthetic of difficulty as a key formal feature in both kinds of pieces.[20] For example, the Flash-based animation *Dakota,* which presents its words bit by bit at a near-unreadable rate of delivery "uses speed to produce difficulty through illegibility."[21] In another example, *The Jew's Daughter*, a piece which includes hypertext-like buttons that change fragments of the text with each click, "presents the reader with content

16 Flores, "Third Generation Electronic Literature."
17 Montfort, "A Web Reply to the Post-Web Generation."
18 Pressman, Digital Modernism, 3.
19 Flores; Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit: Is Instagram Poetry E-literature?"; Saum-Pascual, "Is Third Generation Literature Postweb Literature? And Why Should We Care?"
20 Pressman, 3.
21 Pressman, 97.

that is hard to access, not because it flashes by too quickly to absorb (as in *Project* or *Dakota*) but because its context keeps changing."[22] In general, what Pressman means when she says that these works have an aesthetic of difficulty is that they present themselves in ways that make it hard for the reader to understand or interpret. Other electronic literature scholars, in adopting this term to investigate third gen electronic literature, have preserved its designation as an attribute that holds only to first and second gen electronic literature.

I propose something different. I posit that the growth of these new technologies—apps, platforms, memes—have changed the very systems they reside in. I draw on this concept through the work of Michel Serres, a well known figure in the postcritique movement focusing on the interrelatedness of science and the humanities.[23] One of his most prominent works is *The Parasite*, originally published in French in 1980, which details the relations between the three meanings of *le parasite* in French: a biological parasite, a social parasite, and noise in a technological system.[24] By weaving these three definitions together, he argues that parasites that feed off a system will end up redefining the system altogether.[25] If we view these new technologies mentioned above as parasites disrupting the system of digital media, digital media itself must be reimagined.

Part of this reimagining is also reimagining who counts as a worthy source in my argument. Throughout this text, I will occasionally add personal experiences and opinions. I do this because I truly believe that my additions are worthwhile additions to this text. Leo Flores motivates his exploration into third generation electronic literature by asking the question, "What is electronic literature's place in a world of ubiquitous computing, massive user bases, and even larger audiences?"[26] I feel like I was drawn to the topic of this thesis because I am one of those users, one of those audience members. Third generation electronic literature is intrinsic to my generation's forms of entertainment, communication, and culture at large. I can define my life through my interactions with it: the first social media site I joined was Instagram, even though to be fair I had been using YouTube since before I can remember. My first Tumblr account was a *Percy Jackson* fan account, although I reblogged *Sherlock*, *The Hunger Games*, and Dan and Phil content throughout middle school. I joined Facebook at the beginning of high school to keep up with events, and my fondest memory is probably an ill-advised Facebook group called something like "DISCOURSE" that (obviously) completely blew up within a few months. I entered Twitter later in life than most, but average about two hours a day on it now. I've met people I can count as true friends on Discord. I say all of this not to simulate a biography, but to show that social

22 Pressman, 109.
23 Latour, "The Enlightenment without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy." 85; Latour, 84.
24 Serres, The Parasite, vii.
25 Serres, 68.
26 Flores.

media and its creations are not just ideas to be looked at from a distance and analyzed through the few experts that actually even talk about it—it's also *my own life*.

However, that is not to say that I will eschew scholarly position in this piece of writing. Part II argument begins with a thorough examination of various scholars' interpretations of an aesthetic of difficulty, upon which I arrive at the focal points for my own analysis of difficulty: hermeneutics and politics. I continue by identifying key features of third generation electronic literature. By doing so, I am able to argue why my chosen frame of reference, *local intertextuality*, is the right way to problematize memes. In parts III and IV, I apply this reference frame to two Instagram meme accounts to draw out the possibility of difficulty, mainly focusing on hermeneutic difficulty. Part V draws on Serres and Jacques Rancière to specifically argue for political difficulty, and I conclude in part VI with a consideration of third generation electronic literature at large.

I claim that memes have only been seen as lacking this aesthetic of difficulty because they are viewed as traditional, individual objects, and analyzed in traditional terms of what difficulty can mean. But as Pressman herself recognizes, we live in an "increasingly digital, visual, and networked culture."[27] It is only fair to consider memes in the cultural moment they reside in. Thus if we instead view memes as part of larger networks of textuality, their local intertextuality—my framework of analysis in our parasited, networked world—and take into consideration what difficulty can mean in the age of ephemeral digital media, we can consider how memes could be understood as achieving this aesthetic of difficulty. In short, we must read between the memes.

II. Accessing an Aesthetic of Difficulty through Local Intertextuality

In 2019, Leo Flores introduced the concept of a third generation of electronic literature in his titular paper "Third Generation Electronic Literature." He categorized this new era as building off of popular media platforms; embracing remix, parody, and adaptation; and aligning with digital media as opposed to the artistic and print worlds. Importantly, he also claims that "third generation works reject or are unaware of this aesthetic of difficulty [that appear in works from earlier generations]." In contrast, he claims that they do not "necessarily seek[ ]formal innovation or a highbrow literary experience" and instead "seek ease of access and spreadability," which is produced through the aforementioned recognizable content and platforms.[28]

Even though Flores does not directly claim that this ethos of ease includes easiness of interpretation,

27 Pressman, 17.
28 Flores.

he does directly cite Pressman to discuss aesthetic of difficulty, and he clearly remains aware of her particular definition by referencing "formal innovation" and "highbrow literary experience." His analyses, too, reveal his awareness of this dimension of ease. The only third generation e-literature example that Flores looks at that is not tied to earlier generations by author or form—and thus the sole "pure" example third gen e-lit, in a way—is the video "Lazy Cat" by txtstories. Flores says himself that "in terms of a second generation work, it is not a particularly sophisticated piece." He goes on to explain that it is a simple story made that uses simple technology (at least in terms of what is needed from the user's end), and thus we can understand "sophistication" to invoke Pressman's modernist e-literature with its tricky text and unstable interpretations. What Flores adds to this aesthetic of difficulty, however, are the dimensions of access and spreadability, on top of understanding. He specifically notes the virality and platforms of "Lazy Cat," stating that it "reach[ed] over 68 million views on Facebook and over 31 million views on YouTube."

This easiness is broadened even further when we consider the politics of electronic literature. Pressman frames the modernist conventions of first and second generation e-lit as an "act of rebellion" against our current "digital, visual, and networked culture."[29] Flores continues this thread, describing third generation works as belonging to an "e-literary popular culture" that first and second generation e-literature maintain an "ambivalent … relationship" with.[30] These descriptions set up third gen e-literature as not only easy but agreeable, unquestioning in its role as a producer of media in more accessible formats. To be fair, there is some precedent for this, particularly because of third gen e-literature's reliance on privatized media platforms. However, it is contestable as a sweeping generalization of all third gen e-literature.

Other scholars have since expanded on the relationship between third generation electronic literature and the platforms it exists on. Kathi Inman Berens continues the discussion of the aesthetic of difficulty while considering this relationship, questioning whether electronic literature that is not "self-consciously engaged in the aesthetic of difficulty" can even be counted as electronic literature in the first place.[31] She ends up allowing these third gen texts to be called e-literature, however, by expanding outwards, and reconceptualizing what counts as the "text" to be analyzed. In particular, she considers the data produced by posts on social media platforms. In her words, the difficulty "moves from close reading the medium-specificity of first and second generation works, to skimming the content and close reading the promiscuous read/write capacities of social

29 Pressman, 7; Pressman, 17.
30 Flores; qtd. in Flores.
31 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"

media metadata, and guessing at the black-boxed code that undergirds 3rd generation e-lit."[32] Tying this to our earlier notions of aesthetic of difficulty, we can understand "close reading … medium-specificity" in how Pressman pays close attention to the usage of Flash and hypertext as types of digital media, and how they interact with the actual text to produce meaning, in her analyses of *Dakota* and *The Jew's Daughter* respectively. In comparison, when Berens analyzes a piece of Rupi Kaur's Instapoetry[33] as an example of third gen e-lit, she only briefly mentions the content matter of the post before moving onto other matters: "gestures we can see—the 'likes,' comments, reposts or '@s'" as well as "the platform code and data harvesting we cannot see." She discusses how the code that measures these "'likes,' comments, reposts, [and] '@s'" creates "a new kind of 'reader response,' where algorithms are agentic: the human reader is herself 'read' by behavioral targeting algorithms, parsed for commercial susceptibility, and served new information or ads designed to entice transaction." By considering the metadata—information about the post annotated by the platform—and code of an Instagram post as part of the text itself, she is able to introduce complex interactions between reading and writing, as well as black-boxed algorithms as a new agent bringing even more valances to be considered. This reintroduces an aesthetic of difficulty to third generation literature, but now only at a meta level, as that information which is produced from, and analytical of, the actual piece of media.

Even in their analyses of complex platform power dynamics in third generation electronic literature, critics such as Berens and Nick Montfort belie a preference towards older, first and second generation e-literature: Berens has an essay championing "hand-coded webpage[s]," while Montfort writes his entire analysis in blog post format.[34] Both of these, as media that exist on the Web and do not rely on social media platforms to be spread, fall squarely out of the range of third generation electronic literature. These critics have fair reasons for their preferences, wary of the privatized, corporate companies that lord over such third generation platforms, which can create "enclosure[s] of communications" and call into question the "material conditions" of such e-lit (consider the algorithms above which "read" users to produced targeted advertising).[35] Yet their response isn't to move forward, embracing third gen e-lit while trying to find ways to reckon with its problematic aspects. Instead, they stay right where they're comfortable. Even if he concludes his writing arguing against this preference towards older e-lit, Flores himself admits that "this paper may give the impression that one generation of e-literature is somehow better than the other." By looking at simplistic, unaware, commodified pieces of electronic literature, however, it's near impossible not to give that impression.

32 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"
33 A form of poetry posted on Instagram that utilizes its visual affordances. An in-depth explanation is given in section III.
34 Berens, "Third Generation Electronic Literature and Artisanal Interfaces: Resistance in the Materials."; Montfort.
35 Montfort; Berens, "Third Generation Electronic Literature …"

Yet this is not all there is.

In her paper "Is Third Generation Literature Postweb Literature? And Why Should We Care?" Alex Saum-Pascual points out that by focusing on platforms and data, many have overlooked the actual "literary qualities of a text." She brings light to an affective[36] position in some media which she terms the *meh*. She categorizes this as a position in which creators are aware of the commodification of the web by massive corporate platforms, and who respond by situating themselves *within* the platforms. She analyzes the Broken English Instagram account, which "remix[es] popular memes with Marxist theory" to produce humorous and entertaining explorations of leftist ideas. Clearly this account is aware of the issues of the platform it exists on, as one of its posts literally sets a screenshot of a social media page against the phrase "ah, yes. enslaved work."[37] Yet rather than retreating to individual websites, this postweb[38] literature understands that these platforms have burrowed too deeply into the fabric of the internet, fully parasiting it, and thus "freedom is not a real possibility anymore for the common Web user"—that is to say, everyone.[39]

This affective position is coupled with a particular aesthetic style, which centers around glitch, mess, and a general "low quality" coupled with an invocation of recognizable formal structures (meme templates, fonts, characters, filters).[40] While the "low quality" belies a reticence to fully acquiesce to what kind of post the platform demands (i.e. a high quality image), falling back on recognizable forms shows that these creators still want their message to be understood and thus seen on some level. Altogether, this odd mixture of aesthetic components convey the ironically detached, oscillatory, "shoulder-shrug-*meh*" effect. These accounts have a desire for virality, which can provide massive reach to ideas or even provide financial support for the users—but also a knowledge that this feeds data to the platforms and thus can financially support the platforms. They have a desire to criticize the subjugating mechanics essential to the platform—but also an awareness that doing so means that posts can easily be hidden from other users, or accounts deleted. They have a desire to leave the platform—but also a desire to stay. This patchwork of goals and attitudes leads Saum-Pascual to conclude that while postweb literature is "not completely apolitical," it "has abandoned all desires of being 'difficult' or politically disruptive in traditional terms." Importantly, Saum-Pascual draws on the same interpretation of "difficult" as employed by Pressman, Flores, and Berens, referencing and quoting their arguments to build her

36 "Affect" in the critical sense, "the outward display of emotion or mood." "affect, n."

37 broken english, "Capitalism: enslaved desire."

38 Saum-Pascual utilizes the term "postweb" to describe works which embody this meh position. This term is drawn from her book #Postweb! Crear con la máquina y en la red, in which "digital media is no longer conceived as 'new media,' but as a marker of our present era that has changed the way writers relate to the past, history, and their record."

39 Saum-Pascual.

40 Saum-Pascual.

own. We can thus take "traditional" political difficulty and disruption to mean that which aligns with first and second generation values: rebelling against our current networked culture by avoiding the monopolistic third gen platforms and the "e-literary popular culture" that resides on it.[41]

However, the fact that there is some sense of politicalness in Saum-Pascual's *meh* complicates Pressman's and Flores's claims about the agreeability of third generation electronic literature. Moreover, Beren's analysis of Instapoetry complicates Flores and Saum-Pascual's claims that third gen e-lit lacks difficulty in the first place. With each critic, we add new valances to Pressman's original term. Taken together, we can understand an aesthetic of difficulty as a question of not only interpretation, but also accessibility, algorithmic intervention, and political disruptiveness, among other possibilities. For my focus, I will look at two Instagram meme accounts, vista.dreams.geocities.biz, and affirmations. Both of these accounts have memes aesthetically and affectively similar to Saum-Pascual's *meh*, but I will highlight other qualities to access a third gen difficulty as opposed to her "traditional" difficulty. I also position myself against Berens, using a similar method of extending the scope of what is "read" when analyzing third gen e-lit (and in particular, memes), but diverging by still deeply considering the content held within each post. With all this in mind, I claim that this literature can in fact be considered to hold an aesthetic of difficulty, particularly in regards to hermeneutic and political difficulty. This difficulty can be found when examining a piece of third gen e-lit as a parasite embedded in its local intertextuality.

Before going any farther, I want to highlight some affective and hermeneutic qualities of memes. This will help foreground local intertextuality, a concept I've devised to help analyze and structure meaning in third generation e-literature. Saum-Pascual, in focusing on the *meh*, highlights irony as a key facet in the memes she discusses.[42] Berens, when discussing Instapoetry, likens it to a greeting card, and as we remember, chooses to "skim … the content" when analyzing posts.[43] This introduces irony and *surfacity*[44] as attributes of interest for memes.

Indeed, both of these qualities are quite important to the concept of the meme. Irony has long been intrinsic to memes, offering a way to access humor, which memes generally tend to convey. It's an important enough concept that KnowYourMeme, the most widely used reference wiki for memes, lists "Ironic Memes"

41 Flores.

42 Saum-Pascual.

43 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"

44 I introduce the term surfacity as a noun-quality that an object can hold such that as irony is to ironic, surfacity is to surfacy. Considering the word "surfacy" itself, such definitions like "superficial; lacking depth" suggest negative connotations. This is true of memes when analyzed from a first or second gen perspective like that of Berens, but this will be recontextualized for a third gen perspective in the following pages. "surfacy, adj."

as a meme subculture along with such broad concepts as "The Internet" and "Fandoms," which elevates irony as an aspect of memes on par with these other concepts.[45] Additionally, the banners of two meme research Facebook groups I'm in, one with over 6,000 members and one with over 18,000, both display memes directly referencing and analyzing irony.[46] Thus these groups clearly recognize irony as an important quality to consider when analyzing memes.

As for surfacity, one can see that the very first definition of memes described it as something without depth: Dawkins calls it a "unit," which we understand to be the smallest building block in a system.[47] Even in the internet context, digital media Professor Yvette Granta retains its designation as a unit, understanding its role as a singular and small-scale piece of media.[48] This smallness, while not an exact equivalent, certainly conjures up possibilities of a lack of density or mass. In Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image," she describes the poor image as a "flattening-out of visual content."[49] While Steyerl is technically discussing replications of images in cinema, Saum-Pascual and other scholars like Aria Dean have found the poor image as an analogue to the meme—Dean even calls Steyerl's article "a text that might as well be a treatise on the meme."[50] Thus, we see the meme as massless and flattened—something floating on the *surface* of the Web.

With memes in third generation electronic literature being tied to irony and surfacity, there is a case to be made for first and second generation e-lit as eras more tied to authenticity and depth. When Berens champions individually coded websites, she names them "artisanal interfaces."[51] Artisanal, the handmade, the "real," is a kind of counterpoint to the anti-meaning present in irony. Matthew Kirschenbaum describes these earlier generations as "*Serious*," a humorless affect that also exists in opposition to the flippant irony.[52] He also describes these generations as having a sense of "conceptual density," which we have already established exists as a counterpoint to surfacity.[53] In fact, Kirschenbaum offers "conceptual density" as a synonym for another phrase: "seriousness of purpose," which brings us back to irony.[54] The implication is that irony and surfacity are linked together as elements in a feedback loop in the construction of memes.

Indeed, other thinkers have made a connection between these two elements as well. Jay Owens, in

45 Hiro, "Memes."
46 "/tpm/ - Discussions, News & Resources."; "/tpmg/ - TPM Meme Research and Development."
47 qtd. in Shifman, 37.
48 Granata, "Meme Dankness: Floating Glittery Trash for an Economic Heresy," 257.
49 Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."
50 Saum-Pascual; Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme."
51 Berens, "Third Generation Electronic Literature …"
52 Kirschenbaum, "ELO and the Electric Light Orchestra: Electronic Literature Lessons from Prog Rock," 29.
53 Kirschenbaum, 30.
54 Kirschenbaum, 30.

following the change in cultural trends through Trump's election up to now, found that along with the growth of fake news, "'authenticity' and the desire to focus on the perceived, more-real 'essence of things' is no longer in vogue: surface and clever references are all."[55] Authenticity here is tied to depth through the fullness that an "essence of things" provides. When flattened, this turns into a surface, which is paired with the surface-level rhetoric of "clever references." It's important to note that Owens is not involved in the field of electronic literature. For her to hold the same claim that authenticity and depth have fallen out of favor shows that there is a clear cultural trend in digital media at large in the renouncement of these qualities. However, Owens doesn't view third gen ironic surfacity as simple—in fact, she calls the ironic attitude in memes "complex"![56] The problem with relying on authenticity, she says, is that it has been wholly co-opted by hegemonic power structures and commodified into meaninglessness. Artisanality, in the past used to describe hand-crafted shirts (or code), is now used to describe McDonald's chicken.[57] This is true for the Web as well, where she explains that "authenticity became a performance."[58] Instead, the realest part of Internet denizens' lives are now documented on "finstagrams"—*fake* Instagrams.[59] These accounts are generally secondary accounts in addition to a user's primary, public, and supposedly "real" account (hence the "fake"). Common finsta posts can include unedited photos, private thoughts, and lots of memes. Owens, in following these changing notions of authenticity through digital media, argues that irony as seen in memes today is not always a disinterest in truly engaging with issues. Rather, it can be a transgressive choice to reject the bastardized authenticity that global corporations push onto their consumers.

Both irony and surfacity are qualities ripe with possibilities for difficulty. In their essay "In Defense of the Difficult," Eugenio Tisselli and Rui Torres name irony as one of the "unlikely antidotes" to the datafication and simplification of society.[60] They claim that it allows for a "rejection of official cultures," and thus, they follow a similar vein to Saum-Pascual's argument but blown up to even larger heights. In general, they see irony as a productive emotional affect, paraphrasing Friedrich Schlegel to say that "irony in a literary work may open up the possibility of the infinity of other perspectives." As there is much intellectual work that must go into considering these multitudinous perspectives, one could argue that Tisselli and Torres' irony is difficult in the Pressmanian sense.

55 Owens, "Post-Authenticity and the Ironic Truths of Meme Culture," 90.
56 Owens, 101.
57 Owens, 88.
58 Owens 90.
59 Owens, 94.
60 Tisselli and Torres, "In Defense of the Difficult"; While Tisselli and Torres make no direct reference nor citation to Pressman or other critics, many of them presented at the same conference over various years, and were published in the same journal, so there may be some crossover of ideas, or at least awareness.

However, it remains to be said whether they would consider Instagram memes as the best media to enact this irony. They reject the idea that "e-literature [should] seek to go mainstream," and all their examples of electronic literature are quite high-brow and require heavy coding knowledge; one artist rewires a *Super Mario Brothers* video game to leave nothing but clouds, while another recreates an Android phone but fills it with poetry.[61] In general, it seems like the ironic electronic literature they imagine is more akin to the modernist first and second generation. Even still, their offering of irony as a way to access difficulty is a potent concept in our own investigation.

Tom Whyman shows the possible difficulty of flatness through the concept of shitposting, and in particular shitposts about *The Simpsons*. He first draws on the Urban Dictionary definition of shitpost: "Utterly worthless and inane posts on an internet message board."[62] We can easily interpret "worthless" and "inane" to be qualities that have no depth. Later, he ties this lack of depth in shitposting to irony, explaining that shitposts have an "*indifference*, both to quality … and to reception [emphasis added]."[63] As we've seen before in the *meh,* indifference and irony can go hand-in-hand in the affective sense; users caught in the double-bind of interaction on platforms respond with a feeling of indifference towards their situation, and formulate this indifference with ironic memes. However, Whyman brings in the possibility for difficulty by considering the sheer magnitude of information created by shitposting, and the connections that can be made between each post. As he explains it, "Taken together, then, these posts could be understood as an attempt to *draw a map of everything*, indexing everything in existence to something that happened in *The Simpsons.*"[64] Maps in their common form are flat, two-dimensional objects. However, they still contain a wealth of information, keys and codes that build up into a quite complex assemblage. The amount of information to be reckoned with calls back to the unstoppable flow of words in *Dakota*, while the complex connections made between posts is akin to the unstable writing of *The Jew's Daughter*. Yet each shitpost is still a single unit of a "useless," "inane" *Simpsons* reference—firmly situating these texts in third gen e-lit. Thus, through ironic shitposting, we can start to formulate what an aesthetic of difficulty will look like in this third generation age of memes.

We can now return to the concept of local intertextuality as a way to fully explain how to access this aesthetic of difficulty. Knowing that irony and surfacity are two key attributes of memes provides us with some guidelines as to the best way to analyze them. The fact that a meme on its own is quite surface level means that

61 Tisselli and Torres.
62 qtd. in Whyman, "Oh, They Have the Internet on Computers Now? The Online Art of The Simpsons," 214.
63 Whyman, 215.
64 Whyman, 230.

it is near impossible to analyze as a singular object if one is looking for some form of difficulty. Therefore, we must expand outward and consider more than just one meme. However, as Tisselli and Torres argue, the ironic attitude of the memes we are looking at mean they offer a multitude of interpretations.[65] Considering too many memes in a single analysis compounds this effect, reaching towards Whyman's "map of everything," which in its totality won't offer many actual conclusions. Therefore, the best option is something in the middle. In considering the interactions between multiple memes, we get a sense of intertextuality, while we can impose a limit by drawing a local boundary around the meme.

I draw upon the traditional mathematical interpretation of "local" for two main reasons. Firstly, as a more novel piece of media, memes will benefit from a plethora of methods of analysis, and mathematics offers a unique option in this respect. Secondly, local in the mathematic sense directly emphasizes the spatiality and connectedness of networks of memes, which is intrinsic to my argument of how to analyze them. Mathematically, examining an object locally is to look at the information in a limited range, as opposed to the entire space. For example, the "local minimum" of a function is the minimum *y*-value within a set of *x*-inputs, as opposed to the minimum *y*-value of the whole function, which may be undefinable (Figure 2). This allows us to still discuss important information about a function without having to consider its totality.

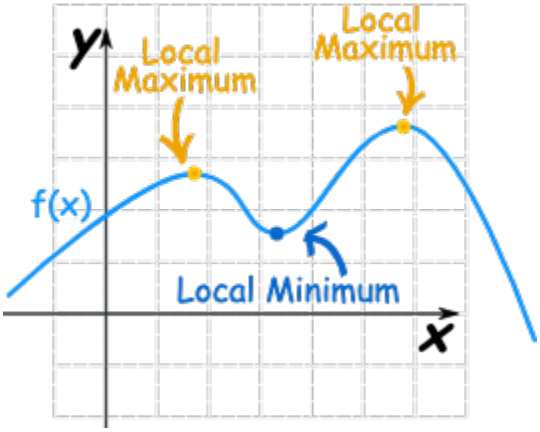

Figure 2: Example of the local minimum of a function.[66]

I provide a two-part definition to specify the range of the locality of a meme. The first is the memes directly connected to it through the platform it exists on, through creation by the same author, or through interaction from the same users, among other possibilities. This is in opposition to the global network of all memes afforded by their existence on the networked computer. What makes those specific memes connected to the original meme local is that they are "closer" to the original meme in a navigational interface sense. The

65 Tiselli and Torres.

66 "Maxima and Minima of Functions."

specifically mathematical interpretation of local lends itself to these programmed connections. From the original meme, it takes a single click to get to other memes from the same author or other users in the replies. As the most immediate linkages to the meme, these create a localized area of intertextuality that can then be analyzed altogether.

It is important to note that this local intertextuality is constrained by the platform that the original meme exists on. Moreover, platforms knowingly enforce this constrainment. As Montfort notes, even clicking links that navigate to areas outside of one platform will still usually keep you on the app, on a partial reconstruction of an actual Web browser.[67] However, this is not to say that a global network doesn't exist; rather, that it takes a bit more effort to associate memes between different platforms than those on the same one.

One *can* see the exact same meme on various platforms: screenshots abound no matter which app one uses. And on top of that, it's easy to spot reference to particular meme templates, fonts, and filters—if you know what you're looking for. Our second method of local intertextuality acts in a similar way to the concept of reference that exists across all artforms: imitating a writing style, including certain figures in artwork, or quoting motifs in music. While it requires more effort than the first, it can be supplemented by technology to produce immediate connections that give credence to its designation as local. Reverse image searching, now available as a shortcut on smartphones, immediately displays relevant associations across the Web.[68] Even simply a few keystrokes on Google (or social media platforms for that matter) can lead to other memes from the same template. This allows us to build the intra-platform connections that accumulate into the full global network of all memes.

Local intertextuality breaks from the general idea of intertextuality because of its purchase in digital media as existing in a nonhierarchical, networked system. The idea of a network of information is fundamental to the Internet: the Internet is literally the system of networked computers that work together to disseminate data to each other. It's also relevant to electronic literature in particular—one of the first popular genres, hypertext fiction, has commonly been written with a network-style visualization. Hypertext fiction was initially created through the software Storyspace, which presents the chunks of text as nodes in a network to be connected. That concept continues today with programs like Twine, which uses the same idea of networked spatiality as a visual interface to create stories (Figure 3). Considering an assemblage of various writings and authors as a single text in electronic literature is reasonable as well, as it fits with Scott Rettberg's definition of "contributory

67 Montfort.

68 Ali, "Easily Perform Reverse Image Searches…"; Johnson, "3 ways to do a reverse image search…"

participation," where the contributors might not understand the overall project or how their piece fits in, but they can still be counted as authors of the project.[69] Thus, it is fair to analyze a group of memes together that may be produced by various authors, even if they didn't necessarily intend to be grouped together. When taken together, there is clear historical and literary precedence for analyzing memes in a local system.

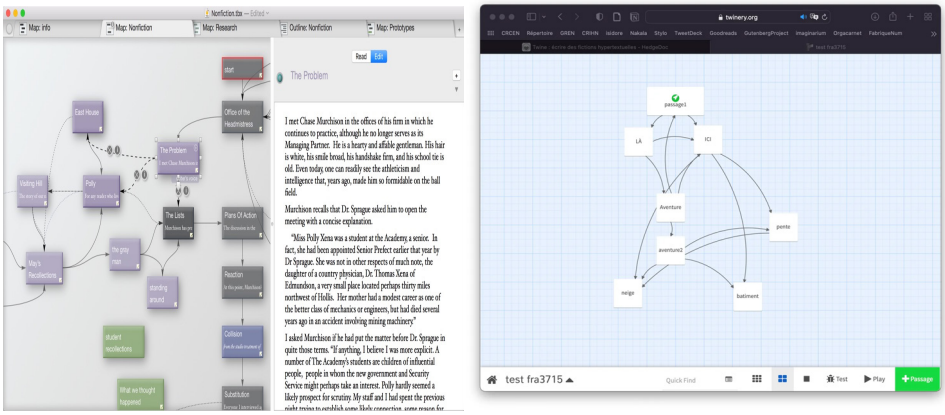

Figure 3: A side-by-side comparison of Storyspace and Twine.[70]

When looking at how memes and third gen e-lit in general have come to be defined, it's almost irresponsible not to consider them in their local intertextuality. Other scholars, while not exactly offering local intertextuality as a method of analysis, have agreed that memes shouldn't be considered just on their own, nor in complete totality. When Tom Whyman describes shitposting about *The Simpsons*, suggesting to "*draw a map of everything*," he acknowledges that "this map could never be possessed in total by any one individual, could never be surveyed in its entirety."[71] Instead, he suggests "access[ing] small chunks of it" as a realistic method towards realizing this map.[72] This gives a clear analogue to local intertextuality. Whyman offers this as a way to comprehend a world caught in the throes of crisis, "rendered incomprehensible (thus meaningless) by its sheer intensity."[73] Yet this is also a way to view memes on the post-Web: if one thinks of all of them in totality, there's too many data points to consider—it's too "intense" to comprehend. However, analyzing each meme as a single object is also irresponsible by the very definition of a meme. In Shifman's definition of the meme, she identifies memes by their overarching templates when she lists memes as "group[s] of digital items *sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance*" [emphasis added], and even implies that the interaction between various memes—their (normal) intertextuality—is a vital facet to their meaning when she claims they

69 Rettberg, "All Together Now," 198.
70 "Storyspace 3 for macOS"; Lescouet, "Twine : écrire des fictions hypertextuelles."
71 Whyman, 230.
72 Whyman, 230.
73 Whyman, 230.

are "created *with awareness of each other*"[74] [emphasis added].

Indeed, the choice to consider a limited group of memes together is not a novel concept. Shifman, in commenting on her own definition, directly argues that "Instead of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated well, Internet memes should be defined as *groups* of content units, or as described here, as *families*."[75] However, local intertextuality is unique in its choice to consider connection through the user's navigation of the screen. Moreover, though, it carries the concept of memetic groups into electronic literature discourse. In looking at viral videos and Instapoetry, both Flores and Berens choose single third gen works to analyze. Even still, their own statements reveal their awareness of the importance in considering relations between memes. In Flores's description of memes, he says that "they get expanded, adapted, forked, combined with other memes, reframed, parodied, become self-referential, go viral, go dormant, return… ."[76] And while Berens mainly focuses on the metadata of Instapoetry to give it its complexity, she also includes the likes, comments, and reposts as worthwhile material to look at.[77] In my experience online, part of the enjoyment of memes is recognizing how they build on other works and respond to them. Memes, once described by Dawkins as something that "parasite[s the] brain,"[78] have parasited the space of analysis for electronic literature as well; it's impossible to cut out the local intertextuality of a meme without losing its own meaning as a singular object.

III. Analysis of Vista.dreams.geocities.biz

I discovered Vista in late 2018/early 2019 by clicking around a few meme pages that followed each other. While I had enjoyed the others already, I was immediately hooked on Vista: it was powerful to see my experience online characterized in humorous, critical, and beautiful ways, all at once. One of the first posts that drew me into the account was an unassuming nine image carousel[79] with the caption "Abstraction is a useful tool, but it can't be the only thing."[80] Each image in the post overlays a typed out bit of writing in a textbox window on top of technological-themed imagery—keyboards, computer chips, minesweeper, and so on (Figure 4). In full, the text reads:

74 Shifman, 41.

75 Segev et al. "Families and Networks of Internet Memes: The Relationship Between Cohesiveness, Uniqueness, and Quiddity Concreteness."

76 Flores.

77 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"

78 qtd. in Konior, "Apocalypse Memes for the Anthropocene God: Mediating Crisis and the Memetic Body Politic," 47.

79 A carousel is Instagram's name for their feature that allows a user to post multiple images together in a slideshow format in one post.

80 Vista, "Abstraction is a useful tool … ."

I didn't like the pain, so piece by piece, I abstracted it away.

Tried to understand it from first principles.

How electromagnetic forces keep me from phasing through matter.

How those forces act on the skin to trigger the nerves.

And the nerves relay a message through axons and dendrites, an electrical signal for the brain to consume

And the brain registers those signals, and that's what I perceive as touch.

Forces tearing through skin send distress calls. I perceive them as pain.

Pain is a beautiful thing. Systems on top of systems in a dance of particles and cells and electrical impulses.

But an open cut still hurts.

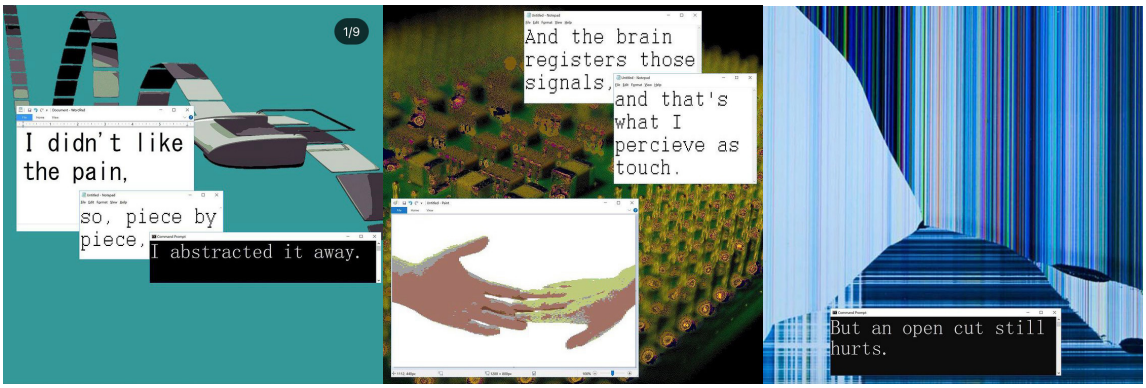

Figure 4: Selections from the vista.dream.geocities.biz post.[81]

At first glance, it's just an enjoyable piece of surface-level Instapoetry. Instapoetry calls back to print poetry that employs image, and even concrete poetry, through its use of Instagram as a platform. Instagram is built around the sharing of photos and images, so Instapoetry utilizes these features to share pictures that combine image and poetry. According to Berens, it "is simplistic, little more taxing than reading a meme," as well as "almost always inspirational or emotional."[82] While other forms of literature could perhaps fall under these descriptions as well, Berens's statements explicitly tie to her argument that Instapoetry is the first viral

81 Vista, "Abstraction is a useful tool … ."
82 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"

form of electronic literature and the ramifications of such a situation.

L. Ayu Saraswati, in her book *Pain Generation*, can help us understand why Berens describes Instapoetry in this particular way. Saraswati argues that the emotions developed in Instapoetry give its audience a way to access these emotions without necessarily feeling them themselves, "controlled 'environmental stimuli.'"[83] She argues that this is a form of entertainment by likening it to the phantasmagoria[84] shows of the 19th century, even as Instapoetry diverges by gaining virality instead of drawing crowds.[85] The phantasmagoria was also utilized by Walter Benjamin to produce a Marxist critique of consumerism—something that Saraswati includes to give a political dimension to her analysis.[86] By absorbing the emotions of Instapoetry, we sublimate our own, and thus the posts enforce a neoliberal politics that obfuscates structural issues with entertainment.[87] Berens doesn't specifically mention neoliberalism, but she follows a similar notion. In particular, she takes issue with the fact that Instapoetry achieves both digital virality and financial success on "proprietary social media platforms" whose "code … is not inspectable, even to government regulators,"[88] with deregulation and the privatization of power key components of neoliberalism. Instapoetry's simplicity also helps achieve this virality, making posts accessible to interpretation and thus, more likely to be shared. While Berens allows for difficulty in the metadata and code of Instapoetry, by following her and Saraswati's arguments, it would seem that the content of Instapoetry lacks an aesthetic of difficulty, both hermeneutically and politically. And the post above from Vista technically fits the bill: it is a mesh of image and word that is easy to read and emotional. However, if we look at the local intertextuality around this post, something more difficult begins to appear. We begin by first looking at hermeneutic difficulty à la Pressman: what meaning comes out of these posts when we carefully analyze their local intertextuality?

We start our analysis with the first style of local intertextuality: a network of clicks. One click takes us to Vista's full account, with a mural of every post arranged in order of post date, and another brings us into one post with similar Notepad text boxes overlaid over a collage of sky and stylistic colored rectangles. It begins, "It's been hard to feel tethered lately," and later seems to partially ascribe this to "Virtual worlds, infinite scroll, communities in every time zone"; we can understand this by the temporally and spatially disorienting effects of interacting in such places, and the overwhelming amount of content within them.[89] This recalls the idea of

83 Saraswati, Pain Generation, 11.
84 Entertainment that utilized a "magic lantern" to produce shadows that were frightening and entertaining.
85 Saraswati, 11.
86 Saraswati, 9.
87 Saraswati, 12.
88 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"
89 Vista, "Just been thinkin."

abstracting pain from our original meme, but now ties abstraction to interaction online. A few single-image posts utilize retro cyberpunk anime images in overlaid word and media collages; one states that "Escapism is comforting. I gravitate towards it, get swept away by it. And I know it can't save me," while another in a Command Prompt box reads, "C:\>I am more than information."[90] Again, we recall ideas from our first meme—"[escapism] can't save me" and being "more than information," similar to how abstraction and systematizing pain gives way to the fact "an open cut still hurts." The two styles of local intertextuality begin to work synergistically, connected clicks revealing connected thoughts and phrases. Thus, these posts begin to develop a larger argument for our first: we move from trying to abstract away physical pain, to technology dissolving physicality, and then commodifying the digital remnants.

An even more clear argument with an explicitly political angle is seen in a carousel that continues the cyberpunk anime theme, which again shows the crossover between the two types of local intertextuality.[91] This one discusses the manga *BLAME!*, which is about a continually expanding city. Vista compares this to differing models of organization for the Internet, where the one we end up going with, Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, lacks "the most fundamental jump in abstraction on a network: from physical signals to data." As he explains, the city in *BLAME!* makes it blatantly obvious how much physical material goes into maintaining such a large network, while the cables and ports of the Internet in real life are less apparent. However, because the Internet is ultimately still made from physical materials, just as the fictional city is falling into disrepair in the story, our digital infrastructure will as well. He then brings up our current climate crisis, and concludes, "The days where we could ignore the physical are ending. / and in the end that's all there is." By the more general phrase of "the physical," which invokes physical effects of climate change as well as the physical infrastructure of the Internet, this post effectively ties the two issues of abstraction, of the Internet and of climate, together.

When this is taken with other discussions of Internet infrastructure on the account, we see even more interlinkages. One post reads, "There are 1.3 million kilometers of submarine cables lining the ocean floor and Google is their largest single investor."[92] Looping in our analysis of the previous post, we can understand from this new post that by ignoring the physicality of the Internet, we also obscure ideas of ownership of the Internet. Submarine cables are its physical backbone, allowing connections between countries and continents. Thus, Google being the majority stakeholder of these cables shows that they control much more than most people

90 Vista, "New things soon"; Vista, "Data is not unbiased."
91 Vista, Two figures … .
92 Vista, "Feels weird, man."

realize, not just software but hardware as well. Another post, which shows an old ARPANET map of nodes in the network, reads "How can our platforms save us when they were never built for us?"[93] ARPANET is a precursor to the Internet built by the Department of Defense to allow for faster communication and resistance to enemies looking for a central area to attack.[94] By tracing this historical lineage of the Internet, this post interrogates the potentialities of the Web today—anything we achieve is, in a way, supported with militaristic enforcement of Western hegemony. Together, these two posts problematize the politics of the Internet through its own history and economy.

Consider our full journey of scrolling, clicking, and swiping, we have an incisive interrogation of the Internet; just as its history in the military-industrial complex is hidden away, its physicality is as well, a physicality controlled by monopolistic private companies that on an individual level commodifies digital personas, and on a societal level contributes to our current climate crisis. Elements of this argument directly appear in our first post—it considers abstraction, chains of connections, and an inability to ignore the physical. Of course, a user browsing all of this might not see every single post I have analyzed. However, there are clearly so many repeating themes, signs, and ideas connected to this one post that it seems near impossible not to begin to pick up on the techno-critical and leftist ideology present. And it is very likely that one *will* at least scroll through a few more posts on Vista's account—which Instagram, like all other media platforms, places into an intuitive linear feed—or notice repeating forms and aesthetics. If your initial emotional outrage is sublimated away, further posts replace that with a continuously expanding rational knowledge on why that even happens in the first place.

The first post on its own might imply a more simplistic discussion of pain with uncritical referents to technology, no possibility for difficulty. Yet when we examine the larger network of media that surrounds this node—a local section of a web, the (post-)Web—the intertextual connections bubble up to the surface. As much as Vista is talking about trying to abstract physical pain into different levels, he's also talking about how technology causes us pain, causes the world pain, how it abstracts away our physicality and its own physicality as an agent in this, and how it's deeply rooted in the neoliberal military-industrial-entertainment complex. It may be easy enough to skim over one pretty post, but the larger argument that clearly does reside here is incisive, complex, uncompromising—in other words, difficult.

93 Vista, "So what is inherently capitalist/imperialist … ."
94 Featherly, "ARPANET."

IV. Analysis of Affirmations

Another way of examining local intertextuality is with the "affirmations" Instagram account.[95] Widely popular with nearly a million followers, it[96] has a quite odd set of content: its name reads "Global Self Hypnosis"; its description includes a heavily ironic "#Inspiring #Quotes for the Heart"; it sells merchandise with phrases like "My art does NOT suck," and "I am big boss." In short, it contains multitudes. Its main content consists of stock photo-like images with text superimposed over them, usually slightly weird affirmative phrases like "I can trick my brain into feeling good," or "I am not 2 AM manic episode"[97] With the focus on self-improvement, one would think this immediately fit in Berens's and Saraswati's unquestioning neoliberalism. But local intertextuality opens up a few other possibilities. Considering our second form of local intertextuality, stock photos and image macros are two historically popular meme formats. Stock photos, premade photos used for various purposes, have been in circulation since the rise in photography. In 2010 however, they came to life as memes with the birth of the Awkward Stock Photos blog.[98] The photos gained popularity because of the weird situations that can be found in stock photography, which can then provide lots of potential for humorous memes. The image macro, humorous text superimposed over images, is an even more widely known format, in use since 2004.[99] It was widely seen through demotivational posters[100] or advice animals[101] in its earlier years, and is an integral style of meme to this day. The affirmations account gives us yet another iteration of this meme.

The usage of popular, traditional meme styles can make afffirmation's content more comfortable and understandable to its audience. However, the account becomes truly entertaining by subverting those sentiments with the images and text they choose to display. Alongside the more traditional affirmations listed above, there are phrases such as "I am Local DJ" and "My lips are tangible."[102] While not exactly surrealist in the official artistic understanding, these phrases have a nonsensical, perhaps surreal sensibility.[103] In fact, surrealness in recent years has come into vogue in online content. This surrealness is linked to irony as almost an evolution

95 affirmations.

96 As affirmations indicates no particular pronouns, and has less of a personal point of view throughout the account, I will stick with the pronouns it/it/its when discussing affirmations.

97 affirmations, Neo from The Matrix …; affirmations, A unicorn in outer space … .

98 Max, "Stock Photography"; amanda b., "Awkward Stock Photos."

99 gi97ol, "Image Macros."

100 Demotivational posters are stylistically reminiscent of the motivational posters found in offices or doctor's waiting rooms, but with sarcastic captions instead of upbeat ones.

101 Advice animals feature various animal characters superimposed over colorful backgrounds. The caption is usually a joke "told" by the character.

102 affirmations, Girl sitting …; affirmations, Cartoon man's face … .

103 I will try to stick with the terms "surreal" and "surrealness" as opposed to "surrealist" or "surrealism" to indicate this meme-based surreality.

of a simpler irony more popular in past online content. KnowYourMeme actually considers surreal memes a subgenre of ironic memes, differentiated by their absurdity and uncanniness.[104] This is seen the popular figures of surreal memes, like Mr. Orange, who has a humanoid-orange figure, or Meme Man, who speaks in stilted speech. While the text in many affirmations posts embody the absurdity of surrealness, the images that accompany these phrases lean more on the uncanny side; the human figures have slightly stretched dimensions, and the landscapes have minute amounts of saturation and contrast added (Figure 5). Thus, affirmations differentiates itself from other memes as ironic through absurd and uncanny surrealness.

Figure 5: Examples of affirmations posts with surreal imagery.[105]

The affects that absurdity and uncanniness telegraph—apathy, discomfort—connect with affirmations's audience's greater anxieties about society. Owens, in considering the rise of irony in social media content today, posits that part of this is in reaction to the crises that younger generations are dealing with, such as educational debt and job instability.[106] Affirmations directly invokes this in memes that state phrases such as, "Our society is not fake and full of trash," or, "There will be NO supply chain crisis."[107] In posts like this, one starts to question the intent behind affirmations. If we interpret affirmations for what it says it is—self hypnosis, making change at the personal level—these posts put that notion into question. One person cannot will a greener earth or supply chain solution into existence. Of course, interpreted in an ironic sense, these posts simply describe a society in the throes of a breakdown. In Bogna Konior's essay on "apocalyptic memes," she details how memes call into question "types of social agency that [the human] might have."[108] This is because agency in our Anthropocene era fluctuates between extremes of power and powerlessness over control of our environment, "both powerful enough to bring about our own destruction through technological expansion, and at the same

104 Blunt, "Ironic Memes."
105 affirmations, Woman shrugging …; affirmations, Beijing 2022 Olympics ski hill … .
106 Owens, 100; Owens, 96; Owens, 101.
107 affirmations, Beijing 2022 Olympics ski hill …; affirmations, Kim Kardashian crying … .
108 Konior, 67.

time not powerful enough to save itself."[109] While affirmations is certainly raising questions about social agency, is it really arguing that we can in fact save ourselves, one individual at a time, or showing the absurdity in even entertaining such an idea?

These doublespeak-like statements, telegraphing both the potential to change our lives and our surroundings, and the hopelessness of such an activity, is a key component of affirmations. I initially read the memes as a completely ironic project, calling out the ineffectuality of individual responsibility in the face of not only societal ills but also their impact on individuals. This can be seen in memes such as "Climate change does not worsen my mental health," which grapples with climate-induced anxiety, or "I'm not overworked and underpaid," which calls into question the destructive norms present in many jobs today.[110] However, I started to question the account's intentions when realizing how often they push their themed merchandise. It occurs in nearly every carousel, is the only link in their bio, and is their first highlight reel[111] in the list. Saraswati discusses this neoliberal inclination towards entrepreneurializing oneself through social media,[112] and then ties this to personal growth, because as work is understood as a personal responsibility in neoliberalism, growth is understood the same: "Because neoliberalism considers that solutions to any problem are registered at the individual and not the institutional level (Stuart and Donaghue), the process of 'healing' becomes an individual practice, an individual work, and an investment in the self."[113] Even in the memes mentioned above that criticize society, the first person pronouns associates it with the individual. I actually encountered affirmations giving a "group hypnosis session" at a Zoom rave where the creator seemed to be completely serious about how internalizing these mantras could lead to personal growth. But I couldn't be completely sure, and I'm still not; sometimes the irony seems to truly question the faults of our society, and other times it seems like a veil for sale.

Konior still believes that the kind of explorations into apocalypse represented by affirmations can hold liberatory possibility. While memes might not have an answer to the question of human power versus powerlessness in the Anthropocene era,, "they do express a crisis in the conventional experience of human agency in an orderly world, and as such a willingness to pose the question."[114] While both consider the politics of ironic memes, one notices that Konior rejects the unavoidable passivity that Saum-Pascual imbues her

109 Konior, 67.

110 affirmations, A green hand made of plants …; affirmations, Dwayne Johnson … .

111 Collections of images and videos similar to "stories" on most social media, although it stays up forever instead of only 24 hours. It is displayed directly below a user's bio.

112 Saraswati, 31.

113 Saraswati, 41.

114 Konior, 71.

meh memes with, instead appreciating what other possibilities this humor can bring by highlighting how "[apocalypse memes] map—at times with pleasure and curiosity rather than fear—both the decline of the Western empire and the global reckoning with the crisis of the Anthropocene."[115] With an ironic interpretation, affirmations isn't shying away from the important crises of our world today, and instead telegraphing them to its hundreds of thousands of followers. And even in an earnest interpretation, afffirmation's posts can ameliorate the personal crises of its followers.

Considering the likes and reposts from the first mode of local intertextuality helps expand this idea. I initially encountered affirmations through a couple people I follow reposting memes onto their stories. They're both people that have struggled more than most others I know. One is a trans girl who is not supported by her family, unable to come out to her larger community or receive gender-affirming care. The other is trying to survive in college while recovering from both an eating disorder and alcoholism. These struggles could be seen as societal or personal—the result of anti-trans legislation and fatphobic media, or unsupportive family or friends. Owens, in considering the rise of irony in social media content today, posits that part of this is in reaction to societal issues that younger generations are dealing with, such as educational debt and job instability.[116] However, I can't claim one way or the other on how they are choosing to interpret the posts. Either way, though, the fact that these are the two people I know that interact with affirmations the most suggests that the account provides a way to reckon with the hardships of life without being subsumed completely into negativity and helplessness. With this in mind, the intentions of affirmations don't necessarily matter; rather, it's how its audience receives it.

By assuming a veil of uncertainty about how serious its statements are, it actually opens up another route towards liberatory potential for affirmations. Consider one other post, which includes statements like, "My social media presence contributes to world peace," "I feel at home in my country," and "My college is not an authoritarian state" (Figure 6).[117] It's also of note that the second post about feeling at home is superimposed over Foucault's panopticon. Read in a completely satirical manner, this post is directly calling out the evils of social media, and the authoritative oppression of the school and the state. But because there is an uncertainty, affirmations can avoid the algorithmic censorship that other creators who are more direct in their criticisms encounter. Moreover, while the algorithm might lack enough evidence to take control of affirmations's account, users still have the option to interpret the posts in whichever way they choose. And I know that when I share

115 Konior, 70.
116 Owens, 100; Owens, 96; Owens, 101.
117 affirmations, Hands holding a sky-colored sphere … .

affirmations posts, I am not reenvisioning myself—I am reenvisioning the world around me.

Figure 6: Examples of affirmations posts that can avoid censorship.[118]

V. Social Media, Its Users, and Local Intertextuality as Parasites

While discerning the larger ideas introduced by these accounts is certainly difficult in terms of interpretation, we still encounter Saum-Pascual's main critique of memes that engage with political issues: by working within the platforms and holding a disenchanted, ironic affect, they are not traditionally "politically disruptive" in respect to the rebellious nature of first and second generation e-literature (as Pressman claims). Limor Shifman echoes this critique, stating that "this heavy reliance on pop culture images in political memes may, at some points, lead to a process of 'depoliticization,' in which the political and critical aspects of Internet memes are diminished in favor of pure playful amusement."[119] The question is raised, then, that while these memes clearly reference and discuss politics, is that actually enacting some form of politics, and moreover, how do we even understand political action in our current networked culture?

The problem here is that first and second generation e-literature face an issue as well: there is no true outside to critique from. Social media megacorporations have so deeply taken hold of the web that they have fundamentally parasitized it. The only way I can get invited to events is through Facebook; the proper greeting for a new friend is to share Instagram accounts. For Montfort and Berens to hide out in blogs or personal sites is to ignore the inevitable—completely disconnecting oneself from the rest of the internet is much more likely to result in powerlessness than achieve some notion of changing it from the outside. We must remember, Shifman says memes get depoliticized only "at some points"; Saum-Pascual couches criticisms of third gen politics as politics "in traditional terms." Hanging on to these potentialities and prevarications, perhaps the way forwards

118 affirmations, Hands holding a sky-colored sphere … .
119 Shifman, 138.

with difficult politics in memes is simply to go inside the belly of the beast.

First, we briefly look at the study of logic. Formal logic generally works with a set of binary values: true and false. Different combinations of the two (true and false, true or false, not true, not false) will spit out different results. Complex structures built from these combinations form the basis of the computers we use today, which deal with incomprehensible amounts of data and make lightning-fast calculations. Yet at the end of the day, they still rest on this binary logic: false or true, zero or one. The law of the excluded middle, one of the fundamental laws of logic, states that for any proposition *p*, either "either *p* or [not] *p* must be true, there being no third or middle true proposition between them."[120] In the world of computers, there is no .5. However, this has no purchase in our new understanding of memes, with all the most interesting meaning *between* them, as opposed to being on one end or another.

For this, we turn to Michel Serres, who is of a different opinion. He proposes a thought experiment to the reader: drawing from the book of Genesis, he takes its famous quote, "Let there be light!" Let yourself imagine that is truly all there is, photons and nothing else. "In order to have only light," Serres explains, "one would have to live at the single-point light source, or the medium would have to be removed, creating a vacuum."[121] And yet that is not how we experience light. Light is scattered through the sky, bounces against trees and leaves, pours into the pupil to become what we see in front of us. We need a medium between the message and the receiver; we need a medium to alter the message to receive anything at all; in other words, "We see only because we see badly."[122] Serres expands this to the concept of communication, describing the channel that exists between a sender and a receiver: "The channel carries that flow, but it cannot disappear as a channel, and it brakes (breaks) the flow, more or less."[123]

The phrasing here is reminiscent of electricity: electrons that travel in a circuit (channel) can only have a current (flow) by the introduction of resistance (brakes). This can then be extrapolated to any kind of digital communication, which is produced through electronic signals; and in an abstract, metaphorical way, any kind of communication at all.

His term for this faulty brokenness that is intrinsic to the system is "the parasite," and his eponymous book is a sort of character study of it. His first definition for the parasite teems with possibility: "It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture

120 "laws of thought."
121 Serres, 70.
122 Serres, 70.
123 Serres, 79.

of information."[124] The noise becomes a message itself, even as it telegraphs something new. The multivalence of such a term rests on the French definition, the original language of Serres's text. In French, *le parasite* corresponds to three meanings. There are two we are familiar with: the scientific definition, which uses a strict set of rules to define a biological organism; and the social one, which is used in looser terms to describe "A person who lives at the expense of another."[125] However in French, it also refers to the static or noise that occurs in technological communication.[126] Thus by invoking the term, Serres is able to use all of its valances: as static, as living inside another organism, as feeding off of a host, human, nonhuman, and what falls in between.

As Serres examines the parasite, it becomes apparent how deeply linked the concept is to that of the excluded middle found in logic. He makes multiple references to the phrase throughout the writing, so much so that Maria Assad defines the parasite as "the allegorization of the fundamental concept of the excluded middle."[127] Steven Brown even more simply states that "Serres calls this third 'the parasite.'"[128] This "third" is a reformation of "middle" by the fact that the excluded middle is called *le tiers exclu* in French, which directly translates to "the excluded third." Thus Brown's third is one and the same as Assad's middle. Perhaps the most important idea that relates Serres's parasite and the excluded middle is the title from a chapter from *The Parasite*: "The Excluded Third, Included."[129] Especially considering our method of connection in building meaning, one must ask, what happens when we include the parasite in the system of the host? What happens when we include the noise in the medium of the channel? What happens when we include the excluded third?

So far, we understand the parasite as something existing *inside* a system: noise in a message, static corrupting the channel between zero and one. However there is also the parasite as an organism, a bloodsucking tick sitting atop the dog. "And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word parasite: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not in the thing, but on its relation."[130] We're arriving at a bit of a paradox: Serres is now suggesting that the parasite is *outside* of the system. Brown enforces that concept, discussing "the inclusion of exteriority into a system, the invasion of the host by the parasite."[131] To state that "exteriority" is to be put in a system, which normally is defined by its inside and outside, seems like it should be impossible. Moreover, how does this lead to an excitation of the system?

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124 Serres, 3.
125 "parasite, n."
126 Serres, vii.
127 Assad, "A Trajectory of Learning: The Quest for an 'Instructed-Middle,'" 41.
128 Brown, "In praise of the parasite: the dark organizational theory of Michel Serres," 87.
129 Serres, 22.
130 Serres, 38.
131 Brown, 96.

Recall Serres's first definition: "it was only a noise, but also a message."[132] In his section "The Means, the Milieu," Serres goes deeper into this noise-message division.[133] He sets up another thought experiment, based on La Fontaine's fable about Simonides, imagining the host of a large, loud banquet. At the table, the host engages in conversation—messages. Yet then the telephone begins to ring. The host first sees this as noise, interrupting the banquet messages. However, once he goes over to the phone and picks it up, it switches—the speaker on the other line is producing messages while the clamor of the banquet becomes the background noise he must ignore. Therefore, including and excluding depends on the location of the observer, and what is occurring in one's local vicinity.

This is not the end of it. We've been able to describe this noise-message couple because we're looking from outside the system, a bird's-eye periphery. However, this is not so for the host; he must constantly repress the noise to be able to hear the message. In Serres's words, "he overvalues the message and undervalues the noise if he belongs to the functioning of the system."[134] And it doesn't stop there. Systems reside in systems reside in systems. The telephone conversation is a system itself, with parasites introducing static into the phone lines. An observer of the banquet and telephone is in their own system, repressing some other noise to be able to follow the movement of the host. We answer a paradox with a paradox; "In other words, the game of exclusion can be played without ever leaving the system, and, on the contrary, getting more and more into the system."[135]

The main thrust of this response is that parasites always involve multiple levels of systems. We can see this in our examples of telephone line to banquet noise to outside observer. When Serres says "getting more into the system," he means the overlapping layers of these multiple systems. While this makes things more confusing to keep track of, it also strengthens the systems and the connections within and between them. As Serres says, "systems have been immunized by becoming more complex."[136] The other option is to reject parasites entirely. This also relates to our earlier description of the parasite: in terms of the medium between signals, if we reject parasites, everyone becomes closed-off monads and we return to the single point of light. We recall Brown's explanation, now with its larger context included: "Without interruption, a system would be locked into an equilibrium state, entirely closed off the [sic] rest of the world. It is the inclusion of exteriority into a system, the invasion of the host by the parasite, which acts to 'dope' or 'excite' it."[137] A bloodsucking tick

132 Serres, 3.
133 Serres, 66.
134 Serres, 68.
135 Serres, 68.
136 Serres, 68.
137 Brown, 96.

can sit atop a dog, but the moment it does, it creates a new system, the dog-tick. Moreover, by including this parasite, the dog's immune system is (theoretically) strengthened, learning how to deal with this new organism.

Serres says time and time again that increasing parasitical noise creates new systems and thus increases complexity. Assad describes the parasite as something that "interfere[s] in the dynamics of systems it does not inherently belong to," and, "for good or bad, forces a given system to adapt to its presence."[138] By placing it in these terms, Assad characterizes the particular ambivalence that introducing a parasite can produce. It "interferes" where "it does not inherently belong," and "forces" those who do inherently belong to change. Sure, it might be a chaotic medium for light, allowing it to spread and produce color. However, there are other, more nefarious possibilities. So far, we have mainly focused on only two definitions of *le parasite*: the biological entity, and the static noise. We now turn our attention to the third, the human parasite, or as Assad calls it, the "sycophant."[139]

The very first story that Serres describes is another fable from La Fontaine, "The Town Rat and the Country Rat." Similar myths abound across cultures. The gist is that the town rat invites the country rat to dinner, a feast of stolen goods furnished by the owner of the house that the town rat lives in the crevices of. A noise startles them, and while the town rat elects to stay, the country rat demurs, choosing a life of safety over wealth. Serres notes the levels of parasites: noise parasites the rats, rats parasite the owner of the house, and the owner himself parasites as well. After all, he must get the cheese, meats, and other delicacies from somewhere. And even more, in some versions he is identified in particular as a tax-collector, one of the clearest examples of a human parasite across time and culture. Yet the parasites in the story are not all on equal footing. The owner of the house here resides at a unique point of this parasitical chain where while the rats may parasite from him, they are also easily scared off in a way he is not. The human parasite is in a special position where he can easily be seen as an equal or even more powerful entity than his host. As Serres says, "history hides the fact that man is the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is a hospitable space."[140] Parasites can exist in a chain, one atop another atop another. However, the fact that there is a chain means that there is one that resides on top, that holds a special type of control over the chain.

Yet this control is extremely unwieldy. One may have already noticed some numerical indeterminacy in the single versus multiple, one parasite intercepting a medium versus the swarm that corrupts it. We began with the monad, the single point light source. It expanded to two, a sender and receiver, and then immediately the

138 Assad, 40.
139 Assad, 40.
140 Serres, 24.

third that exists between them. Yet the minute we include this excluded third, we are not introducing a single interception point; instead, we introduce the entire continuum between them, the infinity between zero and one, the multiplicity. "The second system," Serres says, "is that of Hermes. He is a polytheist, is multi-centered, a chain of hourglasses, a network of such chains," whereas "The third system connects many to many without an intermediate."[141] While having interceptions between sender and receiver can still be "multicentered," it will always give way to a system "without an intermediate."

We can make sense of these ever changing definitions, amounts, and ideas again through the idea of the parasite entering a new system. Serres himself describes the two numerical stages as systems, and as we know by now, systems reside in systems reside in systems. What is truly happening here is that as this excluded third parasites the medium between two points, it de facto introduces change into the system, and this change is what allows the system to be parasited by new parasites. "One parasite chases out the other," and the process is neverending.[142] Clearly this type of activity is unstable—it is constantly changing, growing, and reforming. But Serres says it himself: "No, existence is not stable."[143] Therefore however much a parasite tries to control the system, they are still a parasite, and thus change is inevitable.

Serres's multivalent definition of the parasite allows us to understand multiple actors as parasites at the same time. There is social media, as a "sycophantic" parasite that "interferes" with its host and "forces" it to capitulate, in the words of Maria Assad's explication of Serres.[144] Social media's host would be the larger system of digital media and communication that it operates in. It has parasited it by changing the types of media that we utilize and connect in. As Montfort says, "we live in a post-Web world of networked information today."[145] Even if the Web is still an option, primary interaction occurs on social media clients like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Montfort describes how he "do[es]n't expect anyone to comment on" his blog post, and he instead sees activity in his Twitter microblog posts. Social media has parasited the Web, and in its inclusion, has changed this system into the post-Web.

However, as we've learned with Serres, the power of social media's position makes it all the more unstable. The introduction of a parasite brings with it multiplicity, and we see this with the billions of users of social media. Thus social media has inadvertently created another parasite in the users themselves, subsisting off the platforms provided by social media to survive online. But as always, systems reside in systems reside

141 Serres, 44.
142 Serres, 88.
143 Serres, 149.
144 Assad, 40.
145 Montfort.

in systems. Technically, social media users exist as nodes communicating between each other. This means that there is another parasite to contend with: the flow of information between them.

Serres knows parasites as "noise," which he claims is "also a message,"[146] because this noise is still information telegraphed to the receiver.[147] If we are to consider our communicators as the various users of social media, the crackle in a channel is reminiscent of the meaning users produce between their posts—the local intertextuality, in a way. This relation becomes even stronger when we look again to the noise/message division of the parasite. A parasite seen as noise can be easily considered as part of the message depending on one's location, how near or far one is from it. This fits in easily with our ideas of local intertextuality, where two random third gen texts might have no connection at all, but considering texts *local* to the original can begin to create a constructive intertextuality.

Thus through the fact that parasites can exist stacked on top of one another, systems in systems in systems, we can understand social media, its users, and the local intertextuality they create as parasites all at the same time.[148] Additionally, with with Serres's claim that "systems have been immunized by becoming more complex,"[149] we see a potential access point for politics in a digital age. When we consider the reach and power that these social media corporations have, it can feel impossible to imagine them changing even a small amount. Yet as we have seen, the introduction of parasites into a system automatically changes it. Even more than that, they can "immunize" the system, making it not only stronger but better.[150] And memes seem especially primed to provide that immunization, literally described as a parasite by the originator of the meme, Dawkins.[151] Social media may have disrupted digital communication, redefining it as a system, but that doesn't mean that users and the local intertextuality they create with their memes can't immunize social media as well.

Yet the right kind of immunization—of political action—for this situation is a question unto itself. By reckoning with the fact that social media has completely changed the digital landscape, we must reckon with the fact that we need to re-envision politics as well. Limor Shifman writes "in recent years the perception [from traditional political science accounts] of what constitutes political participation has been broadened to include mundane practices, such as … posting jokes about politicians."[152] While political cartoons have a long history, Shifman is referring to political practices available to the common citizen; thus with social media parasitizing

146 Serres, 3.
147 Serres, 11.
148 Serres, 13.
149 Serres, 68.
150 Serres, 68.
151 qtd. in Konior, 47.
152 Shifman, 120.

the communication landscape, Shifman's claim represents how politics is being parasitized as well. This forces us to reconsider how to politically respond to these companies. A digital, parasitical politics comes to us in the form of Jacques Rancière's *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, another text originally in French. In fact, Serres and Rancière share an academic lineage, both considered to be part of the broader postcritique movement. Yet, it is in the subtler definitions of Rancière's politics that their similarities truly shine through.

Rancière's work revolves around connecting art with politics, examining what is allowed—and not allowed—to be seen, in a particular culture in a particular historical moment.[153] Perhaps that is why his ideas line up so well with digital politics: as Dominic Pettman notes, because art and technology share a root in the Greek *technē*, and politics and technology through cybernetics, "art and politics are thus connected and mediated by *technics*."[154] This meditation through technology is seen in stark detail when Rancière describes politics as emerging through "interruption," a "stop[page of] the current."[155] These terms directly mirror Serres's parasite, "an interruption" that "brakes (breaks) the flow."[156] The parasite, then, might have some real economy in Rancière's politics.

Rancière breaks from the traditional definition of politics as "the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution."[157] Or, in layman's terms, controlling the community through the distribution of power, and creating laws to validate these actions. He retains this concept under a new name, *the police*. He also extends this to his overall argument by explaining that the police decide how "a particular activity is visible and another is not,"[158] directly connecting politics to aesthetics through the subject of visibility. On top of this, the police control how "this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise."[159] Looking at the host-like control of social media platforms (in the system of the parasite-users in social media), we see another resemblance, now to Serres's host that decides what is message and what is noise. These resemblances accumulate when Rancière ties the police to "the practices of modern information and communications strategies."[160] These conceptions of the police provide us with a mirror to social media through the direct reference to digital communication. Thus, we start to assemble a connection between Rancière's

153 Davis, "Rancière, for Dummies."
154 Pettman, "Memetic Desire: Twenty Theses on Posthumanism, Political Affect, and Proliferation," 26.
155 Rancière, Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, 13.
156 Serres, 3; Serres, 79.
157 Rancière, 28.
158 Rancière, 29.
159 Rancière, 29.
160 Rancière, 30.

police and social media platforms.

Politics, according to Rancière, exists in opposition to this police, raising what the police have denigrated as noise to the level of discourse.[161] We are then left with the question of who the people are that are enacting these politics. From earlier, it seems to be the equivalent of some kind of parasite that acts in opposition to social media platforms. Utilizing our analysis of parasites in social media, we can understand this to be the user. Building on this, we look at Rancière's explanation of political subjectification. As he explains it, "[the police] creates [political subjects] by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute."[162] For example, the identity of "woman" changes from simply a category of gender into a subject that is afforded different rights than her male counterpart. We can see a parallel to this in social media users, which shift from simply those who engage in a digital space, into a subject which must work within the constraints of free speech and political hegemony. On top of Vista's experiences with shadowbanning and account deletion, this is made visible in instances like English Professor Grace Lavery, who was banned from Twitter for tweeting "hope queen dies"[163]; or how Twitter technically applies the "state-affiliated media" label to all sorts countries, but applies it much more heavily to accounts oppositional to the Western empire such as those from China and Russia.[164] Altogether, we see that social media polices its users, and through this turns them into political subjects.

To actualize these politics, then, is to make known this gap between the natural identity and political subject—or, one could say, to include the excluded third. Rancière gives a distinct example of this with Jeanne Deroin, a woman who ran for office during the mid-1800s, a time when women were not allowed to assume such offices. By doing this, "she demonstrate[d] the contradiction within a universal suffrage that excludes her sex from any such universality."[165] By exposing the gaps and contradictions inherent in the policing activity of the social media platform— "reformulat[ing] these relations [between noise and speech]," as others have described it[166]—users can directly enact politics. And they can do this exactly through our other digital parasite: the local intertextuality of memes.

Revisiting our two meme accounts with this notion of politics gives us a new lens to consider, interrogating how the content of both accounts utilize (in)visibility. For both Vista and affirmations, the meaning

161 Rancière, 29-30.
162 Rancière, 36.
163 Lavery, "sick tweet bro."
164 Benson, "Twitter to label all state-affiliated Russia media."
165 Rancière, 41.
166 Weinschenk, Review of Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy, 261.

we come to understand through their local intertextualies is an important thing to recognize. For Vista, it builds up to the monopolization and control of the Internet by social media conglomerates; for affirmations, it does so to the social agency of the individual. In each individual post, the ironic, surface-level meanings work around the algorithm's mechanical analysis that looks at posts on an individual, discrete level.[167] For example, the original Vista post we looked at is certainly surface-level in message, just like Berens's greeting card Instapoetry. Moreover, the local post that is probably the most direct in message, about Google owning underwater Internet cables, is also the one that is most ironic in affect. This occurs in affirmations too, although the repetitive format of each post means that each has a similar level of both surfacity and irony. The fact that their full meanings are built through local intertextuality, with human users assembling these meanings in their own minds, means that algorithms cannot "see" the messages these accounts are telegraphing; it can only be understood through the gaps between posts. But there's also a more literal visuality at play in how each account can enact politics.

Although affirmations is clearly not *that* dedicated to politics or to revealing the fundamental inconsistencies of social media, it doesn't actually need to be. Returning to our first type of local intertextuality, we recognize that followers and reposts can say just as much about an account as its actual contents. My friends that I mentioned earlier, that reposted material from affirmations, didn't post them on their main accounts but rather to their finstas. These are both private accounts, with few followers and little interaction. This produces an interesting tension with the affirmations account itself, which not only has nearly a million followers, but has 41 followers that I personally know myself. However, outside of the finstas I follow, I never really see affirmations content reposted anywhere. This produces a sort of gap, between the attention affirmations receives—large, public amounts—and the method by which it's spread—smaller amounts in private. This seems to telegraph that many people resonate with the messages from affirmations, even if they don't show it to the entire public sphere. Thus, we as users are able to gain a sense of understanding and connection between each other while still pushing back against Instagram's expectation to showcase your "authentic" life for all to see, gaining as many likes and followers as possible. Therefore as individual users, we can also be parasites, changing the norms of Instagram towards less attention and interaction, and instead, more connection.

Continuing in the vein of (in)visibility, we can see a way in which Vista can still enact politics no matter how hard he pushes the envelope. If he keeps leftist political messages to an indiscernible amount in any one post, everything that's left unsaid becomes the gap, exposed by local intertextuality. If, however, he goes too

167 Berens, "E-Lit's #1 Hit …"

far, and gets a post (or even his account) deleted, it still enacts politics in a way. Recall that when an object is deleted on social media, it leaves behind a physical presence: a blank Instagram account that states "this account no longer exists," an empty tweet box that says "this tweet was deleted." And these empty posts are still part of any one third gen text's local intertextuality, in the first form still clickable from a link. These remnants then telegraph a message that we can understand through our second form of local intertextuality. While perhaps unintentional, the blank page is still a reference to all other lost content, whether through deletion, censorship, or glitch: something happened, something important enough that it had to disappear. As a parasite, these posts enter the mode of noise, of static corrupting channels and breaking the flow. It is both the gap and the exposure of the gap, the clear statement that a social media platform is policing and subjugating its users.

VI. Conclusion

Of course, this is not the only approach to dealing with our current situation of monopolistic digital media growing more and more powerful with each year. As mentioned before, Montfort and Berens still offer an option in their choice to stay on web-based platforms. But also as mentioned before, what this choice gains in control, it loses in connection.

Newer platforms like Mastodon hope to remedy this by emulating the style and function of social media while finding ways to banish the data-hungry CEOs and investors found in Big Tech. Mastodon is instead open-source and "community-owned," which it achieves through having users themselves host smaller node-servers in the larger Mastodon network, which can then connect to each other to build up into larger connections.[168] Its open-source code subverts the issues of hidden metadata, and its set-up allows users to connect on their own terms, as opposed to the platform choosing which users can be seen and which posts show up on one's feed. Unfortunately, the first time I heard about a user on Mastodon was when they had been run off Twitter for allegedly preying on children.[169]

This can be an issue with decentralized platforms—in eschewing stronger central oversight, they also lose the moderation that comes with it. The social media app Parler, with its slogan "Speak freely," quickly

168 Mastodon.

169 Recently, with Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, Mastodon has gained increased attention as a more democratic alternative. However, its existence in the larger social media landscape is still simply not at the scale of larger platforms.

became a right-wing hub that housed a large amount of planning leading up to the Capitol riot.[170] The choice to moderate or not is a complex issue. Parler situates their valorization of free speech directly against tech companies, which they call "authoritarian overlords."[171] In this way, their qualms start to mirror ones on the left that we have been looking at; there is clearly a grain of truth in these questions of free speech. Indeed, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union emphasized the importance of neutrality on the Internet as opposed to immediate censorship, even with the issue of safety in consideration.[172]

But moderation is still a quality that should be valued. Frederick Brennan himself, the creator of 8chan—an image board site known for housing hateful speech and influencing younger people towards a rightwing worldview—now has misgivings about the site. After seeing multiple shootings that were spurred by discussion on the site, he chose to disavow it, and now claims he would be happy if it were shut down.[173] In fact, he actually supports sites like Mastodon as the true "inheritors" of his goals for community platforms.[174] However, that leads us back to our original problem: nobody is actually using these platforms. As summed up by one of my Twitter mutuals,[175] "the best outcome for twitter is probably just that we all move to mastodon anyway. let me know when that happens (it won't)."[176]

That doesn't mean a complete abandonment of blogs, hand-coded pages, or platforms like Mastodon. It doesn't even necessarily mean that we should give up hope on 8chan or Parler. What it shows, however, is that all of these options have issues, and the issues that exist on these other platforms are in fact a strength on larger platforms like Instagram or Twitter. No one solution exists; we need an array of options, and working within the social media platforms themselves is still one of them.

As Pressman mentions, it is clear that our communication is becoming increasingly networked and multimedial.[177] With more photos taken in the years between 2011 and 2017 than all of history before 2011, some suggest we live in "a visual age" of information.[178] The influence of social media is clear when 300 million of those photos are shared over Facebook, and 80 million over Instagram. This is expanding to even more forms of media with the popularity of two recent social media apps that prioritize audio, Vine and TikTok. As much as one would like to view third generation electronic literature as quaint cat videos and Instagram

170 Parler; Baljak et al., "When Trump started his speech before the Capitol riot, talk on Parler turned to civil war."
171 Nicas and Alba, "How Parler, a Chosen App of Trump Fans, Became a Test of Free Speech."
172 Nicas and Alba.
173 McLaughlin, "The Weird, Dark History of 8chan."
174 Brennan, "lol exactly. …"
175 A term for two people who follow each other on social media.
176 Magdump, "the best outcome for twitter …"
177 Pressman, 17.
178 "The Visual Age."

greeting cards, these texts are a massive part of society, and continue to grow and evolve each day. Electronic literature research, and digital media research at large, would be doing itself a disservice by not examining the creation that can take place on these sites in as much detail as possible. Social media has already parasited the space of digital communication. How will we parasite it back?

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