Meme-making: Poaching, Reappropriation, or *Bricolage*?

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Abstract: Memes are a prominent example of a kind of digital artifact. It is widely agreed that an integral component of meme-making is the way in which it makes use of other existing material. In this paper, I examine three different ways of understanding this making use of. First, it has been seen in economic terms, as a kind of poaching. Secondly, the cultural concept of (re)appropriation has been deployed. Finally, Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* is often mentioned. I argue that despite some interesting insights deriving from the first two approaches, it is the third that gives the most comprehensive and interesting take on meme-making.

Keywords: memes, bricolage, Lévi-Strauss, de Certeau, Heidegger, poaching, nomadism, appropriation

The meme is a prominent example of a kind of digital artifact. Originating in on-line message boards, memes have exploded into mainstream digital culture. By now, only the most digitally unsavvy will not have encountered them in their hundreds or thousands. Many of us have even made them ourselves.

As artifacts, they are the (virtual) products of a process of making by a maker, low-stakes artworks of a kind. One very common type of work that goes into their making involves taking existing material (usually already digital) and making use of it in the creation of new memes. Just to give a few examples, which could be multiplied indefinitely, consider the following.[1] The Batman slapping Robin meme makes use of, in its basic template, a panel from a Batman comic from the 1960s (fig.1). The template of the Feminist Ryan Gosling meme does not make use of any particular image of the film star, but to make an instance of that meme, one has to make use of any picture of Ryan Gosling one feels is appropriate. The Archaic Rap meme template makes use of a self-portrait by the French painter Joseph Ducreux and to make an instance of the meme, a meme-maker must make use of some rap lyrics, rendered by the maker into faux-archaic English (fig. 2). Finally, the Distracted Boyfriend template makes use of a certain photo but, in riffing on this format, one might make use of other images inserted in place of the original figures in the photo (fig. 3).

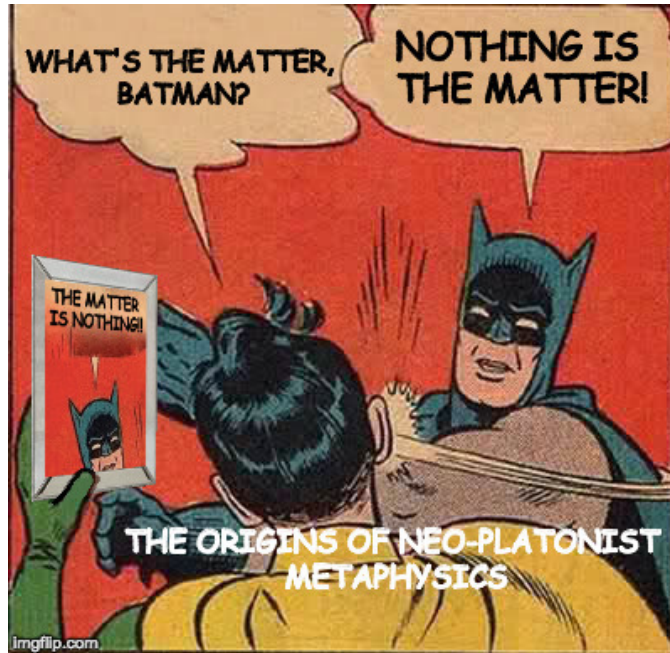[1] All memes appearing in this paper are by the author.

Figure 1 The Origins of Neo-Platonist Metaphysics. This meme, besides making use of the comic book image of Batman and Robin, also makes use of an image of a mirror found on the internet. See *(Evnine 2022)*

Figure 2 A meme that makes use of the self-portrait by Joseph Ducreux and rap lyrics by Jay-Z

Figure 3 A Distracted Boyfriend meme that replaces the figures in the original photo with sculptures that illustrate their labels while resembling the original figures

This feature of how memes are made has been noted by many scholars. Indeed, Ryan Milner (2016) calls 'reappropriation' of existing material one of the five fundamental logics of memetic media. (The other four are: multimodality, resonance, collectivism, and spread.) But while there is consensus over the existence of the practice, it has been described and understood in a variety of different ways (sometimes by the same author in the same work, without any attempt to distinguish them). I discern, broadly speaking, at least three ways of construing the making use of existing material in memes: in economic terms, in cultural terms, and in (for want of a better word) constructional terms. In this paper I shall look at these different ways of understanding the making use of distinctive of memes and argue that each offers some insight into the practice in question. The constructional paradigm, however, in my opinion is the most fruitful tool for understanding memetic making-use-of.[2]

1. The Economic Paradigm

Some theorists reach back to the work of the French polymath Michel de Certeau to understand the activities of meme-makers and the ways in which they make use of existing material in the composition of memes. De Certeau (1984) was concerned, among other things, to combat the idea that writers produce canonical, untouchable texts which readers can consume only passively. Rather, he thought, readers make use of written texts for their own purposes and in their own ways. Here is a much-quoted passage in which de Certeau describes what he thinks are the real relations between readers and writers:

> Far from being writers—founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses—readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. Writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place and multiplies its production through the expansionism of reproduction. Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself and also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise. Indeed, reading has no place. (174)

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[2] I will not here make the obligatory, perfunctory, stop at the shrine of the question "what is a meme?" A variety of definitions can be found, my own among them, and the differences between them will not matter for my purposes here. Interested readers may consult Shifman (2013) and Evnine (2018).

The chapter in which this passage occurs is called "Reading as Poaching" and the idea of poaching in this context has caught on.[3] The media theorist Henry Jenkins (1992) entitled his book on TV fandom Textual Poaching: Television Fans and Participatory Culture. So it is little surprise that theorists of memes should have sought to understand what is, par excellence, a participatory (online) culture in terms of poaching. Ryan Milner (2016), although himself stressing a different way of understanding how meme-makers make use of existing material, refers approvingly to both Jenkins and de Certeau. And Vivian Asimos (n.d.), again referencing de Certeau, writes: "Meme-makers are poachers of popular culture, grabbing what they love as they pass through, and repurposing it as their own."

In fact, as Katherine Firth (2024) notes, the paragraph from de Certeau fails to distinguish clearly two distinct phenomena – poaching and nomadism. From the point of view of a settled victim, there may not be much to distinguish poachers from nomads but, nonetheless, they imply quite different environments of power and possession, quite different economic orders, and we should examine them separately to see how well each captures the acquisitive memetic ethos.

Poaching (de Certeau uses the French word 'braconner' which, as far as I can tell, is perfectly translated by 'poach') is a kind of theft, typically of natural resources, but what is most strongly evoked by this particular word, and the type of theft it denotes, is one of two rubrics. First, a medieval setting in which a noble owns large amounts of natural resources (game, wood, fish) and poor peasants, the noble's feudal subjects, steal some of this for their own use.[4] Secondly, the calculated, profit-linked theft of natural things (elephants from game reserves) or people in employment (a lawyer from a rival firm).

One implication of the use of the word 'poach' to meme-making is that digital material on the internet has something of the status of a natural resource. This is an intriguing idea and worth following up on. After all, we do use expressions like 'digital landscape' and 'digital ecosystems.' However, I suggest that the kind of use that people make of that digital material in creating memes is not well captured by either rubric associated with the term 'poach.' There are a couple of reasons for this. First, in both the rubrics, there is a way in which both the original possessor and the taker are parts of the same economic order. In the first rubric, the poaching peasants are a recurring problem, their identities perhaps well-known to the game-keeper or bailiff who protects the lord's resources. They interact in ways that are antagonistic but symbiotic,

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[3] I should add that de Certeau also uses the language of (re)appropriation and bricolage in this chapter without attempting to disentangle them.

[4] I am clearly appealing to a stereotype here but that is not inappropriate since I am trying to see how well the term, with its associated imaginings, captures a given phenomenon. In actuality, the illegal killing of game and fish is a serious contemporary problem, especially in the effects it has on wildlife populations. A variety of factors seem to motivate people in poaching and it would be of interest to compare their reasons (insofar as we have any real idea of what they are) with the reasons meme-makers might give for making use of existing material. See Eliason (2003).

involving a mutual recognition. In the second rubric, the word specifically designates 'lateral hiring' and hence implies commensurability.[5] This feature is not necessarily present in the meme-making case. Secondly, the very notion of theft does not happily apply to virtual resources, where the use by the taker does not deprive the original 'owner' of similar use. In both the case of natural resources and of employees, the poacher does deny the original owner possession and use of what is poached. Of course, by thinking of the potential for monetization of virtual resources, the concept of loss to the original owner can be made to apply. Intellectual property and copyright law are built on this basis.[6] In some cases, an unauthorized person's use of a virtual resource may financially damage its 'owner' but, in the vast majority of cases, the use made by meme-makers of pre-existing material found on the internet effects no deprivation at all.

Perhaps some awareness of the way in which poachers belong to the same economic order as their victims leads de Certeau, in the passage quoted above, to supplement their invocation with a parallel invocation of nomads. For he explicitly denies that readers are the descendants of the peasants (i.e. poachers) of old, something which would, if it were true, make them writers themselves, people with a fixed place.

It is clear that de Certeau is thinking of nomads not in their nomadic activity as such, but as coming into conflict with settled, agricultural peoples.[7] Where nomads do 'despoil the wealth' of an agricultural society, the problem is not so much individual acts of taking but rather the clash of two fundamentally different economic orders that seem unable to co-exist peacefully.[8] For nomads, the world is terra nullius and they skim over its surface using what they find with no conception that it belongs to them or to anyone else. The poacher can simply stop poaching or the noble simply allow the use of resources on their lands without either giving up their basic way of life. The nomad, however, would need to give up nomading, or the farmer farming, for them not to come into conflict.

Unlike the poacher, I think the figure of the nomad does shed some light on the nature of the making use of we find in memes. I refer here to Patrick Davison's distinction between the restricted and the unrestricted web. He writes that the

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[5] "Lateral hiring is the intentional action of one employer to identify, solicit, and hire an individual or group of employees currently employed by another firm, a practice often pejoratively labeled 'poaching'" (Gardner, Stansbury and Hart 2010, 341).

[6] See, in this connection, the story of Getty Images. They owned the copyright on a photo from National Geographic of a penguin. At some point, they began to go after parties who had posted memes in the Socially Awkward Penguin format (which uses that photo) demanding payment retroactively. They certainly leaned into the role of Bad King John, insisting peasants be hanged who poached a rabbit. See Cantalamessa (2020) and Hick (2017) for valuable treatments of questions of intellectual property in the context of art-making.

[7] I owe this insight to Firth (2024).

[8] I am unsure what de Certeau means by referring to the despoliation of the wealth of Egypt in particular.

zero-sum game between creativity and security implies a divided Internet. Those platforms and communities which value security over creativity can be thought of as the "restricted web;" while those that remain generative in the face of other concerns are the "unrestricted web." (2012, 120)

Memes arose in the unrestricted web (4chan and other such places) and they "not only often disregard attribution and metadata; they are also frequently incorporated into systems and among practices that actively prevent and dismantle attribution" (Davison, 132). There are, then, two digital 'ways of life.' The settlers, the inhabitants of the restricted web, care about ownership and copyright. The nomads, coming in a cloud of dust off the steppes of the unrestricted web, simply do not care about these things and take what they need as if it were unowned. Indeed, not only do they not care about them, they are contemptuous of them and making use of things that belong to the restricted web allows them to express that contempt.

2. The Cultural Paradigm

Nonetheless, the figure of the nomad does not tell the whole story of the nature of the making use of found in meme-making for it leaves the individual acts of taking unexplained. I turn, therefore, to a second paradigm to be found in the literature, that of appropriation and reappropriation. Minimally, to appropriate something is simply to take something that doesn't belong to you. But the term, and its companion 'reappropriation,' are used in a richer sense, to be found in the notions of cultural appropriation, appropriation art, and the (re)appropriation of slurs by groups those slurs are aimed against.[9] When Ryan Milner (2016), for example, lists reappropriation as one of the five fundamental logics of memetic media, he does see with these other uses of the language of (re)appropriation clearly in the background.

Milner worries about the link between reappropriation (which is supposed to be good) and appropriation (which is supposed to be bad). While it is possible that there is no more than a verbal connection between these two ideas, I think Milner is right to be concerned about the question. His answer (234) is to suggest that they are exactly the same process distinguished only in the relative power of the parties involved. Appropriation is what the strong do to the weak; reappropriation is how the weak fight back.[10] Given this, it remains, I think, something of an open question about whether the right term for the making use of existing material by meme-makers would be 'appropriation' or 'reappropriation.' To be sure, individual meme-makers are the weaker parties in relation to the giants of the restricted web like Facebook or Getty Images. But

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[9] The literature on all three of these manifestations of appropriation is enormous. McGrath (2023) has an interesting discussion on the use of notions of theft to illuminate cultural appropriation.

[10] See also this: "there is general agreement that if cultural appropriation is morally objectionable, it is only objectionable when a member of a dominant cultural group appropriates from a member of a marginalized group" (Matthes 2016, 347)

meme-making surely has to be considered as well not just as the sum of individual acts but as a kind of anonymous groundswell and as such, the power lies with the meme-makers.[11]

Still, let us stick with the scrappy- and virtuous-sounding 'reappropriation.' How exactly are cultural items reappropriated? What are the mechanisms at work? We can garner certain illuminating ideas from the literature on the reappropriation of slurs, surely a paradigm case of the phenomenon. On one theory of slurs, what happens in reappropriation is that the slurring term is given a new meaning by the target group so that the term becomes, and remains, ambiguous.[12] It has the original offensive meaning in the mouths of non-members of the group but a new, positive meaning in the mouths of the group's members. The idea that reappropriation might involve a change of meaning certainly seems to have some potential application to the use by meme-makers of existing material though, set apart from the linguistic context of slurs, the notion of meaning is less theoretically tractable and so judgments about change of meaning will, inevitably, be somewhat harder to assess.

As an example of such change of meaning, consider this Trolley Problem meme (fig. 4) which, besides making use of the standard drawing of the trolley problem (which was made originally by Jesse Prinz), also makes use of a famous painting by Caspar David Friedrich:

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[11] See Evnine (2018).

[12] See Richard (2008, 15-16). This strategy assumes that the slurring quality of the term is a function of its meaning, something which is highly plausible but not uncontroversial.

Figure 4 Trolley Problem meme with the addition of the famous picture by Caspar David Friedrich. Executed with the assistance of Jennifer L. Watson

The use of the Romantic painting, which emphasizes an aloof spectator viewing the sublimity of nature from a respectful distance, as part of the meme turns the spectator into a megalomaniacal actor, deciding matters of life and death without emotional involvement. It also changes the meaning of the object in the right hand of the switchmaster from a walking stick to a lever. These changes in the painting's meaning come full circle as they force us to reflect on how much of the megalomania and destruction were implicit in the Romantic conception of humans and nature from the start.

Another idea from the literature on slurs, stemming from Relevance Theory, is that reappropriated uses of a slur by a target group are 'echoic' uses (Bianchi 2014). An echoic use is one "where the speaker not only reports an attributed utterance or thought, but also informs the hearer of her attitude to that utterance or thought" (Bianchi 2014, 39). Since Relevance Theory treats irony as a kind of echoic use, this strategy seems particularly appealing, given the enormous weight placed on the concept of irony by some meme-theorists (see, for example, Owens (2019) and Her and Zharova (2017)). Consider (fig. 5):

Figure 5 A meme that appropriates a text from the philosopher William Paley

The maker makes use of two previously existent things, a painting by Salvador Dalí and a quotation from the deist philosopher William Paley. The text can be said to have been appropriated in the echoic sense since its juxtaposition with the melting and distorted watches in the painting serves to express ironic distancing from the idea that the world is like a well-functioning mechanical object.

In fig. 5, it seems that the text is appropriated and presented ironically by the juxtaposition with the image. In fig. 6, we can see the reverse effect. It is the image now that is presented ironically through the association with the text, taken from Camus:

Figure 6 An image of a woman laughing, while eating salad alone, a much used and much criticized trope, is rendered ironic by the present of Camus's words

The presence of the text makes the image ironic by suggesting that in reality, the work women must perform in looking healthy and happy for the male gaze is unending, indeed Sisyphean.

While these ideas about (re)appropriation derived from the literature on slurs are certainly helpful, I do not think that they, or other takes on (re)appropriation, are widely useful in understanding the making use of existing material in memes. To see this, consider what Sara Ahmed (2019) has to say about 'queer use,' a concept that is surely close to that of reappropriation. (I have put together a collage of quotations here, all from the book's conclusion.)

> Queer use is "to make use audible, to listen to use, to bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background." It is "how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended." It may involve a "commitment to a principle that not all uses could or even should be foreseen" and can therefore involve "releasing a potentiality that already resides in things given how they have taken shape." It is "not being willing to receive the will of the colonizer" and hence living "in proximity to violence." "To queer use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over." "Queer use can be offered as an ethics of finitude, an appreciation of the wrinkle or the scratch, expressions of time on the surfaces of bodies and things, loving what does not, and will not, last."

Reading these beautiful and moving descriptions, it should be evident that queer use, and reappropriation in general, are thoughtful and deliberate acts that are highly sensitive to the meaning of what is used queerly or reappropriated. The use that meme-makers make of things found on the internet, by contrast, while it may involve such deliberateness and sensitivity, is much more throwaway and less portentous. I have already suggested that it is not plausible to think that the Dalí picture is being appropriated in fig. 5. In a similar vein, are random rap lyrics really being 'reappropriated' when someone puts them in faux-archaic English on top of the self-portrait of Joseph Ducreux (fig. 3)? Is that portrait itself being reappropriated? The language of (re)appropriation makes the whole business sound too serious. By contrast, the reappropriation of the N-word by African Americans is a serious business and while not every use of the term need be thoughtful and deliberate, the knowledge that such a use is contributing to a project of reappropriation is surely never far away.

3. The Constructional Paradigm

I come now to what I think is the best way to view the making use of existing material in memes, namely, as bricolage. The bricoleur is a tinkerer, a jury-rigger, who collects all sorts of bits and pieces which can then be put to use in fixing and making things, often in non-standard ways. This concept was raised from the mundane to the theoretically important by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). Lévi-Strauss uses the concept to describe mythological thinking – contrasting it with scientific thought that resembles the more systematic work of the engineer rather than the bricoleur. The question of ownership that underlies the language of poaching and nomadism is simply irrelevant to the understanding of bricolage. One may pilfer something that belongs to someone else because one sees that one can make some non-standard use of it. But the pilfering is inessential. It would be just as valuable if one found it lying unowned on the ground. Indeed, often what the bricoleur hoards are other people's cast-offs. She is, perhaps, a dumpster-diver or a frequenter of yard sales, estate sales, and junkyards. Nor are the pointed cultural meanings of appropriation and reappropriation necessary. Of course, they may be, in individual cases, but very often the material used is either used appropriately (as in the case of the use of other existing memes) or is relatively low-stakes (the picture of Joseph Ducreux in Archaic Rap memes).

The imperative the guides the bricoleur is neither cultural nor economic but rather, as I call it, constructional. The meme-maker is engaged in a construction project. The point of the meme may be political, philosophical, comedic, or anything else. But the creator will have to work with the material they have. Because of the internet, the tool-box is almost infinitely capacious but the problem remains of locating, or creating, or repurposing materials that will work. The material used lies at hand and the meme-maker simply reaches out to whatever will best suit the needs of the given construction project, given constraints on the maker's time and ability to alter digitally the material used. This spirit of bricolage means that sometimes memes will clearly exhibit their DIY origins. Consider fig. 7:

Figure 7 A meme combine text, an image of a young woman on a bicycle, and an image of Trump's head in place of the woman's head

The maker evidently had the idea of a joke that effeminizes Trump by using his words about Megyn Kelly, after a debate in 2016 that she moderated in a way not to his liking, in the context of an ad for tampons. This joke requires two images to be superimposed, one of a young woman on a bicycle and the other of Trump's head, superimposed over the young woman's head. However, the images found do not align properly. More assiduous searching or better Photoshop skills may have helped, but both solutions come with a cost in time and effort. The meme-maker has settled for something that is 'good enough' to get the job done, albeit not in an elegant way. In just such a way, a bricoleur may need a hook to repair something, not have a hook of exactly the right type, and jury-rig a solution using a hook of the wrong kind.

The idea that meme-makers make use of existing material in the same way as a bricoleur, however, does not render the activity in any way banal or devoid of philosophical significance. The bits and pieces for which the meme-maker reaches are not selected for their bare perceptible qualities but are things that themselves have various kinds of meanings. In Heideggerian terms, one could say that they lie somewhere between what is ready-to-hand and what is present-at-hand. Already imbued with meaning, they are not merely inert, displaying only physical (or virtual physical) properties. But the meanings they have may be exploited in novel and ingenious ways. They are therefore not invisible in the way that equipment, the genuinely ready-to-hand, is. It is because of their existing meanings that these things have the constructional properties that they do but those meanings do not determine their constructional uses.

The meme-maker is thus engaged in making meanings out of given meanings. This is not, necessarily, poaching and does not, necessarily, involve (re)appropriation. But the making of meaning out of meanings is a fundamental necessity of human life itself. We are historical beings and hence are always already in a world already saturated with meaning we have not made or fashioned for ourselves. It is each person's task to take up the meanings she finds in order to forge ahead in the making of her own life. Seen in this light, the meme-maker stands for humanity itself, and not merely for those who may need to poach or (re)appropriate, and the making use of that goes into the creation of memes is a representation of the ways in which we must all be bricoleurs.

4. Conclusion

I have examined three different ways in which meme-theorists have sought to understand the way in which memes integrally rely on the making use of existing material: economically, culturally, and constructionally. The first two yield some interesting insights into the phenomenon in question. There is the suggestion that materials on the internet resemble natural resources. With the invocation of nomadism and its clashes with settlers there is a characterization of the relations between different digital life-styles, those of the restricted and the unrestricted web. Theories of (re)appropriation bring out particular uses meme-makers can sometimes put found materials to, by echoing their original uses or changing the meanings they come with. But finally, I think the notion of bricolage gives the best overall paradigm for thinking of how meme-makers put existing material to work in the making of memes. It reveals meme-making as a microcosm of the human condition itself – the necessity of making a meaningful life in a world full of meaning, into which we are thrown.

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