

MEME DRIFT
A study in image, circulation, and residual meaning

MAGCD Y1
Unit 2 Written Component

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Video essay
<https://youtu.be/jiJJPr-0tKg>

I. ORIGIN

It began as an engineering constraint. In Unit 1, working with a CSM light archive project based on web design, I encountered a practical problem: the image files were too heavy to load. Compression was required. My first question was simple. How small can an image become while still being readable?

I tested various image processing methods across a 100-page iteration publication, tracking the relationship between file size, image legibility, and visual language. But the feedback I received reoriented me: this was still too close to an engineering question. It showed how images change, but not why that change might matter.

Steyerl's essay reframed the technical problem I had been treating as an optimisation challenge. This shifted my position: from designer-of-compression to observer-of-compression. The compression I had been authoring was not the only kind. Every platform an image passes through performs its own compression, automatically, continuously. Walter Benjamin

had located the loss of aura in mechanical reproduction; my images had no aura to lose. They were copies from the beginning. What accumulated on them was something else — a record of handling, screenshotting, platform transit. Not loss, but accumulation.

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed.

Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image' (2012)



II. CONTEXT

I moved to memes. Memes are also compressed images, but compressed by the internet: by screenshots, reposts, platforms, and circulation. I began to ask: why do we enjoy images that look damaged?

I introduced the concept of digital patina to describe the compressive traces of internet circulation — the JPEG artefacts, the saturation bleed, the ghosting of text. Rosa Menkman describes the glitch as “a wonderful interruption that shifts an object away from its ordinary form and discourse, towards the ruins of destroyed meaning.”⁵ I am not recording platform circulation to lament quality loss, nor to aestheticise it. The compression artefact is not noise to be eliminated but a site of critical attention, the moment where an otherwise invisible infrastructure becomes readable.

From digital patina I moved to fossil. A fossil is patina taken to its extreme, the same gesture of preservation-through-transformation, at a different timescale. I treated degraded memes as visual remains and built The Meme Fossil Archive: a website collecting approximately twenty well-known memes, each presented in the manner of an archival record with rewritten descriptions

drawn from real archival systems. Rubinstein and Sluis argue that the digital image has become a “computational event subject to continuous processing”, not a record of the world but a product of algorithms.⁴ The archive makes this visible by treating the meme as a specimen: a thing that has passed through many processing stages and arrived at its current form.

Aria Dean extends this argument from the art image to the meme,⁶ developing the implications of Steyerl’s ‘poor image’ for a form whose visual language is shaped directly by the infrastructure of repeated compression, screenshotting, and re-upload:

Like the poor image, the meme finds its home only in this circulation — its true content is the many bumps and bruises that have occurred along the way. It is a copy without an original — a copy of a copy of a copy, and so forth.

Aria Dean, 'Poor Meme, Rich Meme' (2016)⁶

Poor Meme, Rich Meme

If memes reiterate the inequities between black creators and white appropriators, can they also move us into a new collective blackness?

Aria Dean July 25, 2016



When you on the aux and the song boutta end, but you haven't found the next song to play



III. POSITION

In the second brief, I found the concept that now organises my research: meme drift.

Meme drift is the process by which a meme moves away from its original image, context, and meaning and becomes a new visual or cultural structure. It is not only about visual degradation; it is about semantic change.

The Instagram account @unexpected_sports has posted over a thousand iterations of a single photograph of a horse, processed repeatedly until the original subject dissolves into colour fields and abstract patterns.

Drift is not linear loss. It is oscillation. Recognition disappears and returns. The image moves in and out of legibility. This

directly shaped my interactive website: instead of showing a single direction of degradation, I let the viewer scrub backward and forward through pixel expansion, inhabiting the rhythm of the account.

Dina Kelberman's I'm Google⁷ chains images through visual similarity rather than subject. A sliced orange leads to a basketball, leads to a planet. The eye performs this work without

Limor Shifman defines an internet meme as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which were created with awareness of each other, and were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users."³

Two features matter directly: the meme is not a single image but a family; and its three modes circulated,

realising it. Pure visual recognition can connect images with no semantic relationship. This is the logic of the first interactive mechanism in my website: a stretched band that makes the

act of visual connection visible, as if the joint between images were suddenly exposed.

imitated, transformed map onto the stages I track.

I focus on two routes of transformation. The first is visual: an image loses its pictorial content and becomes structural, a pattern, a composition, a gesture without a subject. The second is semantic: an image retains its visual form while its associated meaning shifts entirely.

IV. RESIDUE

The structure you are reading is itself a drift.

This document, and the video it accompanies, is organised in four panels. This structure is borrowed from Loss, a four-panel webcomic that, through successive simplification, lost its text, backgrounds, character identities, and visual detail. The narrative became structure. The structure became a format. The format was adapted to other layouts, objects, and images. John Berger observed that “the meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it.”⁹ My interactive website turns this into an action: the viewer controls the juxtaposition and watches the relationship appear.

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imitated, transformed map onto the stages I track.

These outcomes do not resolve the question they raise. They suggest a way of looking at internet images more slowly. In a space where images usually move too fast to be examined, this project tries to pause them, take them apart, and look at what remains after they drift.

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