WE STARTED A MEME WHICH STARTED THE WHOLE WORLD CRYING
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Walter Benjamin, in *The Author as Producer*, writes that a photograph – or photography for that matter – is incapable of saying anything other than “The world is beautiful.” He does not say that photography shows the world as it is: Benjamin is clear, the former transfigures the latter (but without changing the production apparatus). Be it a rubbish-dump, a river dam or poverty, the more barren, deserted, abject the subject matter is, the more beautiful. For Benjamin, not the most innate dialectician and the author of *The Writer of Modern Life*, this is a problem of modishness. His first proposal is that there should be a caption under the picture; basically inventing the image macro or LOLcat. In the next sentence there is an even greater break, a signature Benjamin rupture, asserting that writers themselves should start photographing. Apparently, one can’t rely on photographers.

It probably has something to do with the iconoclastic tendency of thought itself. To give a less obvious example: Deleuze starts his *Cinema I* with a declaration that there won’t be any reproductions in the book since text is the best illustration, hence all that talk about reading, not watching films. Icons themselves become iconoclastic, as culminated in Malevich, and thought itself is always on the verge of getting rid of letters/characters.

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What Benjamin’s basically saying – and there’s no basically to his basically and no saying to his saying – is that writers should do more – or something other – than writing. In that sense – and not in that sense only – Benjamin is an increasingly relevant, “more and more modern” or rather an absolutely modern writer, that is, something other than a writer. It’s not just that one shouldn’t rely on image makers, be they photographers, designers etc., no specialties or specialists should be relied on, not even writers, not even the so-called critical thinkers. Any separation of tasks, any division of labour, any segregation and the related hierarchies are rejected. By that we are not saying that everyone can or should be an artist – that’s just the art police baby –, we’re saying anyone can be anything, provided that it is a possibility, a potentiality and not a predefined, pre-established actuality.
A meme is a device, an apparatus, a dispositif. As always, not a neutral one (not that neutrality is sought). It is dangerous, much more than Janez Janša. With that we don’t mean or we don’t mean only the hypothesis according to which the Internet was invented by Pentagon so communication could carry on in the event of a nuclear war, although that still sounds menacing, maybe even more so: “Nothing could stop her Instagraming, let alone the burning, crumbling sky. She chose the F2 / Mellow VSCOcam filter.” The word and the concept of the meme was coined by none other than a revolutionary biologist. The book is *The Selfish Gene*, the man Richard Dawkins. According to that other non-neutral device Wikipedia: “A meme acts as a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols, or practices that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena with a mimicked theme. Supporters of the concept regard memes as cultural analogues to genes in that they self-replicate, mutate, and respond to selective pressures.” They are “living structures, not just metaphorically.”

Again we are dealing with these nature-society analogies/equivalences, which always ring a bit too close to Social Darwinism (or is it Lamarckism via Herbert Spencer?) – the difference between diagnosing or proscribing being a pretty insignificant one. In much the same way molecular biology uses the theory of information, binary logic. It’s all about the bi-winning, as Charlie Sheen would say. And it’s not even a competition, since Dawkins observes there isn’t much of a struggle between genes and the host as the former usually win without a fight.

In the same binary logic kind of way we could say we come from a different place. Let’s say our alma mater is critical or radical theory. Of course, there is nothing radical about calling oneself radical, this is just hashtagging, name-dropping for the sake of fast forwarding this introduction. Our point of departure is the Frankfurt School of thought, not the Freiburg School, where

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3 Ex prime minister of Slovenia, currently in prison for bribery. According to the liberal hypothesis the source of all evil in Slovenia and thus its central figure/creature, hence prolonging the paradigm of viewing politics as a matter of psychology or temperaments, Weltanschauungs, local idiosyncrasies etc. It’s actually an example of a sad little incest story, since Janša’s political career started in ZSMS (League of Socialist Youth of Slovenia), the incubator of the liberal hypothesis.

that great innovation of Ordoliberalism aka Neoliberalism got underway. To keep it even shorter, like Deleuze & Guattari we believe there is too much communication, not too little of it. That’s why a figure/signifier of Slavoj Žižek had to be one of our main targets, someone or something that turns everything he/it touches into shit, preferably if that everything is something emancipatory.

While trying to balance on the shoulders of critical theory, Smetnjak thus responded to Benjamin’s call for a new form of literacy, a literacy more native to the image-saturated society of spectacle, grounding its means of expression in what was then at hand – the culture of internet memes. The assemblage of an image and a caption provided us with a form that matched the simplicity of the verse-chorus structure of a pop song. As Debord would have it, “the spectacle’s domination has succeeded in raising a whole generation moulded to its laws,”⁵ and the pop form of a meme seemed

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geared to our generation, for which, raised on the likes of *Robocap* and/or hyperconnected imagery, the spectacle founds the horizon of possibility. Using spectacle as a tool, as John Maus might put it, we tried to establish daily production of memes as a means of disrupting the police, that is, critiquing, or rather fabricating the reality of the consciousness mediated by the spectacular technologies. This was our attempt to move beyond the textual into the domain of the hypertextual, which operates by its own rules.

Firmly in the time of Gutenberg and snail mail Flaubert proclaimed that “anything becomes interesting if you look at it long enough.”6 Today, when the wi-fi connection has been elevated into a basic human right, such patience seems not only outmoded, but radically absent. With the ever-accelerating news feeds of the www, attention (not information) becomes a scarce resource, and is becoming ever-more scattered between different tasks and information streams. Indeed, attention deficit disorder looks like the new order of things, and attention span seems to have mutated into attention spam. This new form of attention cultivated by the Web, which N. Katherine Hayles terms hyper attention,7 has no tolerance for boredom, and thus digests only the bite-size. Making meme our weapon of choice was also a matter of efficiently addressing this form of attention. While taking an image of Žižek and recoding it with a one-liner, or making him sing, might look like a puny attempt to lampoon reality, we also viewed it as the only one possible (especially against the background of the sad futility of academic articles). Still being overly unmodish writers, we often decided to elaborate our memes with the accompanying essays, not to detrivialize them, but to put them into context(s) or decontextualize them even further.

We never dared to think that memes could be an unproblematic form of critique. Pop is the code of capital, and practicing critical theory through memes could be rejected in the same way Adorno rejects bringing together political protest and popular music. In his view the latter is “to such a degree

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inseparable from the commodity-character, from the cross-eyed transfixion with amusement, that attempts to outfit it with a new function remain entirely superficial.”

While we fall in with John Maus in his wager that pop can offer more than just a mindless distraction, that it can resist the appropriation of the police, we understand where Adorno is coming from. After all, what is subversion? Our poetic side keeps telling us about the redistribution or new configurations of the sensory, the breaking up/down of sensory-motor schema. So maybe, just maybe, and we are almost sure we’re flattering ourselves, Smetnjak’s version of Slovenglish, of mixing meme slang with 

theory, certainly not because of eclecticism, has something to do with that. On
the other hand, our prosa(i)c side keeps reminding us – as Matteo Pasquinelli
points out in *Animal Spirits* – that any attempt at subversion should involve
a critique of the economic model sustaining the culture industries, otherwise
we “remain at the level of media activism, or at the level of the PR campaign
of the anti-globalist movement.”

Sure, one catches oneself counting likes and shares (is it too severe to think that one clicks “like” so s/he can forget
all about it?), not just counting, expecting them, desiring them, getting
frustrated when an expected hit does not materialize, analyzing the traffic
stats, falling into the trap of quantification, commodification etc., feeding
the machine. It happens so quickly the thought itself does not manage to
interfere, all that Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger stuff. We used to be Daft
Punk Kids, we’ve grown to despise it, all that unabashed 1 percent mongering,
and yet, pop/power always finds a way to creep in. And then one utters: “I’d
rather not.”

Vstaja, the local version of global uprisings, was a push toward Smetnjak’s
non-participation, withdrawal, the offensive retreat (this “offensive” reeks
of defeatist and privilege apology, doesn’t it?). There was just too much
moralizing, scapegoating, dreaming of the return of law and order, more State,
more Control, this cleansing fixation, to which even Smetnjak contributed a
bit with its tagline “Someone has to be ashamed”. Okay, at least we sounded
like Christians, instead of counterfeit, ersatz ones. Maybe Federico Campagna
spoiled everything by writing: “As Saul Bellow used to say, ‘conquered people
tend to be witty.’ It is not by accident, for example, that during the Berlusconi
decades in Italy, satire and comedy seemed to be the weapons of choice of
the social-capitalist, parliamentary left.”

Satire, society’s famous safety valve. Isn’t there enough production of safety
as it is? The senile humanistic chatter about human needs as if the difference

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9 Matteo Pasquinelli, “Creative Sabotage in the Factory of Culture: Art, Gentrification
and the Metropolis", in *Animal Spirits – A Bestiary of the Commons*, (Rotterdam: NAi
10 Federico Campagna, “Talk at 2012 KAFC conference, Barcelona
talk-kafca-conference-barcelona-2122011.
between human and capital was a clear-cut one. A dispositif from the age of party politics which is now long gone, the wishful thinking of power still being personified, having to do with characters, good guys and villains etc. One can still do it for the sake of a career, and for that sake only. It’s obvious Karl Kraus wouldn’t want to do satire nowadays, he would find it pathetic. No, one can’t do satire, but one is always too close to it when one’s doing something that could be broadly or generically called political humour. One could still say with Deleuze, “fabricating the real instead of responding to it,” but the problem is it seems the real does that much better by itself – beyond its avatars’, mediators’ intentions. One can’t caricature when the caricature is the objective reality, the very nature of things, the carinature.

Considering the emancipatory (or whatever) potentials of humour, we still wait to be persuaded by Paolo Virno and his explorations of wit. And as far as critical thought is concerned, Tiqqun kind of ends it: “We don’t need any more critical theory. We don’t need any more professors. Now critique works for domination. Even the critique of domination.”

Meme itself has become a worn out, coagulated form, and Smetnjak couldn’t or didn’t want to find a way to save it. Time moved on, as always. Modishness is actually not just a fad, it also has something to do with the absolute modernity of Benjamin’s/Rimbaud’s kind. It has its own metaphysics.

Some say Dawkins’ meme is a redundant synonym for a concept. Deleuze & Guattari define the activity of philosophy as producing concepts. Flows hardening into concepts and memes as something that wants to be remembered. Isn’t all that about power all over again? Is there a word that is hardly a word, something that does not want to become a word or would prefer not to? Hapax legomenon. A word that occurs only once whether “in the written record of an entire language, in the works of an author, or in a

11 Or rather with Tiqqun fabriquoting Deleuze in The Cybernetic Hypothesis (http://cybernet.jottit.com/).
single text.”\textsuperscript{14} Smetnjak would like to be on the side of the hapax. Something in passing, scarcely traceable or archivable, unmemorable, belonging to the other of memory (but then again, how could Kafka or Walser ever become a part of the canon? Isn’t that turn of events a betrayal or retaliation against all the kafkas and walsers without a name?).

There’s always too much production, never too little, so why not stop at that? We are already not very far, i.e. we are infinitesimally close to a female voice from the (Italian) movement of ’77: “Silence brought the failure of this part of myself that desired to make politics, but it affirmed something new. There has been a change, I have started to speak out, but during these days of silence I felt that the affirmative part of myself was occupying the entire space again. I convinced myself that the mute woman is the most fertile objection to our politics. The non-political digs tunnels that we mustn’t fill with earth.”\textsuperscript{15} Smetnjak is staying mute, for now, until further notice or without it. The anti-politics of post-politics which is the only politics possible or rather the only possibility of politics. The one or rather none that is slow and opaque.

the great

pretender
Smetnjak
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