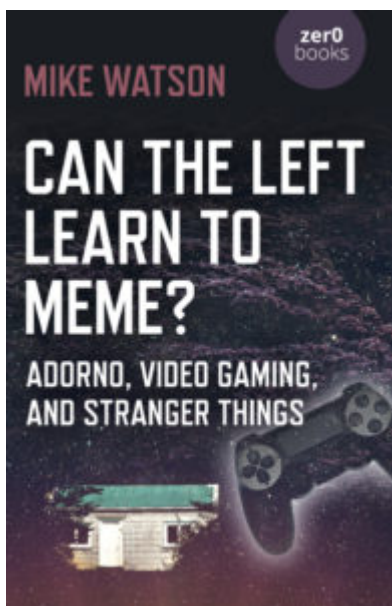# Review: Can the Left Learn to Meme?: Adorno, Videogaming, and Stranger Things

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One of the biggest complaints leftists make about progressive activism—at least in more candid moments—is a failure to communicate effectively. Since Newt Gingrich and Fox News fundamentally changed the dynamics of political agitation in the 1990s through amping up the spectacle and doubling down on hyper-partisanship, many have complained that progressives simply couldn't compete in terms of political optics. This discrepancy was nicely spoofed by Contrapoints in her early video "The Left," which opens with a simulated debate between a fascist and a leftist. The fascist goes to the podium and makes grandstanding, rhetorical, and alarmist statements that are almost entirely empty of content and receives tremendous applause. The leftist goes on stage and starts talking about how the Hegelian for itself will only be realized in itself through the individuation…one gets the picture. The leftist is quickly ignored and even booed offstage. The reputation of leftist political agitation as dull and intellectualized is of course well exploited by the political right. Websites like Prager U feature amusingly simplistic graphs depicting alarming levels of masculinity falling and femininity rising along with pundits who mock liberals and leftists as people with "useless degrees" who have "never done a proper day's work in their lives." And of course there is the constantly recycled rhetoric about the "humorless, out of touch" left.

These issues raise a fundamental dilemma for leftists. How can one address these accusations by becoming more media savvy while not giving up on substance? And in particular how can one appeal to millennials and other young people while countering the growing presence of the political right in digital spaces? These questions are at the heart of Mike Watson's very interesting monograph for Zero Books *Can the Left Learn to Meme?: Adorno, Videogaming, and Stranger Things* (available here)*.* The stakes are well established by Watson from the get go, as he describes the efforts by

reactionaries like Steve Bannon to capture the "souls" of millennials in the brave new online world:

"…There exists a fight being waged for millennials' souls (and electoral votes) as their vast undirected energy, conveyed across the internet on social media, image boards and Massive Online Battle Arenas, is sought by political players such as Steve Bannon, so as to direct it to right-wing ends. Bannon's premise is that the millennial, unchastened by rules and traditions, needs harnessing and putting to work in the service of a conservative revival. What this book proposes, utilizing the best of Theodor Adorno (his unerring yet understated hope in spite of the odds) against the worst of Adorno (his uncouth cultural elitism), is an embrace of the abstraction of the new media landscape, as millennials refuse to surrender to the cynicism of the markets or of right-wing populism, by out-weirding even the world-at-large."

Drawing on the dense but fascinating theories of the Frankfurt School and other thinkers, Watson takes a serious step towards reconceiving left-aesthetics for the Twitter and 4Chan era.

Stranger Things and Left-Aesthetics

The main part of Watson's book begins with an analysis of the hit Netflix show *Stranger Things.* The main setting is the town of Hawkins in 1980s USA. The plot involves a group of pre-teens who discover that the government has been operating a secret research lab near the town, accidentally opening a gate to inter-dimensional terrors who disrupt the melodramatic normality of middle class America. Watson sees the existence and narrative of *Stranger Things* as indicating a dark truth about American culture; in its depictions of an initially idealized United States one senses a yearning for a "stable reality that remains ever elusive." These shows become popular, especially amongst Millennials, because they depict in fantastic form the loss of innocence many of us went through concerning liberal democracy and the morality of American global power. The result is a nostalgic impulse to always want to reconstruct the past since "the young have all but given up on utopia." This might seem like a pessimistic conclusion, but Watson cautions against despair, because these products of the cultural industry do depict an "imagined otherness" that the young still wish to be delivered from.

Watson then goes on to examine what role a left-aesthetics could play to energize these feelings and direct them into political action. This is obviously a very difficult task, since Watson points out that while progressive art is necessary to imagine a different future, by itself it can "dream anything but act on nothing." It also has to wrestle with two competing forces. The first are counter-democratic forces with an interested in maintaining the hegemonic status quo. And the second is democracy itself in the digital age. Left-wing aesthetics has to compete with an endless barrage of cat videos, selfies, and pornography which serve to neutralize efforts at politicization. This is one of the downsides Watson notes to the emergence of digital spaces; what Jean Baudrillard might call the "ecstasy of communication." Rather than directing their energy towards changing the world, the mass of people have become focused on managing their digital images through a rampant process of categorization, and one might add, social capitalization. But alongside these challenges, Watson points out that this emphasis on digital media can be channeled to emancipatory purposes. These efforts to match the "madness of our media world" through image creation also create the conditions for these aesthetic and creative efforts to be turned towards "creative deliverance from human-made tyranny."

Art and the Left in a Digital Era

Watson then proceeds with a series of different critical looks at the art world, contemporary pop-culture like Mad Men and Stranger Things, and gaming. These cultural products are analyzed through an Adornian lens, and are often as cynical as one might expect given that. Even high art has

lost much of its critical potential, having been swallowed within the mechanisms of capitalist production. Shows like Mad Men claim to be critical of the commodification of human life, but can only ever operate from within that system. They require massive amounts of money and time to create, indicating that such high-brow aesthetic critiques of society must depend on the unequal conditions of that society to get going. This is why Watson encourages a turn towards digital media and its democratic production, despite all the aforementioned problems.

"Given that all creativity is both controlled and abstracted at source, meaningful or truly 'free' production seems near impossible. It would appear then that the only option we have is to bastardise the mechanisms of capitalist cultural production and reception from within, over and over, knowing always that the machine is too vast, too all-encompassing to overcome entirely. As pieces of that machine, we do have a right to help reconfigure it with shocks and shudders that might reverberate and rejuvenate the audience at least temporarily….Whether or not this seems palatable, the world of high art has lost its mantle of progressiveness within visual culture to the YouTube video, the meme, social media and gaming culture. If there is a spiritual-revolutionary path for the millennial perhaps it resides here, in a cynical DIY production of culture that is inextricably tied, via appliances, to the materialist path. Some freedom resides in the myriad choices denied to our forebears."

Helpfully, Watson goes on to describe these new forms of production in digital media at length in Chapter Six before going on to discuss its political potential in Chapter Seven. He argues that there are "two ways an image can come into being without being immediately co-opted by the capitalist system." The first are that technological conditions emerge which enable individuals to produce images and aesthetic products cheaply and quickly. This helps counter-cultural and esoteric groups produce an aesthetics which doesn't need to have mass appeal. The second way an emancipated aesthetic product can come into being is a pscyho-social indifference to the demands of consumer culture. The occasionally bizarre and uninterpretable products that come from the deep internet demonstrate an intransigence towards becoming incorporated into the broader culture industry. These can range from Youtube videos about puppets dealing with existential crises to Vaporwave. But if the political possibilities of these conditions are left untapped, it is only a matter of time before mass media co-opts them and they lose their emancipatory potential.

Here Watson is at his most practical. He encourages progressives to take several steps to harness these energies and "learn to meme" as the title of his book goes. To start Watson says we must move from shaming millennials and other youth for failing to "take up" where progressives left off and instead wasting their time in digital spaces, and instead draw value and inspiration from their aesthetic efforts. He points out that the political right has historically been savvier on these fronts, with the American military investing millions to produce pro-service video games and post-modern conservatives like Steve Bannon venturing into the murky world of online gaming at one point. The almost paradoxical willingness of conservatives to venture into the realm of hyper-modern media has given them a temporary advantage in appealing to youth in digital spaces. It is also partly why the right has been moderately successful in rebranding itself as quasi-punk contrarians, despite a law and order agenda that contemporaneously seems determined to return to a nostalgic pastiche of the 1950s as quickly as possible. Prolific Youtuber and far right conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson once opined that "conservatism is the new counter-culture." While this is substantively ridiculous, the left needs to counter the cultural conditions which made such a conceit plausible to millions of reactionaries. He also encouraged progressives to look at the potential of digital media and games to bring individuals together, including for political purposes. Images of solitary and resentful young men living in their mother's basements still predominant when we think of the individuals who inhabit digital spaces and game. Instead Watson points out that many of these individuals are involved in robust and highly active communities, and will often socialize and play together on a regular basis. A left which is attentive to these groups could rally their support for progressive

causes.

Conclusion

Watson's book is impressively eclectic, bringing together a lot of different influences and topics that one wouldn't expect to see together. These range from Adorno to World of Warcraft, Jordan Peterson to Tom Huett. This didactism can be difficult to manage, but Watson's passion and conviction make it very readable throughout. Including in some of the denser passages on aesthetic theory. Beyond that it raises many provocative questions about how the left can present itself in a more aesthetically appealing manner. Especially to young people who may already associate progressivism with moralizing judgement of their way of life and style.

I think there is growing evidence that many are already taking a stab at this reorientation. YouTubers like Cuck Philosophy, Three Arrows, and Contrapoints herself have produced attractive content that draws in thousands of views per video. Intellectuals in the vein of Zizek and Watson have taken it upon themselves to litter their writings with accessible and informative pop culture analysis, bringing dense topics to life in a way Adorno et al themselves struggled with. And of course outlets like Zero (full disclosure, I have a book coming out for them on post-modern conservatism) and Repeater Books have readily adopted an aesthetic designed to appeal to millennials, including going into the trenches to knock down favored right wing pundits like Ben Shapiro. Whether this indicates we're at the opening of the kind sea change Watson desires is of course impossible to answer in advance. It will only be in hindsight that we'll see whether such efforts continue, and if they have a constructive impact. But books like *Can the Left Learn to Meme* provide a guide on how we can get to a point where leftism is hip enough to move in the most cynical digital circles and radical enough to get people off the computer and into the streets.