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The incredible story of how Jair Bolsonaro prevented a war: memetics and dialectical image

A incrível história de como Jair Bolsonaro evitou uma guerra (memética e imagem dialética)

La increíble historia de como Jair Bolsonaro evitó una guerra mundial: memética e imagen dialéctica

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Abstract

In February 2022, at the height of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, former president Jair Bolsonaro traveled to Moscow to hold official meetings. Immediately, his supporters began to speculate about a secret motivation for the trip: to avoid the conflict between the two nations. In the days that followed, a flood of memes on different platforms characterized Bolsonaro as a promoter of world peace, while others mocked such claims. The aim of this paper is to analyze this “memetic war” as representative of the power that memes have been exerting on the Brazilian (and global) political scene. Taking as theoretical tools the notion of “dialectical image” and the structural relations that memes entertain with religious experience, I propose that public discourse has been strongly conditioned by a “memetic logic” that spreads virally through the social fabric in the current conditions of cyberculture.

Keywords: War; Memes; Imaginary; Dialectical Image.

Resumo

Em fevereiro de 2022, no auge das tensões entre Rússia e Ucrânia, o ex-presidente Jair Bolsonaro viajou a Moscou para realizar encontros oficiais. De imediato, seus apoiadores começaram a especular sobre uma motivação secreta da viagem: evitar o conflito entre as duas nações. Nos dias que se seguiram, uma inundação de memes em diferentes plataformas caracterizava Bolsonaro como promotor da paz mundial, ao passo que outros ironizavam tais pretensões. O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar essa “guerra memética” como representativa do poder que os memes vêm exercendo no cenário político brasileiro (e mundial). Tomando como ferramentas teóricas a noção de imagem dialética e as relações estruturais que o meme tem com a experiência religiosa, proponho que o discurso público vem sendo fortemente condicionado por uma “lógica memética” que se espalha de forma viral pelo tecido social nas atuais condições da cultura cibernética.

Palavras-chave: Guerra; Memes; Imaginário; Imagem Dialética.

Resumen

En febrero de 2022, en el punto álgido de las tensiones entre Rusia y Ucrania, el expresidente Jair Bolsonaro viajó a Moscú para mantener reuniones oficiales. Inmediatamente, sus partidarios comenzaron a especular sobre



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una motivación secreta del viaje: evitar el conflicto entre las dos naciones. En los días siguientes, una avalancha de memes en diferentes plataformas caracterizó a Bolsonaro como promotor de la paz mundial, mientras que otros se burlaron de tales afirmaciones. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar esta «guerra memética» como representativa del poder que los memes vienen ejerciendo en la escena política brasileña (y mundial). Tomando como herramientas teóricas la noción de imagen dialéctica y las relaciones estructurales que el meme tiene con la experiencia religiosa, propongo que el discurso público ha estado fuertemente condicionado por una “lógica memética” que se propaga viralmente por el tejido social en las actuales condiciones de la cibercultura.

Palabras clave: Guerra; Memes; Imaginario; Imagen Dialéctica.

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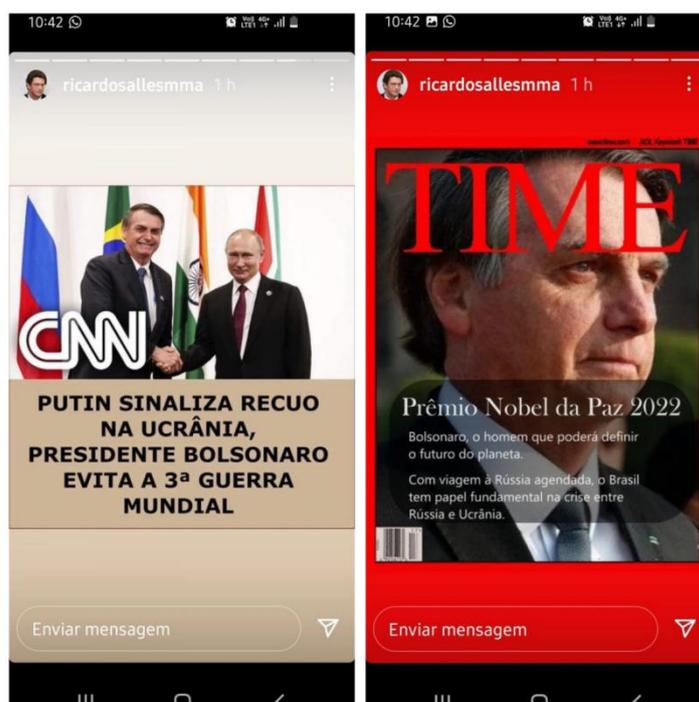


Introdução

On February 14th, 2022, at the height of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro traveled to Moscow for official meetings with Vladimir Putin. The motives for the visit were kept secret “for national security reasons,” (a fairly common practice during the Bolsonaro administration), even though it was possibly just a routine meeting to discuss trade agreements. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro supporters immediately began speculating over another secret, nobler possible motive: preventing conflict between the two nations. It was therefore a convenient coincidence that Putin announced the partial withdrawal of troops from the Ukrainian border on the exact same day Bolsonaro arrived in Russia. The environment minister at the time, Ricardo Salles, posted a gross falsification of a supposed CNN report on Instagram, attributing responsibility for halting the conflict to Bolsonaro. The text of the post said “Putin signals retreat from Ukraine, president Bolsonaro prevents World War 3.” Salles repeated the claim a few hours later with a new false report in which Bolsonaro appears as Time magazine’s “Person of the Year” (Figure 1). In the days that followed, a flood of memes appeared on different platforms presenting Bolsonaro as a messianic figure able to establish world peace.

This meme propaganda was, however, quickly counterbalanced with various ironic memes satirizing such absurd and disproportionate claims. The objective of this article is to analyze this short lived “meme war” as representative of the power that memes exert on the Brazilian (and global) political arena. More than simply a repetition of memes as a form of expressing political feelings and affects, I propose that public discourse is being strongly conditioned by a “memetic logic” that spreads in a viral way through the social fabric in the current conditions of cyberculture. Such logic is founded in imagetic vectors and nonlinear and non-rational imaginaries. As philosopher Chiara Bottici states: “the role of images in contemporary politics is such that they no longer simply mediate our doing politics, but now they risk doing politics in our stead.” (2019, p. 11). This is particularly evident in the case of memetic images (MINA, 2019; MILNER, 2016; WIGGINS, 2020). The premise of this study is that the messianic narrative about Bolsonaro represents an exemplary case of how memes work to configure a social reality in which *myth and fact, religion and politics, fiction and reality* merge, expressing a public atmosphere in which emotions and feelings substitute political rationality. It is on the basis of these specific traits that the classical Benjaminian concept of the “dialectical image” will prove to be a highly useful epistemological tool.

Figure 1 - Posts by Ricardo Salles



Source: Instagram, 2022, online



Memetic war and memetic magic

The subject “meme wars” is at the core of the work by Donovan, Dreyfus e Friedberg, who don’t hesitate in situating them at the heart of contemporary political disputes. According to them, memes are an expression of cultural war, but powered on the basis of “the infrastructure and incentives of the internet, which use revolt and extremism as bargaining chips [...] and reduce the experience of the world to an endless scroll of images and words, a swamp capable of swallowing patience, kindness, and understanding” (2022, p. 10). The most emblematic example of the power of meme war was likely during the election of Donald Trump in the United States. As Ian Parker states, more than all the previous presidential campaigns, Trump’s was entirely mediatic, with emphasis on information technologies and the use of memetic images (2019, p. 354). Indeed, an atmosphere that favored Trump’s election was primarily created through digital media, underpinned by belief in the power of “meme magic” by user communities that, with serious or parodic motives, engaged in what religions scholar Egil Asprem defined as the “American magic war” (2020).

Is it an exaggeration to speak of *meme magic*? Certainly not in the case of the United States. Independent of the concrete effects memes can have in political and social reality, there was (and still is) a widespread belief in the power of the internet to influence and transform culture, particularly on sites like 4-Chan and Reddit. In *The One True Bible of Kek*, developed under the pseudonym Saint Obamas Momjeans, meme magic is defined as a phenomenon “what happens when internet nerds (‘neckbeards’) and ‘autistic’ users combine their mana to meme a macro image into reality” (2017, n.p.). However the notion of meme magic can be secularly translated as the perception of power that images and the imagination exert on a deeply mediatized society. The capacity for semantic condensation in memes thus makes them an important communication tool in contemporary culture, if not also one of the main instruments in political disputes globally, and at such a scale they can be characterized by entire online communities as “magic.” It is important to bear in mind that creating memes in this context involves a series of complex problems concealed by their apparent simplicity. Producing memes requires not just previous knowledge of an “encyclopedia” of memes available online, but also technical and semiotic skills. Varis and Blommaert state:

The different forms of resemiotization represent different genres of communicative action, ranging from *maximally transparent* refocusing of existing memes to the creation of very different and new memes, less densely connected to existing ones. (2015, p. 40, italics mine).

In this sense, meme magic would amount to an expression of the risk we face currently that images might “do politics in our stead,” as Bottici suggested in the passage cited above. It is also in a similar vein that Tony Sampson develops a whole theory of virality based on Gabriel Tarde’s idea of “magic charm.” In his sociology of imitation, Tarde spoke of the mysterious *action at a distance* that runs through the social fabric creating waves of reproduction and sharing of affects. For Sampson, these ideas are truer than ever in the context of digital culture. As such, Tarde was “the forefather of both memetics and actor network theory” (2012, p. 37). I will return to Sampson and his ideas about meme composition later. For now, it is important to highlight the curious relationship between the notion of magic (like action at a distance), the imagination, and certain *religious* vectors of meme discourse.

The story of Bolsonaro and his trip to Russia offers us a curious case in which *a real war overlaps with an imaginary one*. If there is nothing transparent about the “real” war, its narrative reconstruction in meme disputes is even less clear. In this narrative construction, it is important to note the religious dimension of the role performed by Bolsonaro, whether in ironic posts or those made in absolute seriousness. When it comes to memes, it is actually often difficult to say what discursive register is intended. In truth, the intentions are secondary in the relation to how the memetic message is ultimately read by different audiences. It is interpretive communities that regulate the uses and meanings of memes in digital environments, managing their opacity and promoting their correct “exegesis.” One of the popular memes shared across social media at the time, for example, was an image of Bolsonaro with Jesus behind embracing him and saying “Go and stop the war, Jair” (Figure 2). Bolsonaro’s image had in fact been associated with the figure of Christ since well before his election. The convenient coincidence of Bolsonaro’s middle name *Messias* and the support of his candidacy by large parts of the Evangelical and Catholic electorate made him a kind of walking religious myth.

Figure 2 - Christ and Bolsonaro meme

Source: X (formerly Twitter), 2022, online

The meme of the divine mission given to Bolsonaro therefore repeats the framework of a previous image circulated on social media shortly before his election. In that image the ex-president signed the inauguration document with Jesus guiding his hand (Figure 3).

As such, we have an example of a fundamental meme characteristic as a “piece of online media that is shared and remixed over time within a community.” (MINA, 2019, p. 6). It’s important to note that the montages’ low quality doesn’t constitute a defect, but shows the “authenticity” and “spontaneity” of memetic images (anyone can make them with their own resources). Were these memes created to reinforce the religious representation of Bolsonaro or to satirize it? The question is meaningless since the fundamental point here is how the meme is understood among different interpretive communities in a game where ideas about transparency and opacity serve particular political agendas. Ricardo Salles himself, as well as various other right wing online commentators, criticized the press for not noticing that their claims about Bolsonaro’s role in the war were just a joke. “People really don’t have a sense of humor. Everyone is very confrontational. There’s no place for this,” stated the former minister¹. Nevertheless, a lot of people actually did “read” the images as factual truths, converting the joke into a fact of reality. Salles had very possibly foreseen and probably sought this effect. Such a strategy could be translated as the Portuguese expression “*se colar, colou*”, or “if it sticks, it sticks.”

The humorous aspect of a meme doesn’t diminish its possibility of containing truth; on the contrary, it amplifies it since humor is often qualified as a tool for revealing (opaque) realities that couldn’t be easily shown by other means. An official post by the Liberal Party (PL) on February 15th, 2022, involved text where the humorous aspect – if in fact it was there – was even less evident: “Bolsonaro has arrived on Russian soil. Putin has started to withdraw troops from the Ukraine border. For me, this is no coincidence!”² This “for me” operates as an empty indexing mechanism which certain interpretative audiences of the meme can identify with. In effect, a lot of Bolsonaro supporters did not see only one coincidence in such events. Two days later, a Bolsonaro supporter published a post claiming that Bolsonaro had met with Boris Johnson to seek an immediate ceasefire in the region:

¹ <<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/painel/2022/02/post-sobre-bolsonaro-impedir-guerra-era-uma-brincadeira-afirma-ricardo-salles.shtml>> Acesso em 8 fev 2024. Original Portuguese: “As pessoas estão muito sem senso de humor. Está todo mundo muito aguerrido. Não tem cabimento isso”.

² Original Portuguese: “Bolsonaro já está em solo russo. Putin começa retirada de tropas da fronteira da Ucrânia. Para mim não é coincidência!”

Figure 3 - Bolsonaro's divine mission

Source: X (formerly Twitter), 2020, online

“If the mainstream media reported... the truth that the world’s top leaders are currently united for peace [sic] to prevent the third world war already underway.”³ Likewise, Liberal Party congresswoman Carla Zambelli posted associating Bolsonaro landing in Russia with the truce: “They tried to invent a problem where there was none. It didn’t work. ‘Let them cry’. Under Bolsonaro, Brazil has the respect of the world’s major powers”⁴.

On the same day that Ricardo Salles, Carla Zambelli and the Liberal Party posted on the subject (February 15th), the hashtag #BolsonaroEvitouAGuerra (#BolsonaroPreventedTheWar) became the most commented topic on Twitter (now X) in Brazil with more than 12,000 tweets and retweets⁵.

Memes as dialectical images

Tony Sampson suggests that viral phenomena do not exclude the possibility of a paradoxical coexistence between conflict and cooperation. The same meme can then produce radically different affects and feelings, much like the original intentions behind a meme can be easily co-opted by opposing ideological camps. Virality in digital culture occurs by way of an extremely complex process in which

identical reproduction in another assemblage is never guaranteed. Oppositional collisions – unforeseen events and accidents of social density – introduce nonlinear instabilities, interference, error, and aperiodic noise in processes of imitative contact. *These microrelations take control of the whole* – the most deterritorialized aspects of the assemblage take control of the most territorialized strata (2012, p. 46).

Sampson looks to create distance from traditional meme concepts that interpret memes as *something* specific from an *eminently representational perspective*. Instead he suggests starting from the question of *what spreads* to reach the disembodied dimension of meetings. In other words, we need to abandon *essentialist* ontologies in favor of *relational* ontologies. As a form of *affective priming*, memes manifest as a (contagious) relation spread “from person to person via the multisensory affective social atmospheres” (2012, p. 86).

A convergent view can be found in an interesting article by Javier Toscano, coincidentally on the subject of memes created about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Starting from the principle that throughout history wars have turned into political loci through the radical image production, Toscano defines memes in the ultimate instance as *relational artifacts*. He writes:

³ Original Portuguese: “Se a grande mídia anunciou...é verdade que os top líderes de Paz no momento Unidos [sic] para evitar a terceira guerra mundial em curso”.

⁴ <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CaAYpjdAdTC/>> Acesso em 8 fev 2024. Original Portuguese: “Tentaram achar pelo em ovo. Não deu certo. ‘O choro é livre’, com Bolsonaro, o Brasil tem o respeito das maiores nações do mundo”.

⁵ <<https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2022/02/15/bolsonaro-evita-guerra-e-lula-desiste-de-eleicao-entenda-as-fake-news-do-dia-nas-redes-sociais>> Accessed February 9th, 2024.

[Memes rely] on a visual structure and an interactional, dynamic context; therefore, it lacks a specific autonomy, but becomes a context-dependent indexical feature that reflects the nature of the internet's open-ended and multi-sited communication networks. (2023, p. 82).

His method of analysis appropriates Benjamin's notion of the *dialectical image* to combine it with Goffman's propositions on the organization of visual patterns as key for investigating social structures and Bakhtin's approach of seeing subjectivity as a product of aesthetic relationships. The dialectical image is particularly interesting in this context as it debunks the supposed objectivity and transparency of images and contrasts it with other possible realities (other temporalities, contexts, references, etc). Furthermore, dialectical images engender a subjectivity that can be defined as a *sensibility* consisting of "nodes of iterations and drives that cohere as free-floating points of view in which different subjects project their intuitions, emotions and political stances" (TOSCANO, 2023, p. 96). Ultimately, this means that the problem of meme origin or authorship (much like many other digital culture phenomena) becomes irrelevant, problematizing the very notion of agency. This is precisely what Sampson also suggests when he talks of Tarde's "imitative rays," defining the contagion phenomenon as self-replicating, "automatic and involuntary," producing a hypnotic action at a distance, "with no discernable medium of contact." (2012, p. 57). As such, the meme is revealed as a crystallization of affective energies in which logical linearity is substituted by the singular logic of images and the imagination. In the meme shared by the profile Ancap.su, Bolsonaro is characterized as one of the greatest pacifists in the world, alongside figures like Gandhi, Mother Theresa and the Buddha (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - Bolsonaro pacifist meme



Source: X (formerly Twitter), 2022, online. Text: "By stopping the war between Russia and Ukraine, Jair Messias Bolsonaro puts himself within the ranks of the greatest pacifists in history alongside Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Buddha, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, John Lennon and Yoko Ono".

The logical incoherence of comparing a notorious defender of arms and military dictatorship to pacifists like Gandhi and Mandela is of little importance here. The same person that supported "shooting the Workers Party"⁶ in 2018 can easily be placed in company with the Dalai Lama, always accompanied by the unfailing image of Christ as a guide in his soteriological mission. The sunrise, contemplative pose, the small symbol of a white dove occupy an incoherent semiotic space, in which the inclusion of Yoko Ono is unclear,

⁶ <<https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/radar/em-2018-bolsonaro-defendeu-fuzilar-a-petralhada>> Accessed February 9th, 2024.

except maybe as the partner of John Lennon, who wrote the classic pacifist song *Imagine* (1971). The curious constellation of names alongside an image with a kitsch aesthetic recalling popular portraits of Jesus often found in Brazilian family homes expresses an affective atmosphere composed of “accidents and unforeseen events of social density”; a kind of assemblage of nonlinear instabilities in which there are “*microrelations that take control of the whole*” (SAMPSON, 2012, p. 46, author’s emphasis).

Javier Toscano wasn’t the first author to seek understanding of memes through Benjamin and his dialectical image theories. In 2018, Dutch activist Geert Lovink and University of Amsterdam researcher Marc Tuters published a thought-provoking essay online diagnosing the difficulties progressive thought has in dealing with digital communication forms. While the extreme right has discovered that “memes express tensions that can’t be spoken in the political correct vocabulary of the mainstream media” (2018a, p. 3)⁷, the left appears to still be crawling in the field of digital activism. The authors noticed that the biggest political challenge in contemporaneity consists of “creating alternative imaginaries that can overcome —and overrule—the cynical and often reactionary logic that tends to dominate internet meme production” (2018a, p. 4). For Lovink and Tuters, what makes Benjamin still relevant in the contemporary context is how his thinking anticipated the interactive dimension of current media, in which the audience is called on to use their imagination as a synthesis tool to organize the paradoxes and ambiguities of digital logic. The role of memes in this context is possibly that of a kind of “vernacular cultural compression technique” as a means of codifying and decodifying the “operative dynamics of dominant hegemony” (2018a, p. 14). Traditional Marxist theories are therefore inadequate for confronting the contemporary situation. After all, “memes activate and address powerful psychological tensions, mobilizing desires and resentments that such vulgar Marxist preoccupations with the economic base are powerless to address.” (2018^a, p. 15). The apparent victory of the extreme right in the so-called “Great Meme War”⁸ shows how Gramsci’s thinking, with its concept of cultural hegemony, is more strategically useful than the Frankfurt School’s ideas about the media⁹. However, it is in Walter Benjamin, a unique associate of the Frankfurt School, that we can find important theoretical tools to build a “new visual epistemology, comparable to cinematic montage” (2018b, p. 1).

The dialectical image functions as a kind of montage in which constitutive elements are not necessarily reconciled. Historical objects of different periods are combined without the demand for coherence. Something similar happens in the domains of dreams and the imagination, and, not coincidentally, myths, dreams and awakening are part of Benjamin’s conceptual repertoire. In the landscape of capitalism, inhabited by myriad images of dreams and ghostly desires, the materialist historian’s great task (*Aufgabe*) is therefore “dream interpretation” (*Traumdeutung*) (BENJAMIN, 1991a, p. 580). Interpreting dreams is an attempt to address something of intrinsic opacity. Much like dream images can operate to convert utopian or revolutionary ideas into commodities, they can also have a liberating potential when combined with the *new*. Is not Benjamin’s very style of writing and thinking, expressed in full force in the *Arcades Project* (“I have nothing to say, only to show.”¹⁰), as well as his repeated use of images, a kind of great *avant la lettre* memetics?

Lovink and Tuters take Benjamin’s curious mixture of theology, politics, and image theory to argue for the contemporary relevance of the notion of *awakening*. In the German thinker’s theoretical vocabulary, the idea of awakening represents the moment in which the collective acquires consciousness of its historical condition, making it capable of reformulating its reality. For Lovink and Tuters, memes contain that which they define as a certain “ironic reason” which allows its audience to purport belief. As previously stated, whether such belief is actually serious remains irrelevant and interdeterminable. “Nevertheless,” the authors suggest, “ironic reason seems to create a new opening to notions of awakening” (2018b, p. 4). It is no coincidence that contemporaneity appears to be obsessed with this form across the entire political spectrum, from the progressive idea of *woke* to the appropriation of the “red pill” as a symbol of abandoning the Liberal-Democratic dream in reactionary discourses. Lovink and Tuters adopt the position in which “memes are a medium for a secularized form of esoteric-cum-revolutionary awakening” (2018b, p. 5).

⁷ The article was published in two parts with the titles “They say we can’t meme: politics of idea compression” e “Rude awakening: memes as dialectical images” respectively in <<https://non.copyriot.com/they-say-we-cant-meme-politics-of-idea-compression/>> and <<https://non.copyriot.com/rude-awakening-memes-as-dialectical-images/>>. I have used the date, 2018, followed by letters a and b to signal the first and second parts of the article. Accessed February 10, 2024

⁸ “The Great Meme War” is an expression coined to define to online memetic battle fought during the US elections in which Trump was elected president in 2026, as previously mentioned in the article. For an interesting overview of the phenomenon see DAFAURE (2020).

⁹ In Brazil, Olavo de Carvalho was maybe the first icon of the new right to perceive the importance of Gramsci’s ideas, criticizing them within the scope of that which was defined as “cultural marxism” while at the same time discreetly employing in his own communication strategies.

¹⁰ “Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen” (Benjamin, 1991a, p. 574).



As strange as it may seem, this definition perfectly fits with the phenomenon Egil Asprem describes as the *magic meme war* surrounding Donald Trump's bid for the US presidency in 2016. A significant proportion of Trump supporters online had come to believe in its ability to meme the president into office (DONOVAN, DREYFUS & FRIEDBERG, 2022, p. 4). For Asprem, the online conflict that unfolded in the pre-electoral period expressed the far right's appropriation of the Gramscian notion of hegemony, configuring a kind of 'metapolitical' activity. The creation of the Kek cult, a form of online religion that was somewhere between serious and satirical in its taking of a cartoon character (Pepe the frog by cartoonist Matt Furie) as a constellating symbol of reactionary and supremacist desires, represented the paroxysm of this curious movement. In this context, however, "while meme magic may have its veneer of supernaturalism, the bare-knuckle tactics are textbook information warfare" (ASPREM, 2020, p. 27). That is to say, it is precisely a secularized form of *esoteric-cum-revolutionary awakening*, in the words of Lovink and Tuters cited above. It is in this sense that the bonds developed online, as in religious experiences, according to Durkheim's perspective, constitute *affective and not cognitive associations* that motivate people to action through determined symbols and images (ibid., p. 36).

In the case that constitutes the central object of this article, we have already seen how the religious dimension forms a fundamental part of constructing the meme message. Bolsonaro managed to prevent the war (surprisingly before he even landed in Moscow) thanks to him being invested with divine spiritual forces. In the memes that mock Bolsonaro supporters' expectations, the religious dimension is inverted, turning the ex-president into a kind of cursed entity who ought to remain quiet precisely so he doesn't end up unleashing a third world war. In one of the memes, the grim image of a skeleton with Christ's crown of thorns seems to get drunk in a bar with the phrase above saying "God, I hope Bolsonaro keeps quiet." A series of memes appear with the hashtags "BolsonoroStayQuiet" and "WorldWar3." Here the message is precisely the opposite of the previous view: Bolsonaro does not have the divine power to bring peace, on the contrary he has the demonic ability to start a war (from an obviously satirical perspective).

Another strategy for responding to memes supporting Bolsonaro relies on radical irony, which pretends to take the absurd as reality, but amplifies it to the extreme in order to then disqualify it as laughable delusion. The meme with text affirming Bolsonaro's entry into Russian airspace producing an "aura of peace" over the country leading Putin to withdraw troops from the border can be read in this way. However, it is essential to note that the connection between memetic and religious experience is much less of a content nature than a structural one. If memes often fit with the expression of religious or mystical affects, it's because their structure, much like that of capitalism in the view of Benjamin and Agamben¹¹ at least, present various analogies with religious experience; for example, memes' mysterious origins, the immediacy of their message, the magical condensation of a multiplicity of meanings, the symbolic and/or allegorical character etc... Such elements, among others, allow memes to be characterized as dialectical images which produce a perceptive shock expressing combinations of various types of affective energy, temporalities, and fragments of cultural objects. Bolsonaro seems to be a particularly memeable figure in this regard, since the connection to religious themes makes up a fundamental part of his image building strategy (DEMURU, 2021, p. 273). Furthermore, Bolsonaro presents himself as a kind of "living meme," since his political image is built based on soundbites that are generally short and impactful, ironic, ridiculous and/or exaggerated. His performances of simplicity and authenticity, like the video of the president eating barbequed meat skewers from street vendors, seem constructed to appear in memes, while at the same time aiming to convey the idea of transparency of character which the "common" man can identify with. Likewise, Bolsonaro's mysticism, Paolo Demur states, "spreads by contagion [...] relying on the sensory engagement of the communication process" e "capturing not only the cognitive attention of the observers, but also their feelings and moods" (2020, p. 34) – exactly like memes.

Conclusion: can the left learn to meme?

According to research by the FGV School of Communication, Media and Information in August 2022, the volume of posts on X (formerly Twitter) from January to June that year indicate a consistent predominance of pro-government expressions, peaking around February 16th (during Bolsonaro's trip to Russia): 173,288 favorable mentions versus 122,247 negative ones (RUEDIGER & GRASSI, 2022, p. 10). The higher volume of pro-government engagement and the research findings indicating the "negligible presence in the debate on the war" from the "Brazilian institutional left" (ibid., p. 6) seem to confirm the widespread impression of the conservative camp's superiority in terms of online presence and activity. The research further points to the

¹¹ Benjamin (1991b, pps. 100-104); Agamben (2016).



dangerous process of delegitimizing traditional journalistic sources of information in favor of alternative sources that use conspiracy theories and hate speech, which possibly contribute to a weakening of democratic values.

These data could constitute another instance that various authors have defined as a breakdown of imaginative capacity on the left. As Stephen Duncombe suggests, dreams, fantasies and spectacles frighten progressives – who still believe in enlightened rationality –, given the frequent association with fascism. The problem is that conservatives have actually appropriated the imaginative field so entirely it leads Alejandro Galliano to the fundamental question: “why can capitalism dream and we can’t?” (2020). In this sense, progressives “should have learned to build a politics that embraces the dreams of people and fashions spectacles which give these fantasies form” (DUNCOMBE, 2007, p. 9). This obviously implies the capacity to produce memes and foster “alternative imaginaries,” as suggested by Lovink and Tuters. Thomas Hobson and Kaajal Modi echo this proposal when confronting memes as a social *locus* of *building imaginaries* (2019, p. 334). A radical engagement is now necessary, based on a view of interactive media as production sites of the world and meaning, with the imperative to “harness the emancipatory power of these new media formats.” (ibid., p. 347). Therefore maybe one of the great questions posed for progressive thinking can be found in the title of Mike Watson’s recent book: “can the left learn how to meme?” (2018).

It’s important to highlight that the viral and parasitic nature of informational capitalism places “contagion” and “memetic processes” at the “at the center of a media society of knowledge” (PARIKKA, 2007, p. 293). As such, when discussing memes we need to keep in mind not just particular situations (like the meme war surrounding political feelings about a real war), but the general framework of a society permeated by what can be defined as *meme logic*. If “such contagious objects as viruses and memes illustrate how metastability is not a system anomaly but something that can be considered a composite part of network culture” (PARIKKA, 2007, p. 295), it is necessary to carry out an “ecosophic” mapping of the potential spaces and affects of contemporary capitalism, taking into account the *meta-stable instability* of digital systems and their capacity not only to repeat the old, but also create the new. For this reason, Parikka also calls on Benjamin (ibid., p. 308), with his analyses of the mundane universe of technological objects, as a key thinker whose speculation should be updated for the digital communication context of instabilities, contradictions and nonlinear structures. Understanding the complex relationship between transparency and opacity in digital image dynamics requires critical hermeneutical operations as well as special attention to the *material dimensions* of images and their technological supports. Furthermore, transporting an author like Benjamin from the past into the hypertechnological present with a view to illuminating the contemporary situation also means producing a temporal short-circuit that, who knows, may help awaken us to the dreams of control and conformity that inhabit the digital world when put in service thinking about the identical and conservation.

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