WAITING FOR DAT BOI: AN ABSURDIST DEFENSE OF INTERNET HUMOR

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While the generation gap is nothing new, it has been sharpened by the disparity in technological literacy and the development of an internet culture that often excludes older generations, especially "boomers." In reaction, this gap often manifests in accusing Gen Z of blindness to the real world or dismissing them altogether. In an effort to bridge that divide, this paper describes and analyzes "internet humor" using the framework of a post–World War II phenomenon, the Theatre of the Absurd, and treats that phenomenon's response to the postwar landscape as an analogue to the current landscape. This paper contends that internet memes are an artistic reaction to the chaotic, doomsaying world that Gen Z is growing up in. It establishes a schema in which those struggling to connect with young people could unlock the secret to understanding how Gen Z looks at, laughs at, and participates in the world around them.

Over the past decade or so, an abundance of literature has flourished on the topic of millennials: which industries they are responsible for killing, what they think about certain political issues, and opinions of every kind on their characteristics as a demographic. Now a new generation is about to get the brunt of social analysis, statistics, and op-eds trying to explain why they are the way they are. Meet Generation Z: the current high schoolers and young adults born after 1997. These are the kids for whom the internet and social media have always been present, and who have developed an online culture that frankly baffles older generations. As a result, they are often branded as ignorant or indifferent to the real world by those outside that culture. However, to dismiss them this way is to discard a valuable opportunity to understand what makes them tick. A framework in which to do this can be found in a theatrical phenomenon from the era of the G.I. Generation: the Theatre of the Absurd.

It might be called Gen Z humor or "internet humor": the weird collective sense of humor belonging to the generation that grew up on the internet. It does not pervade the entire vastness of the internet, of course, but is exemplified on websites like Tumblr and Twitter, the spawning ground of memes: places where younger people gather and interact. Internet humor is difficult to define, and it seems not to have been academically codified yet since it is so new. In general, though, its identifiers tend to be that it is often dark, intentionally confusing, and almost indecipherable to older generations. Much of it seems like nonsense, but creating art that challenges its audience by disorienting them is nothing new. Internet humor's closest extant cousin in the visual art world might be Dadaism, the movement arising after World War I

that emphatically rejected logic, reason, and hierarchy, and was made to draw a reaction from its audience (Gaudin). After the next world war, the performing arts world responded with its own genre-defying school that reveled in its lack of structure: the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd was born out of the existentialist philosophy of the 1940s, which sprang from the tensions of living in the post-WWII era (Culíí). Stable-seeming institutional frameworks, such as the church and the state, failed to protect people from the chaos of the war, leaving the survivors with a world that did not make sense. Furthermore, the horrors of wartime and the Holocaust, plus the added threat of nuclear annihilation, brought to the forefront the idea that human life was fragile, easily destroyed, and possibly arbitrary (Culíí). Existentialist Albert Camus, writing in 1942, outlined his viewpoint in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," in which he compared the human condition to the pointless eternal task of pushing a boulder up a hill and having it roll back down every time ("Absurd Existences" 216). Without intending to create anything like a "movement," but all operating out of the same recently decimated world, a number of individual playwrights over the next couple of decades began to express this philosophy in their works. Critic Martin Esslin, in his 1962 article "The Theatre of the Absurd," took the term "absurd" from Camus and used it to try to codify what was happening in this new theatre-that-was-not-theatre.

Absurdist plays illustrate the meaningless chaos of human life by depicting characters engaged in some kind of profoundly pointless exercise, whether that is waiting for a person who will never arrive (*Waiting for Godot*), or continually setting up and pretending an elaborate murder (*The Maids*). The

play is carefully set up not to make sense: time, setting, character, and other such elements, which in conventional theatre might be fixed and followable, are either variable or completely unstated (Esslin 3). For this reason, the Theatre of the Absurd is sometimes called "anti-theatre" (Culíí). In Harold Pinter's *Endgame*, Hamm asks what time it is and Clov replies "Same as usual." Setting, if there is any at all, is so vague and ill-defined as to be essentially meaningless: *Waiting for Godot* is famously staged near a country road with one tree. Characters may have defined traits or relationships, but even those are not reliable: the Martins of *The Bald Soprano* appear to be perfect strangers, but discover through comparing their lives that they are in fact a married couple. Language, too, is meaningless. Much of the dialogue lives in repetition & distortion – Esslin calls it "the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases" (5).

The conventions of internet humor, while still elusive to anyone who has not grown up within them, display parallels to the conventions of absurdist theatre. The most ubiquitous unit of internet humor – the meme – relies on repetition and distortion, which are the linguistic habits of the Theatre of the Absurd. Time and place are not only undefined; they do not matter in the slightest in a meme. Characters may appear very specific, but in general it does not matter who they are¬– only the expression on their face is significant. For example, even if the meme is a picture of SpongeBob, it is not important to the joke that the character is SpongeBob; what matters is the feeling he appears to convey, which can then be captioned with whatever relatable situation or topical quip the meme-maker desires. The content is mostly referential to existing ideas and cultural concepts, but quickly becomes so warped, inverted, and cross-pollinated

with other memes that to all but the most plugged-in viewer, it is virtually meaningless. One example is the meme in figure 1:
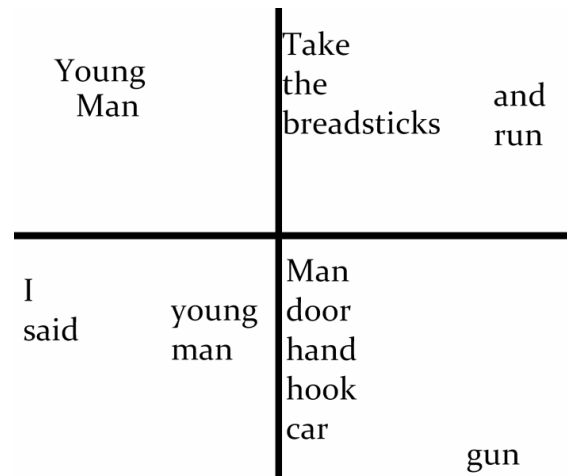

Figure 1. "Memeception." @plaid-n-converse, *Tumblr,* 3 Aug. 2016, http://plaid-n-converse.tumblr. com/image/148396874485

This image references four previous memes. One is parodying the lyrics to "YMCA," one is the "(shoving breadsticks into my purse)" meme, one is an attempted creepy internet story that gradually devolved in coherence and ended in the words "Man door hand hook car door," and the format is a reference to a cartoon called "Loss" that became a meme. It appears clever to someone who knows all the references being made. To anyone unfamiliar with the layers of meaning embedded in this image – anyone who lives outside the culture of Gen Z's internet – it appears to be complete nonsense.

Crucially, this intricate senselessness is what Generation Z loves. They revel in this "giant emptiness of meaning," a "giant race to the bottom of irony" (Bruenig). They think it is absolutely hilarious. The more inexplicable it is to the out-group (i.e. older generations), the better. Madeleine

Gaudin, managing arts editor of the Michigan Daily, aptly notes that "Memes are better when they reference other memes. Jokes are smarter when they reference other jokes." A step further in, internet humor that exists outside the confines of a meme structure can be even weirder. Often, even to its target
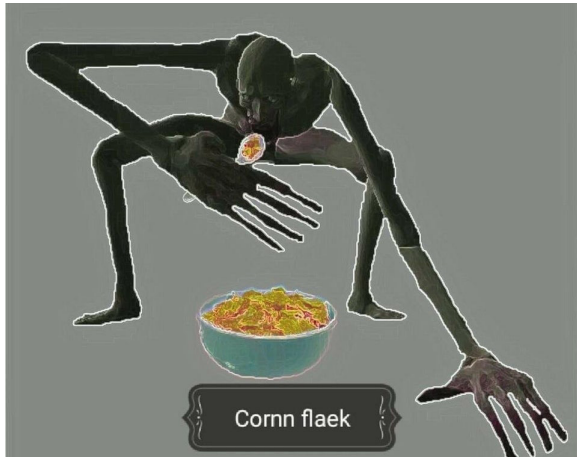

Figure 2. "Cornn flaek." *Reddit*, 3 Jul. 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/dankmemes/comments/8vy13u/cornn_flaek/

audience, it is not supposed to make sense.

In fig. 2, unlike the previous meme, there is no deeper layer or hidden reference out of which someone could make some meaning. It may be alarming, discomfiting, and/or hilarious, but not sensical. It is emphatically not supposed to make sense. It is supposed to make the viewer feel something, and not necessarily something they want to feel. The same idea is evident in the culture of Tumblr text posts, which are, again, hard to categorize in a scholarly manner, but can be summarized by this Tumblr post:

"one of the weirdest ways that language is evolving in response to the internet is that "bad words" just

do not have the same impact anymore. i constantly forget that some people think '[f***] you' is a terrible insult so threats and insults have to start getting really out there if the person wants to even mean anything. if a person told me to die i'd shrug it off but if i opened a post's tags and saw "op i will sneak into your house and replace all your shoelaces with cooked pasta" do you know how shaken i'd be? do you know how upset i'd be if i saw "op is the personification of the look you share w other people in the grocery store when some dude is causing A Scene™ for no reason." (@feywildwest)

This phenomenon of crafting content to disarm and unsettle the viewer aligns exactly with the effect of absurdist plays on their audiences. People like to know when and where they are, and absurdist plays remorselessly rob them of their bearings, leaving them uncomfortable at best and angry at worst. Bereft of all logical indicators and faced with a situation that

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does not – in fact, cannot – make sense, the average viewer of an absurdist play is left bewildered, struggling for meaning, and deeply, existentially uneasy. The difference with Gen Z is that they find that effect funny. Even when they are the ones being directly unsettled, they are ready to laugh about it, even if they cannot explain exactly why. A modern audience of teenagers watching *Waiting for Godot* would probably be in stitches watching the tramps try to reckon with

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the nonsense around them. It would be like experiencing one giant, extended meme: funny, baffling, and intensely relatable.

Why *do* they match up so well? What is it about living as a member of Generation Z that makes them *like that*? Absurdism centers on the Sisyphean exercise: continuing to try and achieve a task that has no meaning. The next generation up, millennials, live under what Buzzfeed culture writer Anne Helen Petersen calls "millennial burnout": working incessantly harder to make it in a job market, housing market, etc. that is set up for them not to. Gen Z is in a similar, if not worse, situation. Nothing is promised to Gen Z except uncertainty and the threat of disaster, sensations that were endemic to the postwar landscape in which the Theatre of the Absurd flourished. Not only are they looking forward to crushing student debt, if they don't die in a school shooting, but they will only have a couple of years to enjoy it before irreversible climate change wipes out the world as they know it. And they have always known this. They grew up on the internet. Since they were born, every part of the world has known

all the terrible things happening in every other part. Millennials were promised an easy future if they worked hard, only to discover it had all been empty (Petersen). Gen Z has no such illusions.

Even in the face of this uncertainty and disaster, they are neither lazy nor apathetic, but politically and socially active. Recent years have seen a swell in student activism comparable to the 1960s, around issues from gun violence to environmental justice (Jason). Young people like Greta Thunberg, the Parkland students behind #NeverAgain, Mari Copeny ("Little Miss Flint"), and others have become the face of current issues like climate change and gun control. Gen Z knows the world is ridiculous and meaningless, but they are determined to try and make it better anyway. They are absurdists to their core. They see their Sisyphean situation for what it is, and just as Camus advocates, joyfully continue pushing their boulders uphill. The nihilist despairs at how terrible, complicated, and fragile the world is; the existentialist notes the unknowability of its meaning and strives to create meaning anyway; the absurdist laughs at how pointless it all is, makes a
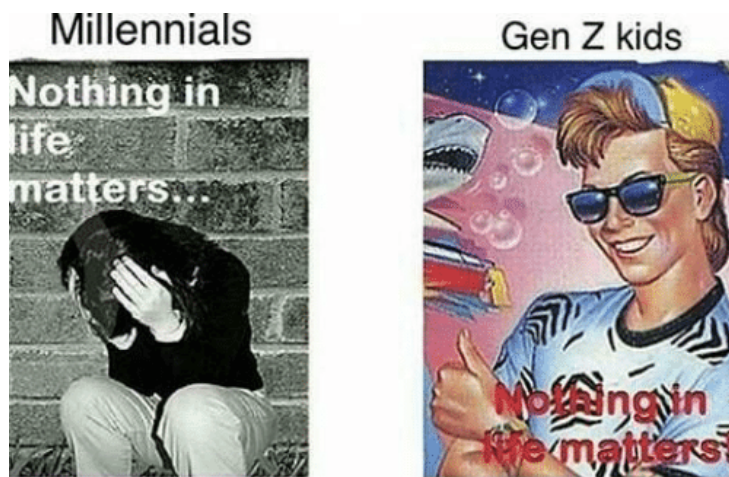

Figure 3. "Gen Z Kids." @iskinaary, *Tumblr*, 23 Jun. 2017, http://iskinaary.tumblr.com/post/162180467010/gen-z-kids-dont-give-a-single-fuck-and-theyre

meme out of it, and keeps on pushing. There may be no inherent meaning to life, but that realization also means they are free, "and this release expresses itself in laughter" (Esslin 13). The unique outlook of this generation, as compared to millennials, might be best expressed in the meme pictured in figure 3.

All things considered, it seems as though the artistic ideals (or lack thereof) of the Theatre of the Absurd might be exactly the framework with which to understand Generation Z. The conventions of absurdist theatre are familiar principles to young people raised in the culture of the internet, and they are able to find hilarity in the bizarre and unsettling world of that theatre. They recognize the comic figure of the Absurd because they see it in themselves. Their gloriously indecipherable memes can be understood as a product of the doom-laden uncertainty of the world they are growing up in, a philosophical embrace of the senseless chaos they have been given. Viewing internet humor as an artistic movement in reaction to this world will not only allow older generations a glimpse into the minds of their successors, but it should also draw admiration to the youngest generation. Gen Z are absurdist heroes, triumphing over meaninglessness by refusing to let it crush them. Anyone wishing to understand or relate to the kids these days has only to look through the absurdity to the heart of meme culture.

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