The meme's iceberg: Post-irony, neo-decadentism and archetypal imagination

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Abstract

This essay offers a symbolic and imaginal analysis of digital memes through the meme/metaphor of the iceberg. Structured in five layers of depth—from communicative use to archetypal expression—it argues that memes operate as condensers of affects, language, and cultural complexes. Drawing connections between post-ironic aesthetics, neodecadent sensibility, and the collective unconscious, the text proposes that memes are not mere vehicles of humor, but symbolic devices that reactivate narratives, traumas, and contemporary myths. As rhizomatic images, they stage psychic ambiguities and paradoxes, functioning as liminal figures between the collective and the singular, the banal and the sacred, laughter and grief. Memes thus emerge as performative artifacts of our cultural sensibility. ∎

Keywords: meme, post-irony, cultural complex, symbol, neodecadentism..

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O iceberg *do meme: Pós-ironia, neodecadentismo e imaginação arquetípica*

Resumo

Este ensaio propõe uma análise simbólica e imaginal dos memes digitais a partir do meme/metáfora do *iceberg*. Organizado em cinco níveis de profundidade — do uso comunicacional à expressão arquetípica —, o texto argumenta que o meme atua como condensador de afetos, linguagem e complexos culturais. Explorando-se o vínculo entre estética pós-irônica, neodecadentismo e inconsciente coletivo, defende-se que o meme não é apenas uma forma de humor, mas um dispositivo simbólico que atualiza narrativas, zonas traumáticas e mitos contemporâneos. Enquanto imagem-rizoma, ele encena ambiguidades e paradoxos psíquicos, funcionando como figura liminar entre o coletivo e o singular, o banal e o sagrado, o riso e a dor. O meme emerge, assim, como artefato performativo da sensibilidade cultural de nosso tempo. ▪

Palavras-chave: meme, pós-ironia, complexo cultural, símbolo, neodecadentismo..

El iceberg del meme: Postironía, neodecadentismo y imaginación arquetípica

Resumen

Este ensayo propone un análisis simbólico e imaginal de los memes digitales a partir de la metáfora/meme del iceberg. Estructurado en cinco niveles de profundidad — desde el uso comunicativo hasta la expresión arquetípica —, sostiene que los memes actúan como condensadores de afectos, lenguaje y complejos culturales. Al vincular la estética positrónica, la sensibilidad neodecadente y el inconsciente colectivo, se argumenta que el meme no es solo un vehículo humorístico, sino un dispositivo simbólico que reactiva narrativas, traumas y mitos contemporáneos. Como imágenes rizomáticas, escenifican ambigüedades y paradojas psíquicas, funcionando como figuras liminares entre lo colectivo y lo singular, lo banal y lo sagrado, la risa y el duelo. Así, el meme emerge como artefacto performativo de la sensibilidad cultural de nuestro tiempo. ▪

Palabras claves: meme, postironía, complejo cultural, símbolo, neodecadentismo.

The iceberg meme

Imagine that the meme is like the iceberg that sank the Titanic: on the surface, it looks like just a silly joke, a dancing kitten, or a minion from *Despicable Me* wishing "Good morning"; underneath, it hides tons of meaning, affection, collective traumas, cultural complexes, delusions, symbolism, and a certain weariness of existence that expresses itself in laughter. Perhaps that's why studying the meme is, at the same time, an exercise in cultural anthropology and an investigation into the contemporary psyche itself: those who pretend to be on top of the meme forget that gossip, rumors, and ironic commentary are elementary forms of belonging.

Not understanding a meme today is tantamount to not understanding the secret language of an era: the allegories, marginalia, and moral emblems of the Middle Ages, the pamphleteering political rhetoric of the 18th century, the political caricature of the 19th century, hundreds of years of lectures in literary salons, the slang of cabarets and revues, Dadaist

slogans. Today, the meme is the currency of the attention economy, the language of digital micro-communities, the mirror through which culture combs itself. The fact that a single image can generate simultaneous reactions of "LOL," "yikes," "LMAO," "WTF," is reason enough to treat it with the seriousness of a psychologist and the humor of a chronically online user.

This essay proposes precisely this metalinguistic dive: focusing not on the iceberg meme, but on the meme's iceberg; descending this cultural iceberg step by step, from instant communication to the symbolic and almost mythical dimension of the meme. The goal is to demonstrate that the meme, beyond an internet product, is a total cultural phenomenon—that is, it functions as a collective psychological device, an aesthetic expression, and a vehicle for imaginative forms that transcend individuals. To this end, the analysis is organized into five levels, each deeper than the last. First, we will explore the surface, where the meme acts as an immediate, rapid, and viral language. Next, we will address its biopsychosocial functions: psychic defense, affective regulation, a mark of belonging, and a post-ironic atmosphere. The third level examines the meme as a contemporary symbolic image, capable of condensing daydreams and constellations of affect. The fourth reveals its archetypal and chaotic face, as a
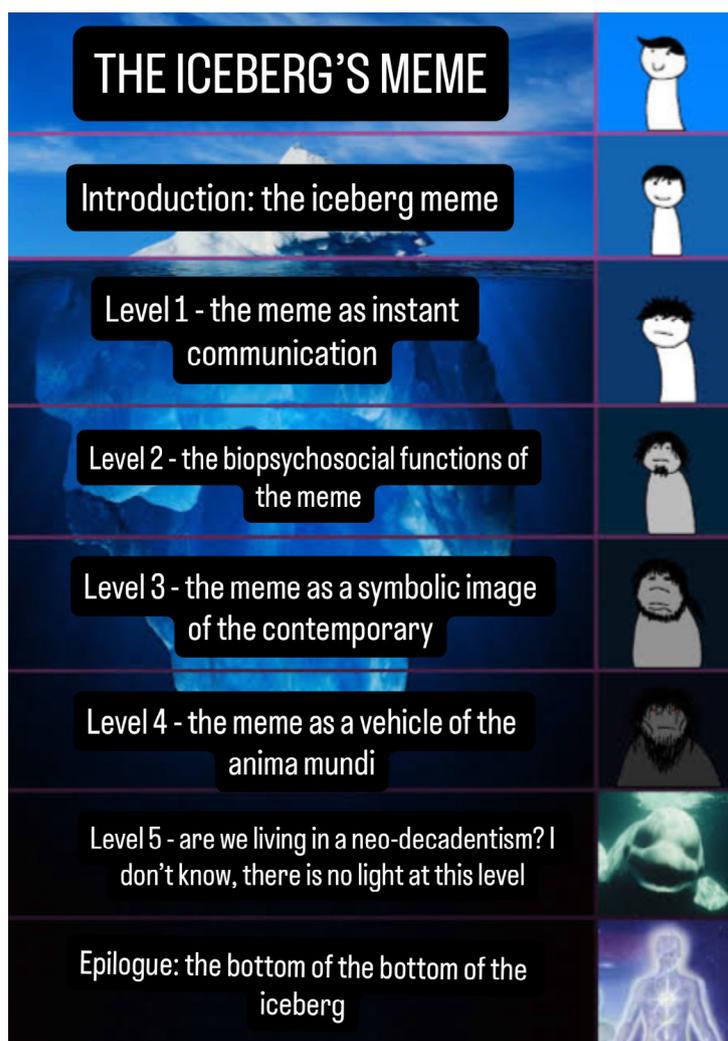

IMAGE 1 — The article summary inside the iceberg meme

manifestation of the *anima mundi* in pixels and as an incarnation of the digital trickster. Finally, we'll reach the ambivalent synthesis, where the meme becomes paradox, artificial nostalgia, cynicism, and the potential seed of a new form of imagination. Take a deep breath, put on your diving suit, and dive into this icy, virgin water.

Level 1 — The meme as instant communication

On the surface, the meme presents itself as what it appears to be: a fast, replicable form of communication with immediate impact. This functional layer, where the meme acts as a minimal cultural object, is the most visible and, therefore, often underestimated. It is here that it becomes a kind of currency of digital everyday life, circulating with a speed that frightens and surprises even its creators.

The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins (2007), in *The Selfish Gene*, as an analogy between biological evolution and cultural propagation. Dawkins (2007) defined the meme as "a unit of cultural transmission" that multiplies through imitation. Although this conception reduces complex processes to quasi-genetic mechanisms — one of the many limitations that researchers point to in Dawkins's work — it had the merit of illuminating the contagious nature of certain symbolic content. With the advent of digital platforms, this virality reached an unprecedented scale.

In the so-called ecology of attention, a term popularized by Yves Citton (2014), the meme has established itself as a privileged device for cognitive capture. It condenses information, affection, and positioning into a few seconds. Brief visual contact is enough to decode ironies, judgments, or social commentary that, in another format, would require much more time and effort. The meme, in this sense, is a kind of "total microtext": a compact package of meanings, ready to be shared without the need for detailed contextualization. This effectiveness is linked to the way the meme has become a nearly universal language. By combining pop culture references, visual expressiveness, and instant humor, it creates

a grammar that dispenses with formal translations. Even among people from different backgrounds, certain images have become recognizable signs, like codes of an emerging language. When circulating, the meme offers entertainment, but also belonging: a brief mutual recognition that one shares the same repertoire and inhabits the same time.

Thus, the meme, on the surface, fulfills a dual function: it captures attention and signals identity. This quick gesture that says "See how I think" and "See how I belong" may seem trivial, but it contains a new, culturally structuring form of communication. If laughter comes easily, that doesn't mean the phenomenon is superficial: it is precisely this initial layer that outlines the meme's power as a global language and a symbolic product of the contemporary world.

But, like every iceberg, this surface is only the beginning. To fully understand its scope, it is necessary to descend to the levels where the psychological, social, and symbolic functions that memes carry operate. Let's move on to the next level.

Level 2 — The biopsychosocial functions of the meme

While on the surface, memes act as spontaneous acts of communication, at deeper levels they perform biopsychosocial functions that help us understand their symbolic strength and power of dissemination. Memes are not just cultural products for rapid consumption: they are also devices that mobilize neural circuits, regulate individual emotions, and build collective dynamics of belonging.

At the biological level, the response to memes is associated with mechanisms of reward and emotional processing. Studies in the neuroscience of attention, such as those by Susan Greenfield (2021), show that brief, visually striking, and emotionally charged *stimuli* activate dopaminergic circuits linked to immediate pleasure. The predictability of formats, such as templates and standardized captions, reinforces this micro-pleasure, which becomes an almost automatic habit. In environments of high digital stimulation, this discharge of

gratification contributes to a compulsive relationship with timelines and feeds.

In the psychological field, the meme operates as symbolic compensation in the sense that Carl Gustav Jung (2013, para. 814) gave to the term: a form that emerges when unconscious contents find no direct expression. Humor, irony, and the absurd become ways of metabolizing collective anxieties. Jung (2013, para. 814) observed that symbols have a mediating function between consciousness and the shadow, offering a psychic contour to that which threatens to fragment the self.

Beginning with James Hillman (1993), particularly in *Emotion*, we can understand the meme as a symbolic form that conveys affects crystallized in images. Hillman (1993) criticizes the psychological tradition that conceives of emotion as a mere subjective release of internal tensions, a perspective the author considers reductionist and incapable of capturing its symbolic function. For him, emotions should be understood as "acting images," forces that organize experience and give meaning to events. This imaginal conception allows us to see the humor of the meme not simply as a superficial escape, but as a way of configuring and sharing collective affects. When thousands of people reproduce an image that mocks exhaustion, anxiety, or fear of failure, they are not just joking: they are giving tangible form to what would otherwise remain diffuse and unrepresented. Hillman (1993) suggests that the psyche imagines the world emotionally, that is, that our feelings are embodied in figures and narratives that allow us to recognize and contain them. The meme, in this context, can be read as an imaginal micro-device, a symbolic container that embraces emotional states and distributes them on a collective scale. This function is not limited to the individual regulation of affect, as the circulation of these images creates a shared field where emotions become public, can be commented on, and even domesticated. Memes actualize, in digital language, what Hillman (1993) identifies as the archetypal need to embody passions in images capable of mediating our relationship with them.

This symbolic function is not limited to containing discomfort: it also produces psychic defense.

Irony, as a distancing mechanism, creates a kind of emotional security. It is laughing before the other person laughs, confessing in a joking tone so as not to have to commit to one's own vulnerability. Jung (2013) draws attention to this ambiguity: humor can integrate dark aspects of the personality and, at the same time, become a disguise that impedes authentic elaboration.

In social terms, the meme functions as a marker of belonging and a kind of password for recognizing a tribe or subculture. Limor Shifman (2014) observes that memes are not just objects we consume, but practices that define who is inside and who is outside a common repertoire. The mass circulation of formats, such as "distracted boyfriend" or "woman yelling at a cat," or WhatsApp stickers, produces a sense of connection that combines familiarity and performance. Sharing a meme is declaring: I understand this code, I belong to my time.

It is on this collective plane that the affective climate emerges, to which we will return more than once, which David Foster Wallace (1993) called in the 1990s an atmosphere in which sincerity and cynicism coexist in the same gesture, so that it becomes impossible to distinguish whether one is being serious or joking: memes of radical self-irony, assumed "cringe" aesthetics, contradictory slogans, emotional shitposting, public personas who perform sincerity and mockery at the same time. We currently call this atmosphere post-irony: the search for radical sincerity after the saturation of irony. Mark Fisher (2020) takes up this idea when arguing that contemporary humor functions as affective anesthesia: a way of exposing contradictions without ever committing to their transformation. The meme, while denouncing, relativizes; while bringing together, it distances. Therefore, it is simultaneously a form of collective care and a trap that perpetuates ambiguity.

In short, the form of memes arises from this convergence of factors. They activate neural gratifications, function as symbols that regulate affect, and reinforce shared identities. At the second level of the iceberg, it becomes clear that the meme is less a harmless distraction than a complex matrix of

Level 3 — The meme as a symbolic image of the contemporary

Unlike a possible interpretation of the symbol, which conceives it as a totality that unites opposites and creates a mediation between the conscious and the unconscious, the meme appears to operate as a symbol in transit: a composite of allusions, fragments, and commentaries that fail to form a unified and lasting image. This is not to say, therefore, that the meme is a symbol *per se*, in the sense of an archetypal figure endowed with transformative power — although nothing prevents them from becoming symbols. Rather, its symbolic power seems to reside precisely in its incompleteness and impermanence. The meme is a way of capturing, for a moment, affective and collective content before it dissolves again into the current of digital flow. Therefore, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of the meme as a symbolic preform or a sketch of a symbol, participating in a fragmentary image economy characteristic of the present day.

This condition of temporariness contrasts with the traditional model of grand mythical narratives, which sought to establish continuity and symbolic coherence over time. The meme, by contrast, rejects any pretense of stability: it multiplies, parodies, remakes, and remixes itself. An image can circulate across thousands of profiles and always reappear with a different caption, a different tone. This incessant variation corresponds to the image that Deleuze and Guattari (1995) called a rhizome, a horizontal and proliferating configuration with no center or hierarchy. In this logic, the meme belongs to no one and has no definitive meaning. Its symbolic value lies in its ability to establish momentary connections between dispersed affects.

Therefore, it's important to resist the temptation to classify it as a mere trivial sign or a full-fledged symbol. There's a middle ground. The meme occupies a liminal zone, as it is more than a mere unit of communication, but less than a constituted myth. Its power lies in being an unstable image, a cluster of references that condenses desires, moods, and social conflicts in an attention span as short as infinitely scrolling. In a world marked by acceleration and information saturation, the traditional symbol gives way to figures that can only exist as transitory constellations, emerging and dissolving without ever fully consolidating.

There's something paradoxical about how memes have become public *reveries*, small images that condense anxieties, expectations, and desires that would previously have remained dispersed in private life. Even when they're disposable jokes, they function as spaces of shared confession, where affection finds a precarious form of expression. When a meme goes viral, it creates a shared atmosphere, a brief moment in which culture allows itself to reveal its vulnerabilities. This experience suggests that, despite the fragmentation of bonds, we persist in seeking images capable of reminding us that, to some extent, we all share the same fatigue.

Walter Benjamin (2007) argues that certain visual figures have the ability to interrupt automatic perception and establish what he called a dialectical image: the moment when a fragment of the past meets a present need and forms a symbolic constellation. Although memes operate on a more ephemeral and unpretentious scale, they also fulfill this function of suspension. An image that mocks everyday exhaustion — for example, a retro childish cartoon with the caption "I can't take it anymore, I want to k* myself" — creates a flash of recognition that blends humor and discomfort. For an instant, the indifferent flow of the timeline is disrupted, and what seemed banal reveals itself as an index of a collective state. The meme is, therefore, a symbolic marker of a shared emotional climate, which emerges and dissolves without promising continuity.

Thus, although memes rarely reach the density of the symbols described by classical Jungian theory, we can take the poetic liberty of calling them proto-images: transitory forms that make latent affects shareable. It is probably this brevity, this reverie consumed by the speed of scrolling, that makes them so characteristic of our time.

At level 2 of the iceberg, where some light still shines, post-irony has been identified as the dominant emotional climate that lingers over much of digital culture: an atmosphere of ambivalence in which sincerity and cynicism blend so intimately that it becomes impossible to separate them. But post-irony, more than an affective state, has also consolidated itself as its own symbolic form, an ethic and an aesthetic, a mode of constructing and circulating images that challenges the search for authenticity. When applied to the world of memes, it creates a curious condition: everything can be a joke, but everything can also be a serious confession: the true meaning lies in the hesitation between these two positions. This oscillation is a cultural symptom. It expresses a widespread distrust of any discourse that seems overly committed and, at the same time, a persistent need to communicate what hurts us.

Post-irony, as described by Wallace (1993), emerges as a reaction to the weariness produced by the corrosive irony that marked the end of the 20th century. If classical irony consisted of maintaining a protective distance from any emotion, post-irony recovers a desire for connection, but only on the condition that this connection is never taken fully seriously. In the context of memes, this ambiguity materializes in images that seem to mock the very affect they expose. This type of symbolic self-effacement functions as a collective anesthesia: the confession is quickly diluted by laughter, the discomfort is thematized but never fully elaborated. Thus, post-irony creates symbols that cannot be stabilized, images that invite and repel. They are the most precise emblems of contemporary sensibility, for their symbolic power resides in the refusal of definitive clarity. Unlike traditional myth, which sought to offer cohesion, and the classical symbol, which integrated opposites into a relatively stable field of meaning, the post-ironic meme operates as an anticode, a symbol that promises synthesis but celebrates the precariousness of its meaning. When we share these images, we participate in a paradoxical ritual: we confess something about ourselves, but ensure that this configuration remains surrounded by a margin of doubt. We maintain the illusion that nothing truly affects us, while at the same time everything affects us more than we would like to admit.

Level 4 — The meme as a vehicle of the *anima mundi*

Throughout this essay, we have considered the meme as a communicational unit, a biopsychosocial mechanism, and a symbolic form in transit. But it is at a deeper level, where the pressure of water is intolerable to the human body and light is rare, that it reveals itself in its most unusual character: that of a vehicle for the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world that manifests itself through shared images.

Hillman (2011) proposed, drawing on Jung, that the psyche extends to the very fabric of reality: everything is inhabited by imagination, everything is symbolic expression. When we view memes through this lens, we realize that they are more than cultural products: they are manifestations of a collective imaginal force seeking to become visible. Even though they operate at the speed of digital consumption, they carry, in their mass circulation, the diffuse memory of an imagination that belongs to no one in particular. From a Jungian perspective, this is quite clear; after all, this framework encompasses the idea of the collective unconscious, which transcends its symbolic character by approaching a symbolic cosmology. Jung (2014, para. 155) pointed out that archetypes reveal themselves not only in myths and dreams, but also in the images that spontaneously emerge in culture. When millions of people share the same figure, we may be witnessing a form of symbolic irruption that transcends individual intention. The meme, in this sense, functions as a conduit for archetypal contents that continually degrade and reinvent themselves. Hillman (2011) argues that recognizing the soul of the world means accepting that we are not the sole authors of the images that affect us. An imaginal dimension exists, and it creates and circulates forms without seeking our conscious permission. Memes are modest manifestations of these small collective epiphanies that, even fleeting ones, remind us that the symbol is not a resource

we control, but a presence that permeates us. It's not a metaphor to say the world is dreaming in pixels: it's simply the observation that, in the frenetic circulation of memes, something of the collective soul finds expression.

There is an archetypal figure embodied in the energy of memes: the trickster — the trickster, the prankster, the agent of chaos who dissolves boundaries. Lewis Hyde (2017), in his fantastic study on the subject, describes the trickster as a force that subverts rules and produces new possibilities precisely by violating the established order. In the digital realm, memes assume this function in a peculiar way: they are forms that simultaneously criticize, parody, and participate in what they appear to ridicule. It's no coincidence that so many memes destabilize institutions, mock authorities, or expose cultural contradictions. By laughing, we expose the precariousness of everything, and how our certainties can be dismantled in seconds by a witty caption.

In the tradition of analytical psychology, Jung (2014, para. 472) had already pointed out that certain mythical figures, such as Hermes, embody this creative and destructive ambivalence. Hillman (2007), for his part, does not develop a theory of the trickster systematically, but frequently uses Hermes as an example of the psychic principle that transits between poles and opposites and sustains the imagination of movement. Hermes is, at once, messenger and trickster, patron of thieves and mediator between worlds. The symbol is Hermes's gift to humanity, and so is the meme. When transposed to digital culture, this Hermetic impulse draws on its intoxication in the present — the monotheism of postmodern Hermes — to circulate without respecting boundaries of ownership, authorship, or fixed meaning. The humor they produce is not merely anecdotal: it carries something of the liminal and ambiguous spirit, which interrupts seriousness with its radical irony. This pixelated version of Hermes isn't content to laugh at the world: he also wants to expose the fragility of established narratives. After all, the trickster not only describes a range of behaviors

that range from the comical to the destabilizing, but also acts on the structure of language itself, just as irony deconstructs meaning and establishes ambiguity. While denouncing contradictions, it refuses any definitive commitment to transformation. The meme, like its contemporary avatar, dismantles the pretense of authority without offering another center of symbolic gravity. In this back-and-forth between critique and complicity, Hermes, the trickster and father of post-irony, confirms that every culture carries within itself the seed of its own subversion.

Between the speed of the timeline and the saturation of *stimuli*, memes sometimes produce a singular phenomenon: a moment of unexpected revelation. In the midst of distraction, an image strikes our attention with the force of a small epiphany. Benjamin (2007) wrote that certain images have the power to interrupt the homogeneous succession of events and illuminate, for a brief moment on earth, a constellation of meanings. Although Benjamin was thinking of historical images and allegories, something of this flash is repeated, on a modest scale, when a meme brings forth a sudden perception: the shared recognition of an affection, an anguish, or an irony that hung in the air.

This epiphany is fleeting precisely because it doesn't usually last. And its brevity is an essential part of its essence: the meme illuminates the moment, not the duration. Hillman (2010) observes that imagination doesn't need to commit to grand narratives to fulfill its function. True Jungian amplification doesn't require the *Odyssey* or the *Theogony* to occur: the eight o'clock soap opera is enough. Or the meme received in the family group this morning. Images that reveal, even if only for a few seconds, the emotional texture of an era are enough. The meme, as a transitory epiphany, offers flashes of lucidity and complicity, but it doesn't produce lasting elaboration. There are areas of collective experience that can only be touched by fleeting images, like a flash of lightning, a brief dream: the meme appears, affects us, disappears, produces a tenuous memory, like the shimmer of the formless provisionally taking shape.

Level 5 — Are we living in a neo-decadentism? I don't know, there is no light at this level.

At this level, there's not much light left. I've encountered abysmal Lovecraftian monsters, questioned my sanity, and my physical body has imploded countless times, but here we are, at the level reserved for the most profound information, as well as the most absurd and bizarre, which the reader, post-ironically, is invited to accept.

Here, the surface of the meme gives way to a saturated territory, where images have lost all ingenuity and blend into a nonsense that is simultaneously intimate and collective. If at the beginning of the iceberg, the meme seemed playful and transitory, now it reveals itself as a field where remnants of symbolic vitality and symptoms of cultural exhaustion coexist. It is as if each image bears the mark of a cultural complex, in the sense described by Thomas Singer and Samuel Kimbles (2004): not simply a set of shared emotions or ideas, but a semi-autonomous psychic formation that emerges at the intersection of collective experiences, historical memories, and unprocessed affects. Cultural complexes function as symbolic cores that are reactivated in moments of social tension, carrying myths, defenses, and identity narratives that often escape conscious reflection. They crystallize collective wounds — of race, gender, class, creed — in symbolic forms that span generations, becoming part of the affective and imaginative backdrop of a culture.

In memes, this symbolic material is mobilized in a condensed manner: figures that would seem banal activate, through resonance, deeply rooted emotional zones. A joke about failure or being a cringe-maker may not seem politically relevant, but its affective code carries marks of structural insecurities that have not been worked through. The cultural complex doesn't need to be thematic: it acts as a climate, a field of meaning that is performatively updated with each share. Thus, the meme not only portrays a state of mind, but reenacts it, perpetuates it, and sometimes transforms it. In its reiterative functioning, it stages traumatic zones of culture, whether with irony or tenderness, but almost always with ambivalence. Thus, contemporary cultural decadence, simulated nostalgia, irony that can no longer be a joke: all of this composes a climate in which imagination can only survive as a fragment. This is the level at which shadow and symbol are no longer distinguishable.

At this point, it becomes impossible to ignore that digital culture not only multiplies images, but also multiplies exhaustion. Everything seems marked by an awareness of planned obsolescence, as if any form of enthusiasm needs to be immediately neutralized by irony. In memes, this atmosphere becomes visible: the compulsion to repeat formats, the nostalgia for relatively recent moments, the parody of affections that barely had time to consolidate. It's as if we were condemned to circulate in a theater of fragments, incapable of producing another Horizon.

This climate is not entirely new. Throughout cultural history, there have been moments when the perception of collective exhaustion became a dominant sensibility. At the end of the 19th century, what has come to be known as decadentism flourished in Europe. More than a literary movement, decadentism was a state of mind and a psychological style of consciousness: the conviction that the civilized world was approaching its end, and that only aesthetic consciousness could give dignity to decline. Among its emblems are Huysman's Des Esseintes from *À Rebous* (2011), which enclosed itself in an artificial universe saturated with perfumes, books, and rare objects, and Baudelaire's poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (2010), where boredom and morbidity become the raw material of beauty. It was an imaginary fascinated by everything that perishes: wilted flowers, ruins, vices, languor. Classical decadentism preferred artificiality to spontaneity, *simulacrum* to nature, ornament to the essential. And, above all, it cultivated an irony that protected against any temptation to hope.

If we want to understand the archetypal genealogy of this virtual neo-decadentism of ours — which we now coin with all possible care, as it is a poetic freedom and a clear experimental extrapolation — we must observe the cultural terrain in which

it germinated, marked by aesthetics that flirted with artificiality.

Kitsch, which Milan Kundera (2017) defined as the denial of the dark side of existence, produced sentimental images packaged in rapid consumption, always with a pretense of emotional purity. It was the sunset with uplifting captions on PowerPoint presentations sent by cheerful aunts, a prefabricated affection that dispensed with any critical elaboration. Camp, on the other hand, celebrated its own artificiality with affectionate irony: it was the performative joy of those who know they are acting. Susan Sontag (2020) saw in camp a love of the unnatural, an exuberant display of bad taste made sophisticated by self-awareness. Both kitsch and camp offered, each in their own way, refuges from disenchantment: the former feigning authenticity; the latter converting excess into celebration. But neither aesthetic fully anticipated the atmosphere of peaceful exhaustion that characterizes our post-ironic neodecadentism. Here, artifice is neither celebrated nor denied: it is accepted with the naturalness of those who no longer have the strength to care.

The era of post-irony was decisive for this shift. When everything began to be consumed with a half-hearted emotional distance — that is, a regime in which we simultaneously confess and ridicule — kitsch lost its innocence and camp lost its exuberance. It became increasingly difficult to distinguish whether we share sentimental images out of sincere nostalgia or cynical play. In this vacuum of criteria, virtual neo-decadentism consolidated itself as a resigned aesthetic: a place where the artificiality of emotions is admitted while still maintaining a melancholic connection to them. When a meme alludes to the difficulty of feeling anything today, there is neither the carnivalesque joy of camp nor the moralizing fantasy of kitsch. There is only a saturated awareness that every experience seems recycled, secondhand, and yet we continue to need these images to shape what remains of hope. Post-irony never emancipated anyone from shame, it only normalized it. In this scenario, repetition became the ultimate form of belonging, and exhaustion the order of the day.

If classical irony was a strategy of distancing, post-irony has transformed this defense into a psychic *habitat*. It is not a figure of speech, but a permanent disposition that prevents us from choosing between confessing and refusing. When we share a meme that admits the exhaustion of life and anticipates judgment with a joke, we are no longer talking simply about humor. It is a way of declaring that no affection will escape suspicion. Post-irony allows us to confess without committing ourselves, to expose ourselves without giving ourselves completely. But this freedom comes at a price: it does not need to be taken seriously, and everything remains suspended in the same chronic hesitation.

This climate of ironic resignation finds support in another contemporary phenomenon that Simon Reynolds (2011) called retromania: the contemporary compulsion to relive and recycle the recent past as if it were the only raw material available for the imagination. This trend manifests itself in an almost caricatured way in pop culture: in the 1990s, the 1970s revival fever brought back the disco aesthetic and bell-bottoms revamped into baggy pants; in the 2000s, the 1980s were resurrected everywhere: from hits like Madonna's Hung Up (2005), which repurposes ABBA, to the wave of remakes of the decade's classics, like *Transformers* and *Friday the 13*th. Today, it's the turn of the 1990s and early 2000s: the Y2K aesthetic, with glitter, tank tops, flip phones, and digital cameras, dominates both Generation Z's wardrobes and TikTok filters, where old, well-known songs go viral as if they were new releases.

When Mark Fisher (2022) speaks of mourning a canceled future, he points precisely to this impasse: the present has become an inventory of unfulfilled promises, and this, in turn, has become our aesthetic repertoire. Post-irony works like anesthesia: it helps us endure the feeling that nothing new can be born. Reposting old images, mimicking our parents' style, ironizing nostalgia, and staging disenchantment become ways of living with the very loss of horizon. And therein lies our current paradox: we laugh at the ruin we secretly wish to avoid.

But let us remember that decadentism has an ethereal, more luminous sibling: symbolism. Both

arose from the same *fin-de-siècle* perception: that culture had lost its center of gravity. But where decadence transformed this loss into a spectacle, symbolism paradoxically sought a path of redemption: instead of restoring the solidity of ancient values, it invented ways of sensing the invisible through the ephemeral. For the symbolists, degraded matter was not merely a residue, but a sacred material, shimmering with life. When Stéphane Mallarmé (2007) said that to name an object was to destroy three-quarters of the pleasure one derives from guessing it, he enunciated a non-doctrinal ethics of the symbol, that of the order of the minimal preservation of mystery. As distant as this notion may seem from the viral logic of memes, I believe it is a notion worth relearning today: resisting virtual neo-decadentism implies not confusing ruin with definitive exhaustion.

James Hillman (2010) insisted that imagination is not synonymous with escapism or idealistic transcendence. It arises from the ability to look at that which has apparently lost its vitality — a worn-out image, a cliché — and ask if a strand of meaning remains. Against a discipline of images, Hillman (2010, p. 108-9) says:

> I could not raise my voice louder against these methods. They abuse the soul's first freedom — the freedom to imagine. This is the source of our peculiar individuality and of our art, our science, and our culture. The autonomy of fantasy is the soul's last refuge of dignity, its guarantee against all oppression (...) We sin against the imagination whenever we ask an image for its meaning, which requires that images be translated into concepts.

For Hillman (2010), the task is not to restore purity, but to cultivate a more generous attention, one that accepts precariousness as a condition of experience. This gesture should not be confused with uplifting nostalgia: it is about recognizing that even irony can be a symptom of a soul that still wants to feel something, but doesn't know how to feel it. Gaston Bachelard (1998) also noted that imagination is always a form of hospitality: an invitation for the moment to contain more than its appearance suggests. Perhaps this symbolic hospitality is what is missing in digital culture, so accustomed to displaying fatigue as a trophy.

In this sense, summoning an imagination is not about proposing a moralization of experience — as if simply desiring depth were enough for it to be magically attained. It is simply about affirming that exhaustion can be viewed from another angle, as a surface where glimmers still remain. Reposting an image can be pure reflex, but it can also be a gesture of attention: a brief attempt to see in that repetition the form of a question. Symbolism, even in its most anachronistic form, offers a modest hypothesis: that no culture is so saturated that it cannot harbor some spark. Perhaps this is what our neo-decadentism forgets when it transforms disenchantment into a permanent posture. Between ruin and exhausted laughter, it is still possible to imagine other forms of presence — fragile, provisional, but capable of interrupting, for a moment, the automatism of fatigue.

Epilogue: The bottom of the bottom of the iceberg

They say there's a layer of the iceberg no one has ever fully mapped. There, memes are no longer content to mock the world: they begin to mock themselves, with a sophistication as useless as it is fascinating. It's in this abyss that layers of self-devouring references accumulate — images that parody other images, which in turn were parodies of feelings no one remembers ever truly existed. Once, gliding through the icy halls of this final layer, I saw floating an inventory of names that seemed to have come from an apocryphal manual of cultural taxonomy: meta-meta-cringe, quantum JPEG nostalgia, emotional autotune, low-resolution polygon affection, spectral mourning for the feed, and other post-ironic names. There, each meme was a Russian doll containing another, and another, until at its core there was nothing but an ironic wink aimed at no one in particular. It was as if, in a last-ditch effort, culture had decided that all meaning should be camouflaged beneath successive layers of jokes and

self-reference, until only the tranquility of no longer needing to believe in anything remained. Perhaps it is in these inscrutable depths that imagination encounters its greatest challenge. Because, if everything can be dismantled, recycled, and reenacted, only the question remains: what makes us continue descending through these layers, instead of returning to the surface? Perhaps it is the intuition that, even in the most delirious babushka of ironies, there is a vague nostalgia for another form of presence, less saturated, less anxious, less cynical. And perhaps this is the first step? Learning to recognize that the very act of inventorying the abysses is already a form of desiring meaning. Ultimately, if everything can be a meme, everything can potentially be a symbol. The challenge is to have the courage to look at these fleeting images with the same attention one gives to myths. For the world, as always, continues to dream, and now in pixels, in laughter that folds in on itself, in layers that never cease to multiply. ▪

A brief glossary to scan the iceberg

Baggy — Defines both a musical and fashion style associated with the 1990s in the United Kingdom, characterized by baggy clothing, a relaxed attitude, and a fusion of alternative rock and dance music. Currently, the style is making a comeback with George Clanton.

Lovecraftian — Reference to the aesthetics and themes inspired by H.P. Lovecraft: cosmic horrors, indescribable entities, and a sense of human insignificance in the face of the universe.

Minion — Yellow character from the *Despicable Me* franchise; in online usage, it can mean an uncritical follower, a pawn, or an ironic reference to childish behavior.

Shitposting — Intentionally absurd, meaningless, or low-quality posts designed to provoke humor, confusion, or saturate an online space.

Templates — Pre-formatted text, image, or video structures used to quickly create memes or replicable digital content.

Timelines — Timelines, both literally and in the social media sense.

Y2K — Style and aesthetic associated with the turn of the 1999-2000s, marked by both the millennium bug and digital futuristic fashion (mirrored glasses, metallic shine, technological typography).

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