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SPECTACLE AND THE FEED: MEMETICS AND MEDIA PARASITISM

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Abstract: In the contemporary digital landscape, media consumption is increasingly shaped by algorithmically curated feeds that prioritize attention-grabbing content, giving rise to a new mode of cultural transmission governed by spectacle. Drawing from Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle, this paper explores how the incessant flow of visual stimuli and emotional provocation on social media platforms transforms public discourse into a performative arena of passive spectatorship. Within this environment, memes function as parasitic cultural agents— self-replicating units that exploit cognitive biases, emotional triggers, and algorithmic structures to ensure their survival and spread. This paper conceptualizes a framework of media parasitism, in which users serve as both hosts and vectors for viral content. Memes do not simply inform or entertain; they hijack attention, replicate through social sharing, and evolve rapidly in response to platform dynamics. In this context, the feed becomes an ecological system where memetic entities compete for cognitive real estate, often privileging virality over veracity, outrage over nuance, and spectacle over substance. This paper argues that the interplay between spectacle-driven media environments and memetic parasitism poses significant challenges to collective sense-making, democratic discourse, and mental health. It calls for a re-evaluation of our relationship to media technologies and the development of memetic literacy as a potential mode of resistance. It positions the digital feed as a contested site where cultural evolution, cognitive exploitation, and political manipulation converge.

Keywords: *Spectacle, media parasitism, memetics, digital capitalism*

Introduction

In the mid-twentieth century, Guy Debord (1967/1995) described modern capitalism as a society of the spectacle. In today's society, social relations are mediated through images that replace real experiences. Half a century later, platforms like Youtube, Instagram, and X have changed this spectacle into an interactive and self-replicating system. The Feed, an endless stream of algorithmically selected content, no longer just reflects social life; it is

social life. Users are not passive spectators; they are active participants. Their data, emotions, and actions support a large, dynamic infrastructure that reproduces culture. This paper suggests a framework to understand this system using memetics—the study of cultural replication—and media parasitism, which comes from Michel Serres's *The Parasite* (1982/2007). Here, memes, platforms, and users interact in a complex host-parasite relationship. Cultural forms evolve by taking advantage of cognitive and emotional weaknesses. The aim is to show how the Feed extends and changes Debord's spectacle into a type of parasitic media ecology. The analysis happens in three steps:
(1) a theoretical foundation in the spectacle, memetics, and parasitism; (2) an exploration of how algorithmic systems allow for memetic-parasitic replication; and (3) a discussion of recent examples that demonstrate these dynamics, leading to a critical look at agency and resistance in a world shaped by algorithms.

Literature Review and Theoretical Context

The Spectacle Revisited

For Debord (1967/1995), the spectacle marks the culmination of commodity fetishism: the moment when ―everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation‖ (12). The spectacle is not merely a proliferation of images but a social relation organized through images. In Debord's original formulation, the spectacle referred to a media environment dominated by television, advertising, and mass culture—institutions that centralized the production of meaning and dictated what counted as reality for the public.
In digital contexts, this logic is not overturned but intensified. What was once a one-directional flow of images becomes a decentralized, participatory, and constantly shifting ecology of representation. Platforms such as Youtube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) continuously reassemble social reality through personalized feeds tailored to each user's preferences, behaviors, and emotional triggers. The spectacle moves from the billboard to the smartphone screen, from passive spectatorship to continuous micro-participation. Ordinary users now produce, circulate, and consume images in real time, making the spectacle a lived, interactive process rather than a distant cultural backdrop.

Contemporary theorists extend Debord's insights into the age of digital capitalism. Jodi Dean's (2009) notion of ―communicative capitalism‖ argues that online interaction—posting, liking, commenting—becomes a substitute for genuine political engagement. Participation, rather than empowering users, becomes a source of data extraction. Hito Steyerl (2009) describes the ―poor image‖ as a degraded, highly compressed, and infinitely shareable file that embodies both resistance and capture: it democratizes cultural production while being fully embedded in the circulatory logic of digital capitalism. In this sense, the modern spectacle is fluid, algorithmic, and memetic.

Its power lies not in the stability of images but in their movement—their ability to travel, mutate, and accumulate attention.

Memetics and Cultural Evolution

Richard Dawkins (1976) first proposed the meme as a ―unit of cultural transmission‖ modeled after the gene, capable of replication, variation, and selection. Later scholars, especially Susan Blackmore (1999), developed this into a broader theory of cultural evolution: ideas and images propagate by exploiting human cognitive tendencies such as humor, pattern recognition, fear, or empathy. Memes are not merely jokes or images; they are replicators.

In the digital era, memetics becomes more than a metaphor—it becomes visible. Cultural forms evolve with spectacular speed across digital networks. A YouTube dance video, a catchphrase, or an image macro spreads not because people consciously decide its cultural value but because it taps into shared affective structures. As Blackmore argues, memes ―use‖ humans as reproductive machinery, leveraging our attention, creativity, and emotional responses to ensure their survival.

Limor Shifman (2013) situates memes at the heart of participatory culture, where remixing, parody, and virality are central modes of meaning-making. Digital memes mutate rapidly as users adapt them to new contexts, often without attribution or explicit intention. This memetic fluidity reveals a parasitic logic: cultural units that provoke strong reactions—laughter, anger, nostalgia—spread more quickly, while more nuanced, demanding content struggles to survive. In the memetic economy, visibility is linked to transmissibility, and transmissibility is tied to affect.

Media Parasitism and the Attention Economy

Michel Serres‘s *The Parasite* (1982/2007) provides a foundational philosophical lens for understanding these dynamics. For Serres, the parasite is both a disruption and a mediator: it feeds on noise, reorganizes flows of energy, and creates new relational structures through

asymmetry. Parasitism is not merely biological but informational and social. Media systems, in this framework, operate parasitically—they insert themselves into communication channels, feed on attention, and reshape meaning in the process.

In contemporary digital capitalism, this parasitic structure becomes the foundation of the attention economy. As Davenport and Beck (2001) and Citton (2017) argue, attention has become the central resource around which platforms compete. Algorithms are optimized to maximize retention and engagement, privileging content that elicits immediate emotional responses. This creates a feedback loop in which human psychology and digital

infrastructure evolve together. Chun (2021) calls this the regime of ―habitual new media,‖ where platforms subtly train users to repeat certain behaviors—checking notifications, scrolling reflexively, responding to algorithmically tuned stimuli.

Other scholars describe this as a form of extractive mediation. Terranova (2004) discusses ―free labor,‖ the unremunerated work users perform simply by being online, while Zuboff (2019) identifies this system as surveillance capitalism—a regime in which behavioral data is continuously harvested, processed, and monetized. The user becomes both host and vector: their actions sustain the system even as the system drains their cognitive and emotional autonomy.

Across these theories, a common thread emerges: digital media environments do not merely offer channels for communication or creativity. They configure new forms of life in which attention, affect, and identity are continuously extracted, repurposed, and reinserted into algorithmic circuits. The spectacle becomes a parasite; the meme becomes a replicator; and the user becomes a hybrid subject caught in the flows of memetic, economic, and technological evolution.

The Feed as Algorithmic Spectacle

The Feed represents the algorithmic management of Debord‘s spectacle—its automation, personalization, and intensification. Unlike television or film, the Feed is not consumed in a sequence but navigated through an infinite scroll. Each refreshed display of content feels like an exercise of choice, even autonomy. But as Wendy Chun (2021) notes, digital interfaces blur the boundary between habit and agency: scrolling becomes a conditioned behaviour, a rhythmic gesture that folds bodily reflex into algorithmic prediction.

Every act of scrolling is paradoxical. It is a gesture of agency (‘I choose what comes next‘) and simultaneously an act of submission (‘show me what you think I want‘). The user appears to guide the Feed, but the Feed is already anticipating them—sorting, ranking, and curating micro- worlds tailored to patterns of desire, frustration, and curiosity that it has learned to predict.

Alexander Galloway (2004) might describe this as control through protocol: a system that manages behaviour not through coercion but through the design of the environment itself. Within this algorithmic spectacle, users become living nodes in a vast memetic network. Algorithms select for content that maximizes engagement, amplifying what spreads quickly, emotionally, and efficiently. High-arousal memes—those that provoke laughter, anger, awe, or identification—float to the top. Subtlety, slowness, and complexity register poorly, and thus remain peripheral. The result is an environment shaped not by what is

most meaningful, but by what is most *reactive*. Memetic selection pressure rewards intensity, novelty, conflict, and shareability over nuance or reflection.

Memetic Fitness and Parasitic Selection

In this system, memes behave less like cultural artifacts and more like adaptive organisms. Those that thrive in the Feed exhibit parasitic traits: emotional immediacy, simple repeatable forms, and ease of recombination. A sound that spawns millions of choreographed variations, a recycled tweet format ("the villain arc," "the worst date ever"), or a looping Instagram reel built on a trending audio clip—each functions as a replicator honed for algorithmic environments.

From a memetic perspective, these are not merely pieces of content; they are entities that exploit human cognition. They latch onto affective vulnerabilities—humour, outrage, identification, fear of missing out—and propagate by triggering responses that the platform captures as engagement. As Blackmore (1999) emphasizes, memes "use" humans as their reproductive machinery. In the digital Feed, this logic becomes explicit: the more a meme compels you to engage, the more it multiplies.

The algorithm acts as the selection environment. Much like natural selection filters genetic variation, the Feed filters cultural variation. Ideas that fail to capture attention disappear; those that spark reactions flourish. This is not a neutral process. It rewards extremes: the funniest joke, the angriest reaction, the most dramatic confession, the most polished aesthetic. Users who share content become both vectors and victims of memetic replication—participants in a cycle that feels spontaneous but is deeply structured by the machinery of algorithmic choice.

The Parasitic Relationship

Michel Serres's theory of the parasite elucidates the strange intimacy of this relationship. The Feed is not simply a platform but an occupant of the communication channel—it inserts itself between sender and receiver, feeding on attention, transforming the message, and redistributing value. Notifications act as tiny taps on the shoulder, small interruptions that claim cognitive energy. Each like, comment, and share becomes a micro transaction of attention, a unit of labour feeding the system's appetite.

Yet the relationship is not purely exploitative. Like all parasites, the Feed depends on its host's vitality. Users derive pleasure, validation, entertainment, and community from participating in the system. Sociality and creativity are not extinguished; they are redirected, shaped by metrics, and modulated by algorithmic expectations. As Terranova (2004) argues, this becomes a form of "free labor," in which people voluntarily produce cultural value that platforms harness and monetize. Zuboff (2019) expands this into the

logic of surveillance capitalism, where behaviour is not just expressed but harvested and predicted.

The parasitic dynamic thus becomes ambivalent. The Feed provides connection but extracts data; it offers visibility but demands self-optimization; it supports creativity but channels it toward replicable trends. Ultimately, the Feed transforms communication into an energetic economy where attention circulates like currency, and where the subject becomes at once creator, consumer, and commodity.

Illustrative Cases and Analytical Discussion

YouTube and the Rhythms of Replication

YouTube provides one of the clearest illustrations of memetic–parasitic dynamics because its recommendation systems—especially YouTube Shorts—create an environment where cultural forms spread through imitation at high velocity. Trends on the platform often begin with a single video that captures a particular rhythm, gesture, or emotional beat. Once the algorithm detects strong engagement, it amplifies the format, pulling thousands of users into a cycle of copying, remixing, and re performing.

Consider the rapid spread of dance challenges set to viral audio clips. A creator posts a choreographed sequence using a catchy, easily looped track. Within hours, the comment section fills with requests for a tutorial. By the next day, the song has become a template: teens, fitness influencers, and even major brands perform their own versions in bedrooms, parking lots, and studio sets. The memetic logic is unmistakable—each reproduction strengthens the template‘s presence, making it more likely to be recommended, which in turn inspires further replication.

But the trend need not be musical. Visual motifs also spread parasitically. The “Photo Dump Shorts" trend, for instance, repurposed TikTok‘s slideshow format but flourished on YouTube: creators stitched together rapid-fire images from their week, set them to the same soft indie track, and followed identical editing rhythms. Each video differed slightly—new photos, new captions—but preserved the recognisable pattern that the algorithm had already deemed successful.

Even micro-behaviours become replicators. Reaction videos using the same shocked pause, the same eye-roll transition, or the same comedic zoom proliferate across genres. A single editing trick—like the “snap transition” or the “before/after beat drop”—spreads from comedians to gamers to makeup artists within days.

These examples reveal how YouTube‘s design rewards cultural forms that are simple, rhythmic, and immediately legible. Memetic fitness is not tied to originality but to repeatability. As users mimic these templates to gain visibility, they become vectors in a parasitic loop: trends evolve through small emotional and stylistic mutations, while the platform harvests the attention generated by their continual replication.

X (Twitter) and the Virality of Outrage

On X, the parasitic logic of memetic circulation is especially visible in the way outrage spreads. Research shows that posts eliciting anger, fear, or moral indignation travel faster and farther than neutral content (Brady et al., 2017). The platform‘s engagement-driven ranking system amplifies this: a tweet that sparks argument, disbelief, or moral condemnation is pushed into more timelines, regardless of whether the information is accurate. Emotion—not truth—becomes the engine of visibility.

Real-world examples illustrate how this works. A video clip taken out of context—such as a politician‘s sentence clipped mid-speech or a chaotic moment at a protest—can go viral within minutes. Users, sensing the emotional charge of the moment, quote-tweet it with their own expressions of anger (“what is happening???” or “unbelievable!”). Others jump in to correct, debate, or mock the original post, yet even disagreement contributes to the same feedback loop. The algorithm interprets conflict as engagement and escalates its reach.

Hashtag storms show a similar dynamic. During moments of public tension—celebrity scandals, political missteps, controversial news headlines—users collectively perform indignation. They write threads, share screenshots, and post reaction memes not only to express personal frustration but also to signal group belonging. The outrage becomes a communal ritual: to be silent is to risk being excluded from the conversation.

But the system metabolizes these emotional performances as data. Each like, re tweet, and reply is logged as evidence of what keeps users active on the platform. Outrage functions as a highly efficient memetic vector because it keeps people scrolling, refreshing, and participating. The platform, in turn, monetizes this attention by serving ads and promoting content embedded within the emotional flow.

Thus, the parasitic loop closes. User indignation becomes both the product and the fuel: emotional labor is extracted as engagement, processed as data, and fed back into the system to trigger further responses. X thrives not despite conflict but because of it, transforming anger into a renewable resource for profitability.

Instagram and the Aestheticization of the Self

Instagram functions as a platform in which subjectivity is produced, circulated, and evaluated through visual curation—what Debord might understand as the intensification of the commodity- form within the realm of personal identity. Here, the self becomes an ongoing aesthetic project, assembled through images that are simultaneously intimate and performative. Michel Foucault's work on technologies of the self is instructive: the platform encourages users to engage in practices of self-stylization that align with broader cultural norms of visibility, aspiration, and discipline. Each post or Story operates as a micro-ritual of self-fashioning, a carefully managed disclosure that asserts both individuality and conformity.

Instagram's Stories and Reels formats accelerate this dynamic by creating rhythms of ephemeral self-exposure. Reels trends—such as "Get Ready With Me" routines, hyper-stylized travel montages, or the popular "Day in My Life" sequences—exemplify a mode of self-presentation that is both routinized and responsive to algorithmic cues. These trends function as templates through which users reproduce recognizable aesthetic and narrative patterns, echoing Theresa Senft's concept of microcelebrity, wherein everyday individuals adopt strategies of visibility historically associated with public figures. The seemingly casual glimpses offered in Stories—morning rituals, gym sessions, workspaces, domestic scenes—reflect what Abidin (2021) calls "calibrated intimacy," a curated proximity that invites emotional investment while maintaining strategic distance.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity further illuminates this environment: identity on Instagram is not merely expressed but reiterated through repeated acts of posting. The algorithm privileges performances that conform to dominant visual grammars—symmetry, brightness, bodily legibility, aspirational lifestyle markers—thus reinforcing norms around beauty, consumption, and success. Concrete examples abound: the uniformity of wellness influencers' pastel-toned home gyms, the cinematic edits of travel influencers' drone footage, or the precisely choreographed Reels that sync gestures to trending audio clips.

Within this system, the parasitic dynamic emerges through comparison and affective extraction. The curated selves populating the feed produce a landscape of idealized images against which users measure their own lives. Engagement metrics—likes, comments, saves—translate affect into data, converting human presence into platform value. In this sense, Instagram operates as both a technology of self-production and an apparatus of capture, transforming the aestheticized self into a resource for algorithmic and economic accumulation.

The Parasitic Subject

Across platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and X, the digital subject emerges as both host and parasite—an entity entangled in the very systems it helps sustain. Users internalize the logic of the Feed, often unconsciously, aligning their behaviors, emotions, and self-presentations to the rhythms of algorithmic reward. Value is measured in likes, re tweets, shares, comments, or watch time, and identity becomes a curated performance optimized for visibility. Every scroll, tap, or post becomes part of a continuous feedback loop: the more a user engages, the more their attention and behavior feed the platform, and the more the platform shapes what is likely to engage them next.

This dynamic produces what Christian Fuchs (2014) describes as the "prosumer": an individual who simultaneously produces content and consumes that of others, turning everyday life into a source of data and cultural replication. In YouTube, for example, a user might learn a trending dance not solely for enjoyment but to participate in a memetic cycle, capturing visibility and accruing likes. On Instagram, posting a carefully staged "morning routine" video may feel like self-expression, but it is also a contribution to the platform's affective economy, where attention itself is the resource being mined. Even acts of outrage or moral commentary on X can be understood as a form of participation that generates affective data while signaling social belonging.

The parasitic subject is not a passive victim. Engagement can be pleasurable, socially rewarding, and creatively fulfilling. Yet the very mechanisms that generate joy also ensure that attention, labor, and emotion are harvested systematically. The self becomes a hybrid of agency and submission: it performs, imitates, and amplifies content in ways that propagate the system, even as it benefits from social validation or creative satisfaction. In other words, users feed the parasite, and in feeding it, they are themselves transformed by it, becoming both conduits and nodes in a sprawling memetic and algorithmic ecosystem.

Toward an Ecology of Resistance

If the Feed operates parasitically, the question that follows is unavoidable: *How does one resist something that cannot simply be switched off?* Complete withdrawal is rarely feasible. Digital infrastructures shape communication, work, education, sociality, and even self-understanding. We live in systems we did not choose, but ones we cannot meaningfully opt out of without significant social cost. Resistance, therefore, must take place from within.

Rather than imagining resistance as heroic abstinence, we might think of it as a set of small, ongoing practices—gestures of care toward one's own attention and the shared informational environment. ―Semiotic hygiene,‖ for example, names the discipline of

being intentional about what one consumes and circulates: pausing before sharing a post designed to provoke outrage, recognizing when a meme manipulates emotion, or choosing creators who foster depth rather than noise. These micro-decisions do not dismantle the system, but they slow its grip, creating pockets of autonomy.

Slowness itself becomes a form of resistance. In a culture optimized for speed, taking time to read, reflect, or simply sit with an idea interrupts the accelerations that make parasitic replication possible. It allows room for judgment rather than reaction, and for meaning rather than momentum.

Collective strategies matter as well. Meme subversion—twisting viral formats to critique the very structures that made them viral—reclaims memetic forms for political or aesthetic dissent. Digital minimalism, practiced at the scale of communities rather than individuals, can reshape shared norms about availability and attention. Emerging models such as platform cooperativism imagine digital spaces governed not by extraction but by shared ownership, aiming to redirect informational flows toward reciprocity rather than capture.

Following Serres (2007), resistance might also involve embracing the generative potential of parasitism. Parasites, after all, do not merely consume; they transform. They convert noise into signal, disarray into new relations. A resistant practice might therefore use the mechanisms of the Feed—its virality, remixability, and rapid circulation—to cultivate forms of solidarity, care, or counter-narrative. Counter-parasitism becomes a creative strategy: feeding on the Feed, but redirecting its energies toward ethical and communal ends.

Such practices are modest, imperfect, and necessarily ongoing. But they open space for more intentional forms of digital life, where attention can be stewarded rather than surrendered.

Conclusion

The transition from Debord‘s spectacle to the modern Feed signals a profound change in how media shapes human experience. What was once a static panorama of images has evolved into something more dynamic and intimate—a memetic, algorithmic organism that learns from our behaviours and feeds on our attention. The spectacle has become a system that reacts, adapts, and multiplies. It has become, in a sense, alive.

By reading the Feed through the lenses of memetics and media parasitism, this paper has shown how cultural forms replicate not simply because people choose them, but because they exploit human affect and cognition. Algorithms act as selective environments, amplifying what provokes strong reactions and filtering out what does not. In this process,

subjectivity itself is reshaped: users learn to optimize their own expressions for visibility, to internalize metrics as measures of personal worth, and to think of attention as a scarce resource.

Yet this analysis also opens space for possibility. Recognizing the parasitic nature of contemporary media is not a call for withdrawal; it is an invitation to rethink our participation. We do not have to be passive hosts. We can be co-creators of a more sustainable communicative ecology—one where connection, creativity, and critique are not swallowed by the logics of extraction but sustained through practices of care and resistance.

The spectacle, it seems, has not disappeared. It has mutated. The task ahead is not to escape it, but to learn how to live inside its shifting forms without losing ourselves to its appetite.

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