# On Harambe: Simian, Cyborg, Meme

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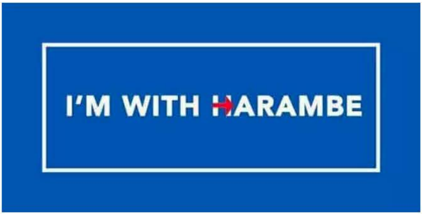

Can an epitaph be written for a being deceased but not departed? For Harambe is trapped, in enduring memorial purgatory, in the freakish eddies of the never-sluiced memosphere. He is unable to pass into heaven or hell, into peaceful oblivion or institutionally commissioned stone. It took hardly a few minutes on May 28, 2016 for the whole event that took the late 17-year-old Western lowland gorilla to this place: a four-year-old boy fell into his enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden; he grabbed and dragged the boy through the enclosure, be that out of protection, aggravation or confusion; and out of fear for the boy's life, a zoo worker shot and killed him. With this, almost immediately, Harambe became a subject of controversy, and more consequentially, an icon.

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A video capturing how Harambe handled the child was circulated extensively and the incident was covered internationally, sparking a debate over the choice to kill Harambe. A petition demanding "Justice for Harambe" received over 500,000 signatures. There were memes, as there are for most cultural fixations and rages, but these seemed to have been wearing away—until, on July 20, a "RIP Taylor Swift" mural in Melbourne, Australia (referring to the humiliation Swift was said to have suffered due to her feud with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian-West) was altered into a memorial for Harambe. The following month saw a surge of memes and the expected portion of commentary to go with that. Along with attempts to garner meaning from the phenomenon, the futility of those very attempts was also argued.

But meanwhile, the memes kept coming. The slogan "Dicks Out For Harambe" caught on, a salute and self-sacrifice that can probably best be understood as denoting a willingness to forgo one's position on a pedestal of humanness and become a bare animal. It became a popular subreddit (on top of the regular r/Harambe) and was incanted even by celebrities. A protest sign at the RNC, caught in a fortuitous flash on television, inculpated President Bush (presumably Jr.) for the death of Harambe; aspersions were also cast on Hillary Clinton for the crime. Some voices from the chambers of contemporary social justice gesticulation railed against the meme, arguing it is racist, in apparent oblivion of the fact that all memes are exploited for some or the other bigoted messaging, and more importantly, that the Harambe memes largely began on Black Twitter and Instagram. The Scottish synthpop group Chvrches dedicated a song to Harambe. Streets were renamed on Google Maps. The discourse and content were bottomless. At the end of August, finally, the Cincinnati Zoo released a statement stating "we are not amused by the memes, petitions, and signs about Harambe," arguably the worst way to get the Internet to oblige to one's concerns.

Though probably not because of the Zoo's injunctions, the circulation of memes about Harambe did wane over September, though even now, it still persists, with desperate though not yet inelegant flourishes: late last month, J.K. Rowling retweeted an image in which Harambe had been depicted in an image for a Patronus, ostensibly as one among the available Patronuses in the new feature on her Pottermore website —but clarified, a few hours later, that Harambe is indeed not an actual Patronus. The day after the Vice-Presidential debate, early this month, Fox News came out with a video alleging that "Hillary Voters Know More About Harambe the Gorilla Than Tim Kaine." After a prudent hiatus off Twitter, Cincinnati Zoo finally returned to the platform just yesterday [Oct. 21], though not without being subjected to another round of distaste. Yet, it does seem that at this point the meme has conclusively waned.

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It is unlikely, though, that the sun will ever set on the gently persisting dominion over our minds enjoyed by a meme that made it to living in strength for a full third of a year. A postmortem can be performed on a body—yes, the gorilla was shot—but a conclusive and concluding purview of the full presence of something or someone who lived as a social entity is impossible so soon. The circulation of the images that we saw as the meme may have seen its day, but given how long this circulation lasted, the relevant inquiry now, in hindsight, is not that of what Harambe meant, but what Harambe has done and enabled.

The question is no longer, and in retrospect surely never was, whether the humor about Harambe the gorilla being shot and killed is "okay." An intuitive, simple reaction to the memified commemoration of Harambe from an animal rights perspective has been that the memes are not only jokes—by their being memes, by their being created and viewed with some good part of the tongue in cheek—but jokes about the murder of a sentient being, and so, simply and wholly in bad taste. For all its good intentions, the stiff social justice tenor, applied here to animals, would thus consider Harambe (the meme) worthy of conscientious disapprobation at worst, and at best, worth little notice, the frivolous pastime of millennials rendered insensate by the glows of their lit screens. Still, one could agree—when someone jokes about a sentient creature being shot and killed, that could just be in bad taste. But when that goes on for a few months, surely there's more than just bad taste and shallow fascination with the event—this is a case of a taste lingering into a permanent sensation, and a fascination becoming an obsession. Not even Hotline Bling or Pokémon Go was a big deal as long as Harambe has been.

Contra this unimaginative "natural" analysis that anything being joked about necessarily trivializes its object, the first easy fact to point out, which from the beginning should have prohibited such a knee-jerk objection to Harambe, is that not all advocacy begins with transparent, normative vociferations. Revolutions are presaged by mutterings and acts of insubordination and subversion less forthright than pitchforks and torches. Neither is ordinary, day-to-day communication totally direct. Virtually all conversations involve semi-conscious, hardly calculated phrasings, which are meant to make a point that could be disagreeable to the opposite person without actually directly making it. Communication is more a Trojan horse of insinuations, allusions and subtext than an envoy making beelines between minds and announcing messages with an honest knock at the gates of consciousness. Jokes are a form of this warped manifestation of truth: *Oh, I'm not being serious (... except of course I am)*. And so, they are a means for ordinary people—including omnivores *en masse*, and in general those who would find it awkward to earnestly take a moral stand over an animal (or anything at all)—to make the case that Harambe should not have been shot, whatever the risk to the child.

Indeed, there is good reason that ordinary people, even, for now, considering humans simply as humans and Harambe simply as a gorilla, would not have wanted Harambe to be killed, regardless of what may have happened to the toddler. 2016, if it has been anything, has been a tragic year in which the approval rating of humanity for itself has taken depressing hits, in which the hopes people have for civilization and human resilience have concretely started to be undone. In the future, it may be remembered as the year in which mass shootings and terrorist attacks really started to feel normal. Bernie failed and Trump happened; with that, the belief that we can really be a democracy, cherished for a moment in an unexpected resurgence orchestrated by the former, took a painful recoil at least in some quarters of our minds. As pointed out by another Internet meme, we have become so disillusioned about the possibility of our society and politics progressing, that falling in line with the prospect of a Clinton in the White House, this year, we even acceded to getting hyped about a new Blink-182 album and playing Pokémon again, preferring a blithe fantasy of the '90's over the reality of 2016. So, disappointed in ourselves, in our very species, it was absolutely natural that so many people who don't generally care about animals might have felt, consciously or unconsciously, "The gorilla's probably all-round a better bloke than that kid would have turned out to be."

But how to convey that? Not everyone is a valiant warrior; raising a solemn, objecting fist to established discourse does not come easily to most people—especially millennials, inscribed as we are by self-consciousness, irony and an anxiety toward earnestness. What's more, this stand defies all anthropocentric standards, still shored up in all their might by expertise and power: all the authorities, from Jane Goodall to Donald Trump, have said shooting Harambe was the correct decision.

It is only natural, then, that most people would come up with indirect methods to express their concern or indignation over Harambe. It takes effort to speak up against power and its discourses directly, and sidestepping that stress, people form conveyances to still get the point across. These conveyances may happen to be new forms of culture; or, they may take existing forms to new extents—here, the meme, which attained to a new stage with Harambe.

In this case, the content of the meme, how exactly Harambe has been represented, does not matter. Harambe has been present in a variety of forms, not even just digital: the mural and the protest sign at the RNC being prominent counterexamples to the typical meme format of, say, Imminent Ned, always with the same still from *A Game of Thrones*, accompanied by the constant upper line of "Brace Yourselves" and a variable lower line that defines the meme, both lines in capitalized Impact font. The fact that Harambe has been immortalized in the vaults of Internet culture suffices as protest (even if its purveyors would never solemnly call it "protest"). Overall, there is plenty of reason to believe that not only has Harambe been a convenient grieving contrivance for a generation and age of great self-pity and indignation, such that anyone you have ever lost becomes Harambe. Rather, serious feelings about the relative worth of human lives and those of other primates were present through this whole affair, even if latently, underneath the irony and levity of Harambe. But underlying everything, new potential conceptualizations of all these entities—humans, animals, memes—have been emerging.

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The real inquiry about Harambe, then, is not about the genuineness of the sentiments underlying the meme. These exist. Peeling a layer further, rather, would get us closer to the worthwhile depths and dynamics of the Harambe phenomenon, and its possible undoing. This undoing, if at all it exists, must be argued in another way, more sophisticated than the critique from the precipitate moralism that can see nothing more to Harambe than joking about a murder. This next critique, drawing on the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis, wouldn't deny that there is something genuine to the sentiments about Harambe, but would raise skepticism about "ironic distance" as an "anti-totalitarian force," or in general, as a force that challenges or alters discourses or regimes of power in any meaningful way. As Slavoj Žižek, the most famous affiliate of this school, puts it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, "in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian ... cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not to be taken seriously or literally."

How would this pertain to Harambe? The indignation, at least partially tongue-in-cheek, over Harambe's death and the demand of various guises of power that he be officially acknowledged constitute the phenomenon of ironic distance toward that which should be viewed negatively—broadly speaking, the exploitation of animals by humans. According to the classic definition of ideology, from Marx himself, ideology in this case would be if humans took part in the exploitation of animals without knowing about what they are doing. Now, though, we are onto the state of things, we know what's going on—but this doesn't prevent us from doing it. Because we still participate in it, despite knowing how things really are, ideology has not been overcome; to the contrary, at this stage, it is possible to see how deep it actually infiltrates into our psyche. In Žižek's words, "The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself ... Cynical distance is just one way—one of the many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*."

With our jokes about Harambe, even if we express cynicism toward the prioritization of a human over a gorilla (a genuine cynicism, which is rebuffed by those moralistically disdainful of the memes), this does nothing, according to the Slovenian critique, to lift the underlying illusion: that despite our knowledge, we do nothing to alter the hierarchy between humans and non-human animals—we do not even actually take out our dicks for Harambe.

This may be true in an immediate sense – that in our given scheme of distinguishing things, Harambe remains a dead gorilla, other exploited animals remain other exploited animals, and humans remain, for the large part, exploiting humans. However, even if ever so slowly, this scheme of things has been getting scrambled, and Harambe represents a watershed moment in this process of scrambling. The Ljubljana critique would be valid if reality as such remains the same through this instance of ironic detachment.

But here lies the profound wager of Harambe, the real issue raised by the phenomenon of Harambe: The ontological schema and the reality reflected by the schema are getting transfigured by the technic of the meme. "Natural" analyses, relying upon traditional, timeworn ideas of what truly counts as human and animal, what is humor and what is tristesse, simply cannot hold in the context of this tenacious interaction, between a sphere appearing the most "natural" and real, and one seemingly so unearthly and simulative: Internet culture—about a gorilla.

Ontology and the reality it reflects are being altered through two parallel movements. One is the ontological movement itself, whereby the scheme that distinguishes humans, non-human and memes is getting scrambled, whereby Harambe goes from being seen as gorilla to not-gorilla. However, alteration of ontology is not social activity, and pointing out an ontological alteration coming to pass with Harambe does not suffice as refutation of the Ljubljana critique. However, this first movement coincides with a second, which beckons the way to the remaking of reality. This is the movement of memes, which attests to a new social body emerging and finding its first instance of prolonged presence in a singular form through none other than Harambe. Without this second movement about memes in general, the first one about Harambe's memification and mythification, which requires briefer explanation, would lack a foundation upon which to be relevant. So, this movement of the consciousness of memes would best be examined first.

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"Consciousness of memes" does not imply that the textual, two-dimensional images on our screens are aware. It means that memes can really be understood or seen in their full existence only as a complex in which these images operate in conjunction with the human minds that engage with them. As no text is a text by itself, in isolation from other texts and ways of reading and discussing them, same is it with the meme. ("There is nothing outside the meme" – the epigram of the age?) To understand the movement that has been congealed at the point of Harambe and the phenomenal referents and productions that the meme harkens to, we must situate Harambe-the-meme within a network of other memes, which in retrospect, considering Harambe, also take on new meanings and operations.

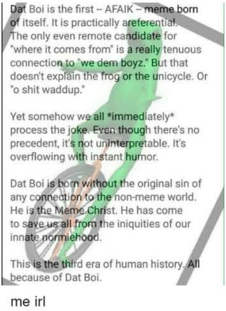
Now, within this second movement of ontological alteration, there are two further trends in memes that have to be viewed, for which Harambe represents only the completion of a convergence that had already started to occur in memes preceding Harambe. The first is memes with animals as their subjects. Humans have always had a fondness for anthropomorphizing animals, or at least, for ascribing spirituality to other forms and relations of life. If Disney movies were the epitome of this compulsion in the pre-digital, modern West, Internet memes about animals could be seen to have usurped them, generating a corresponding, disproportional hype, for the era of the Internet. Nyan Cat, for example, on a memospheric timescale, is prehistoric; it broke through in April 2011. Still, most who have even drifted in and out of this sphere would recognize it; indeed, it is one of the most iconic figures of Internet culture in general. LOLCats, even if less distinctive (an image of a cat with white Impact font, rather than the animated form of Nyan Cat) also stand as an iconic early-generation meme. Grumpy Cat is another meme that created far more acutely concentrated hype than say, The Most Interesting Man in the World or Conspiracy Keanu (though the contexts in which the former, at least, can be used is limited by the text "I don't always .... but when I do ...."). After that, among prominent animal memes, was Doge, another recipient of a burst of popularity other human-centered memes did not receive—there were no first few weeks, for example, in which Sudden Clarity Clarence was all the rage.

Now, the second trend being described was already occurring with Doge, though it probably wasn't limited to Doge. As condensed by media theorist Scott Wark from its KnowYourMeme page, the common characteristics of this meme include "the ur-content of the now-iconic Shiba Inus breed of dog and the Comic Sans MS font overlay in basic, bright colours; the twisted misuse of the formal grammatical modifiers, *much*, *many*, *so*, *very* and *such* (as in typical phrases like 'very Doge, much cool'); and the related ironic 'contemplative' stance that, it is argued, these features engender."

None of these are as clear generators of humor or meaning as the memes mentioned before Doge. Certain facial expressions usually serve as references to certain sentiments, which is true of Keanu, Clarence, Yao Ming and even Grumpy Cat. The comicality of Grumpy Cat is created precisely by the incongruence and defiance of expectation caused by seeing that very human expression on a cat. The humor of The Most Interesting Man is more clever, its meaning created by the phrases that accompany the meme. In all these cases, whatever point is conveyed by the meme, whatever comicality is produced, is accessible through common human signifiers that can be understood by people who may not be steeped in meme culture. Still, to some extent, the enjoyment of the meme does arise from the fact that these are memes; there is a charm of the meme *qua* meme, which makes it be understood or found funny just a bit more or with a most distinct nature due to its contextualization in and as a meme. But around the time of Doge, in the second half of 2013 and early 2014, this process was reaching a new degree, and the new consciousness in question had begun emerging.

The camp of the colored Comic Sans is not something everyone "gets" in the way that everyone gets a confused expression. (Otherwise, good riddance, we would see far less Comic Sans in the world.) Doge's face itself is not something that "naturally," through commonly transmitted and socially internalized signifiers, conveys some meaning or comicality either. The point is most clear in the case of doge grammar, which involves, as linguist Gretchen McCulloch explained, a defiance of standard "selectional restriction," according to which, for example, the modifier "such" selects for noun phrases, and "so" and "very" select for adjectives. A non-standard usage of these modifiers wouldn't necessarily to be perceived as humorous or conveying some other kind of meaning by semantic norms. It's unusual, but that's about it. Yet, with Doge, in association with the other elements of that meme, it worked, and created a mania. There was something to it that was somewhat humorous—if one got the irony of using colored comic sans, if one saw absurdity in associating that dog with these emotions—and conveyed that ironic wonder ("wow"; "very thinkpiece"). But this was not something one's grandmother on Facebook would understand in the way she would understand the emotion conveyed by Conspiracy Keanu or the meaning conveyed by "Brace Yourselves" (even if she didn't know where the meme originated from). To a large extent, to those familiar with memes, Doge makes sense simply by being situated within the meme-form. It functions through its own memeness.

These two trends, finally, found momentary full convergence in the last big animal meme before Harambe: Dat Boi, the unicycle riding frog everyone loves, or at least loved, until he slipped out of attention, as unexpectedly and suddenly as he had arrived. ("He?" Or "It?" "They?" – if ever we needed a new pronoun, it is now, to designate such not-quite-object, not-quite-subject creatures borne as and of this emerging collective mind.) But before he disappeared, it was noticed at last that he marked meme-consciousness reaching a new stage. As a percipient member of the Internet noted:



Dat Boi is the first – AFAIK – meme born of itself. It is practically areferential. The only even remote candidate for "where it comes from" is a really tenuous connection to "we dem boyz." But that doesn't explain the frog or the unicycle. Or "o shit waddup."

Yet somehow we all *immediately* process the joke. Even though there's no precedent, it's not uninterpretable. It's overflowing with instant humor.

Dat Boi is born without the original sin of any connection to the non-meme world. He is the Meme Christ. He has come to save us all from the iniquities of our innate normiehood.

This is the third era of human history. All because of Dat Boi.

me irl

The moment is indeed profound. Unlike even with Doge, where there was a subversion of grammatical standards that could cause a peculiar amusement, or the ironic font or emotion, there is nothing about Dat Boi that would necessarily draw a coherent, unperplexed response. With Dat Boi, finally, the memosphere reaches autonomous consciousness.

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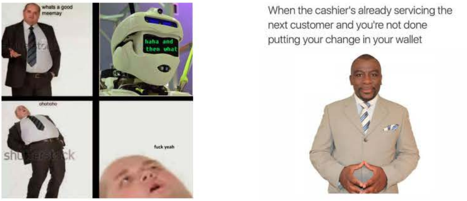
A semiological marvel is fulfilled. Here is the creation of a plane of meaning operating seemingly by itself, not needing referents in the humdrum and foul rest-of-the-world. (*Not* "real world"; with this autonomizing of the memosphere, it is hard to consider it unreal as opposed to any real.) Meme culture, hitherto confined to certain dark trenches of the Internet where it could revel in its own systems of signs such as 4Chan and Reddit, had now surfaced, though these waters would be scaled even more by the next meme in the series, out in the blue open of extensive oceans of media such as Facebook.

As topography changes, so does physiology: With the expansion of the space in which memes can proliferate, new forms of the meme are tinkered with and brought into haphazard circulation. In this the self-referentiality of memes can further manifest and grow. Thus in the last year we have had such a profound shift in what memes could be. Till now memes have largely occurred as an image with some cultural or social reference accompanied by two capitalized, Impact-font lines. Hardly a year ago, Scott Wark began describing them in his essay "The Meme in Excess of its Instance" in these terms. Today those memes still exist, but what works as a meme has just in the last year dramatically expanded. Along with this standard form, variegated others have flourished and started to become normal—which is to say, be understood in and as the mass culture of the Internet.

To all these forms of media that fall under the category of memes, contributing to this situation in which they organically start be understood and enjoyed, there may be certain traits that mark them as memes. For example, an ironically casual lack of concern about low graphic quality or a deliberate effort, even, to use stock images. These function as signifiers of memeness, which in itself draws a certain response from the savvy. However, the cumulative effect of these traits is to create an emergent affect that isn't a simple memeness, reducible to its parts—what is borne as the fundamental quality of a good meme is *dankness*, which began as a somewhat ironic descriptor, but since has marked itself as one of those rare signifiers that is normalized from ironicness to wholeheartedness.

It is hard to specify what exactly dankness is in the context of memes (and, to some extent, even in the context of marijuana, which is probably the most important rhetorical predecessor to its current usage). It falls under that category of things that former Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart used to describe pornography: "You know it when you see it." It's a generic yet very meaningful word to connote goodness about a meme. A meme is either dank, or it's not. It's not quite funniness in a traditional sense, where the humor can be drawn from existing categories such as slapstick or sarcasm. To some extent it is indeed irony, but one gets the sense there is something more—it "overflows with instant humor," as was remarked about Dat Boi.


whats a good meemay
haha and then what
ohohoho
fuck yeah
shutterstock
When the cashier's already servicing the next customer and you're not done putting your change in your wallet

(Two creations of ShitpostBot 5000)

What it indicates, in fact, is the creation of a new consciousness with which reality is sensed. It is an expansion or evolution of senses of humor. Obviously there can be disagreement about whether a meme is dank or not. (The debates over certain memes posted in the Facebook group Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, back in its heyday, served as perfect examples of the subjective nature of what is dank.) But what is dank is not so because of traits that can be isolated. Rather, the whole range of traits that constitute a meme does so by creating something greater than the sum of the traits, which could then be dank, or not be dank.

These traits need not now even include any text. Through their circulation through the common platforms of the meme page and group, memes have further expanded to overlap with other formerly separate aspects of Internet culture: funny pictures, and GIFs, which were earlier in distinct domains of Internet culture from what were considered "memes." What is common to all these now, though, is that factor of immediately working, of there being something to them due to which those familiar with Internet culture just "get it." There doesn't have to be wordplay, or lurid physical humor, or an actual joke in any sense to these images. Yet, something clicks.

Windows
MICROSOFT WINDOWS

Bring forth the meme, Frodo.

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From the theory that humor arises when an expectation is swiftly defied (with the qualification that what occurs instead isn't tragic), sense can be made of this situation. For so many memes of today, the characteristic operation is, perhaps more than anything else, to isolate a fragment of a fundamentally disenchanted social reality, already created or captured in another form of media, in a way such that the fragment, and hence at least some part of reality, appears at least odd, and even, perhaps, re-enchanted.

The feeling accompanying the appraisal of the meme is "this is not supposed to be like this." Not in an ethical sense, or in an aesthetic sense, but almost in a socio-metaphysical sense. Against the sleekness and functionality that neoliberalism would like us to regard and accept as both our descriptive and normative ideal, against the status quo itself as status quo, memes show how much of the world is still odd, as are our own reactions to it, inconducive to exploitation for machine learning algorithms and reduction into marketing data. For reality to feel alienated, against our state of malaise and dysfunction, it must seem different, alien, giving of an impression of cold, impersonal functionality. The reality captured by so many memes fractures this situation: the external world loses its facade of rationality and aimless functionality;

it is presented such that its tenor can much better be captured as, put simply, "wtf," "lol wut?" or "whoa".

The Internet's creative energies, not just through memes, are directed at making out the world as being consistent with our experience of the general world; or in a utopian interpretation, it makes the world, out of those very artifacts that make stale and tiring otherwise, something amazing.

This is taken to the greatest extreme with Vaporwave music and art. Vaporwave first originated in the early 2010's—on the Internet. This is the first remarkable fact about it—the first art movement or subculture that originated purely in the virtual realm, without any geographical origin. It is marked by a pastiche (in the Jamesonian sense) of commodity culture of past decades and ages—most prominently the 80's and 90's (glitch art, early digital graphic design, nu-jazz-influenced Muzak, distorted soul and funk), but also, in certain more niche manifestations, the commodity culture of different periods, for example Laborwave, which incorporates Soviet products. It also exhibits an affinity for tropical habitats (indicating, to some extent, its kinship with the shorter-lived seapunk movement), Roman busts, Japanese culture (of course) and broadly, East Asian cultures in general. Its insertion of the kitsch of capitalism within surreal, frequently discomforting musical sequences, created out of recycled tunes of yore and accompanied by dreamlike hues, have the effect of both re-appropriating and re-enchanting. It is a movement of pure affect, deliberately taking the sterility of late capitalism and repackaging it as art, as a metaphysical *sui generis*.

So many vaporwave albums are overtly conceptual—they take the listener to a particular common situation in the life of *Homo œconomicus*, but by rendering the alienation and deadness of that activity in strange sounds and colors, make it somehow sublime. It is, as it were, showing us a way out of ennui while being forced to live in the same world; it does not try to avoid commodity culture, but reclaims it; it is the vanguard of art, creating the new art of the world and the new world of art out of the shells of the old. And through this year, it has been on a path of mainstreaming—an irritating situation for those concerned about the continued authenticity of any cultural niche, but something that also reflects that the arena and consciousness of the Internet that revels in its areferential ways of understanding is rapidly growing.

But ultimately, keeping in mind the real social activity that could be yielded through the moment of Harambe, the point to be drawn from this narrative about meme culture is that even if such understanding works on its own without prior cultural references, instead merely by taking semantically "free" cultural artifacts and somehow threading them together into meaning, the appreciation of such memes and aesthetics could not occur without a shared consciousness about what the world is. If a meme speaks to us, if Dat Boi makes sense, that sense is ultimately not immediate, it is mediated by an internalized recognition of the content of the meme as being unusual and breaking expectations of what things are supposed to be like in the most fundamental sense.

Thus, prior to that, the sense is mediated by an internalized recognition of existence as disenchanted at best, or hideous at worst, which makes the oddness or freshness of Dat Boi and vaporwave meaningful. For something to stand out as absurd (rather than mere stochastic noise) there must be a scheme of what is not absurd, of the standard that is defied. As different categories of humor work at large because a system of what is normal (say, language, in the case of Doge, or wordplay in general) has been assimilated to an automatic, pre-conscious level in people's minds, it could be said that as more and more people sync up with the kind of consciousness that understands memes, if not appreciates them, this reflects a general understanding of what constitutes disenchanted, ho-hum (post-)modern reality. Memes, for all the aversion toward political readings of the phenomenon, indicate the growth of a consciousness about present-day capitalist society as what it is: a world generally so boring, so alienating and alienated, that any time it is captured in a frame and held still, the absurdity is humorous and offers solace. The world we live in is so wearisome that defamiliarizing the familiar is therapeutic.

However, this consciousness, though autonomous and engaging in areferential memes in a self-contained semantic realm, is not existent yet in fullness. It is a shadow of the subject it could be, a state for which a requisite condition would be interpellation by society beyond that consciousness. It affirms itself in its auto-processing and enjoyment of memes at the point of Dat Boi, but it has not yet established itself as a real thing as much as the human and non-human units out of whose interactions it arises.

To come fully into its own, it must explore its being yet more, much like a child who comes into being as a member of its species by exercising its species-being for a prolonged period of physical and psychological growth. But the opportunities here are limited. Memes such as those highlighted above are innumerable, but they are too scattered and do not cohere well. Dat Boi was a milestone, but it could not last, for the very reason that it was so disconnected from the greater world in and through which the meme-consciousness seeks full existence. Dat Boi memes could not be created *ad infinitum*, for months on end. They were too fanciful to impose on society and seek recognition for with seriousness. But the finally-actualized meme-consciousness wanted to affirm "I exist!"—which is to say, "I exist in the world at large." For this, it had to manifest and exercise this existence—its autonomy as an entity, not requiring reduction or reference to other entities—through something else that need not be restricted by the forced transience of most oddness, something else the meme-consciousness could latch onto and assert itself through for longer than was possible through Dat Boi. Harambe, in this circumstance, was the perfect Trojan horse.

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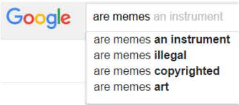
"Why do you keep bringing up that damn frog?" the world would have asked to the memosphere if that mischief had kept on going. And the meme-mind knew that, and in any case, it would not have been able to give the real answer: "Because I am now coming into existence, and want to exercise this existence." The only answer it could have given with a straight face would have been: "Because… it's funny?… because I feel… connected to that frog?"

Whereas with Harambe the situation was different. The element of subterfuge was obvious. Yet as long as it was clung to unabashedly, the world could only allege, but never prove, that it was subterfuge: "Why do you keep bringing up that damn gorilla?" "Because we want justice for him," we could say. But the truth was more so, though not exclusively, "Because we get this, dammit, because it makes *immediate* sense to us, and we can only legitimize and give permanence to ourselves as an immense, singular consciousness that can get this by prolonging this moment, so that we can be more than a glimmer." (Cecil the Lion occupied the pole opposite to Dat Boi. With Cecil, no child was involved, thus no moral dilemma, and so expressing that outrage through memes and subterfuge was not a natural route of addressing the matter, and if pursued, would have been unallowably inappropriate.)

Though there has been some genuine concern about Harambe's death, even if the ironic mode of expressing this could come across as insincere, the longevity of Harambe has not been because of outrage over Harambe, or because of any greater humor or artistic value to the meme. Rather, this meme was long-lived *because it could be*, because of the semi-genuine front of the ethical crusade that was an excuse to keep it alive. After all, Harambe memes also fall into the same category as that of Dat Boi: if you get the Internet, you get it, not even requiring explanation of other entities in the memes. Though Harambe has been conjoined with many other figures, iconic and outré, over the course of the memes, the bare fact of Harambe-in-the-meme, the phenomenon that the memes work, is yet another point in the mind of the Internet attaining autonomy from the norms and semantic webs of the larger world it forms part of, but doing so in response to the expectations and normalcies of that world—the perfect dialectical progression.

The slogan "Dicks out for Harambe" as humor is an interesting case in autonomy being sought in return or escape to primordiality. Simple (which, for the record, does not mean invalid) interpretations of the phrase see it as designating a self-leveling or homage, a proclamation that "we're serious about this; we're doing something about this," or the obvious association of the phallus with a weapon to beat the oppressor with, to avenge Harambe with. But consider the fairly well accepted Aristotelian hypothesis that the origins of (Western, at least) comedy lies in phallic processions that took place in ancient Greece as Dionysiac celebrations. While this may seem a primitive form of humor, one could interpret "Dicks out for Harambe" as a spurning of an ever-more gentrifying, bourgeois world in which ordinary people cannot avail of finer pleasures, where good taste comes with a hefty price tag. It is funny to all those united in the necessity of reclaiming fun in a day and age in which each moment must be spent in precarious productivity—unless you're rich. And almost as if the protest is written into our cosmic, genealogical memory, against the sequestration of pleasure to strata of privilege, it seeks sanctuary and takes pleasure in what is even historically, let alone rhetorically, the most rudimentary form of humor.

The phallus, then, though hidden far and invisible in the unconscious, is the only point of reference from which the birth of this form of consciousness can be traced. As comedy itself, when it first arose, was its own system with its own logics (emerging from a basic relation with the phallus), so now, with that same prop to hold it up initially until it can fly out of the nest by itself and hold its own, a new autonomous system of consciousness is at its germinal point. We are at the point of the ego-formation of the meme-psyche; we are at—or, simply, we are—the mirror stage of the memosphere. What has recently been birthed as an auto-consciousness is now on the path of becoming self-consciousness, *même*-consciousness (the corresponding point to that from Greek history would have been when the concept of comedy as comedy arose). This process will likely not terminate with the popularity of the meme. Harambe has ceased to run rampant around the Internet. However, the process that brought Harambe has been furthered by Harambe, and will continue to find expression again through other things that can be held under the strobe-light of social attention, to bring even more affirmation and social existence upon the kind of consciousness that forms it. Although it does not know it yet, the machine that is the memosphere, by having kept Harambe going so long, has been saying, "We exist," but is not done fully enunciating and establishing this. But the movement has set in motion; the meme, as an object understood by subjects drawing reference from the social world, has become meme-mind, object-subject brought together, with its own autonomous, self-referential semantic operations, and a collective journey.



are memes an instrument

are memes **an instrument**
are memes **illegal**
are memes **copyrighted**
are memes **art**

Harambe, then, in one sense is not to be taken lightly: He-They-It has been a seminal moment in the activation of the mind of the Internet; or rather, the Internet as a mind that has its own logics and sensibilities for understanding signs from all over the social plane. Both Internet culture that draws its meaning from specific cultural productions (say, stills from popular movies or TV shows) and long-established signifiers of particular emotions (even if present on the faces of animals) could be influenced by institutions of power. But the Internet of today, the Internet of Harambe, grows to defy the hegemony of any concerted or haphazard vanguard of meaning-generation, be that the culture industry, the intelligentsia or digital platforms.

However, in another sense, to return to the gorilla who has been reduced to an assortment of images on servers, is a tragedy and presents an aporia—because he exists only lightly, in this immaterial lightness drained of corporeality. So what of Harambe, the simian that was in Cincinnati Zoo? Here too, ongoing processes have advanced, but this is a matter of the other movement, that which scrambles ontology, and as pertains to this instance, renders Harambe from gorilla to non-gorilla.

* * *

Harambe, for all he is—i.e., not just the gorilla, but also as he been held in the mind of the Internet and popular culture at large—is neither simian nor meme, but a cyborg, as paradigmatically described by Donna Haraway. In writing *A Cyborg Manifesto* in the 1980's, she brought up the ontology of the cyborg as coincident with, emergent of and contributive to three boundary breakdowns that she saw taking place then: between the human and non-human animal, largely due to biological science itself; between the organism and machine, due to cybernetic advances; and between the physical and non-physical, largely both due to physics and cybernetics. If those processes had been underway then, right now they are more than thoroughly established. Our smartphones are extensions of our hands and minds, and in all likelihood, Apple's new AirPods aren't the farce they have been received as, and may be remembered as our first widely adopted implants, receiving feedback and whispering information from and to our quotidian activity. And as just one way in which the "animal" as an "animal" in a pristine, "natural" sense keeps on becoming less accurate, more scientific consensus has emerged over the last year that chimpanzees, our so-near, yet still-not-human cousins, are now living in their Stone Age.

In these circumstances, cyborgs are already manifest. But more manifest and concerted cyborgs are post-due—and with them, a "cyborg world [which] might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints." Harambe, in this hope and line, would be best understood as most truly a complex—of gorilla | representations/memes | mass consciousness of representations | becoming of self-consciousness out of consciousness.

Such a conceptualization in which these disparate components are unified in one ontology naturally seems strange. But retrospectively, one day, it may come across as being as arbitrary as one that insists on an inelastic framework in which Harambe, the dead biological unit, is held as separate from the aggregate of Internet culture about it, despite the unceasing connection of the latter with the former. Right now, this latter conceptualization may seem like theoretical fantasization or grandstanding with no basis in an ansatz of "how things really are," and thus immediately subject to dispute from a fundamentally instinctual tradition of individuating different instances of organisms. But if the Internet can indulge in the same category of memes for an entire summer, then an atypical hypothesis about them surely deserves to be indulged—and after all, hasn't the intent of so much radical thought been to conjecture toward ways in which discrete selves or subjects as risen from modern discourse can be disturbed, dislodged and liberated into concatenations or unfoldings less liable to existential curtailment or social repression?

The big stumbling block that might be pointed out against conceiving of Harambe as this cyborg or complex is that the gorilla had a consciousness, subjectivity—a good, strong criterion for considering him as something separate and unassimilable into the nexus being proposed here. That is true, and the conjecture is certainly not that *that* Harambe, with his own consciousness and subjectivity, has at once been retained as a discrete unit and also assimilated into this meme-human-consciousness-nexus. Of course, Harambe as conceived of and existing as that gorilla was finished with the cessation of blood flowing to and from the biological brain in that entity. The existence of Harambe as a cyborg does not incorporate the biological gorilla Harambe as a simple part within a whole.

Still, there has been something of that gorilla in and to the cyborg, in a way that with the memification of Harambe, larger ontological planes have been altered—at once opened, nullified and closed. Harambe existing and conceived as gorilla was annihilated not only in a biological sense, of that one Harambe in the zoo, but also in the sense of what constitutes the bounds of a gorilla, as an object of our thoughts and a subject influencing our thoughts. But Harambe was also created, as always happens when icons are created—and that was a direct transformation arising out of the gorilla, though mediated by planetary-scale semantic, neural and technological infrastructures.

Harambe reverted John Durham Peters' remark that "ontology, whatever else it is, is usually just forgotten infrastructure," as we see that through new associations of infrastructure, new ontology was borne. For Harambe-*même* gave way for meme-Harambe: First, from the gorilla no one had heard of, to the pure subject of controversy, projected with unmediated importance, as is the effect of scandal *qua* scandal. After this, with traits fleshing him out (ironically, only once his flesh was no longer alive) with traits such as goodness and vengeance through Internet memes. Finally, after the memes had reached a certain mass, after he had been anthropocized to the extent required, at the point the anthropocized version could not contain all that was being wreathed onto him, through the abrogation of this substance into re-immateriality—with godliness, beatified, notionally raised to a reality greater than our thoughts of him: He who died for our sins.

Harambe could become divine and ethereal only by way of being constituted as an entity with substantive, anthropic content, by the gorilla becoming not-gorilla. As Haraway writes, "Cyborgs are ether, quintessence"—but only by way of materiality, even if projected, the case of Harambe demonstrates. But then she also writes, "They are about consciousness – or its simulation." The question still stands: What is the consciousness being created or simulated here? Not just Harambe-the-simian, what for gorillas at large can come of the greater social phenomenon? What does the cyborg do for the animal?

In a immediate and direct sense, no consciousness has been created here. Harambe is not going to awaken, aware as a great ether-gorilla, regardless of how much he is hailed by the memosphere, just as God does not become real solely (if at all) by His name being taken by billions. But Harambe as has been newly created, from merely "a gorilla" into something endowed as more than that, may well have implications on conscious things such as Harambe or things simulated as being like Harambe. At the most basic level, even if the genuine sentiments for Harambe the gorilla surfaced largely only with a tongue in cheek, even if the grander reason for the longevity of the meme was the memosphere's search for an outlet to exercise and manifest what it can actually now be, first, there was discussion about the gorilla. The petitions (to rename the Cincinnati Bengals to the Cincinnati Harambes; to secure justice for Harambe by pressing charges against the parents of the child for whom Harambe was shot; to rename Gorilla Glue to Harambe Glue, and hundreds more) were to varying extents serious, and there is something to be said about that. A conservation fund was set up in memory of Harambe. Further down the road, Jill Stein reminded us "to be a voice for the voiceless" to mark three months of his death. The conversation did move forward, and Harambe, as it were, died up to his name, which is a Swahili word meaning "working together, pulling together, helping each other, caring, and sharing." But the degree of reflection on compassion that was produced wasn't because of dour animal rights advocates objecting to the memification of Harambe—it was because of the memification of Harambe.

But even apart from such worldly instances in which the posthumous rights and sentience of Harambe have been championed, the memification of Harambe, the elevation of Harambe into a cyborg, has not only marked but substantiated and furthered the erasure of the divide between the human and non-human. Regardless of the sentiment with which it was conducted, the sheer emotion that has been displayed toward the gorilla, literally as if Harambe were a real person, is not something that has happened ever before. But even to this, the question would be, "If the gorilla isn't being regarded as a *gorilla*, how is this is a victory for *animals*?"

There is no way to answer this without returning, finally, full circle in this analysis, back to the Ljubljana critique. If the hierarchy between animals and humans weren't being altered at all through the process of the memification, then certainly, nothing would happen for animals. But with Harambe, the ontological plane has been altered. Harambe is no longer regarded as a gorilla. Still, surely, that mere *regard* wouldn't be enough for to change conditions for animals. What makes the difference, though, as stated earlier, is the coincidence of this changed orientation regarding a gorilla with the other movement that has led to the first prolonged display of the Internet-mind's areferential self-understanding. The recognition that has been sought with both the movements is not for Harambe the gorilla, but the gorilla as having-become-cyborg; not for Harambe the meme, but the meme as having-become-cyborg. The cyborg is inseparable from the object, in this case the gorilla, and the subject, the consciousness that contemplates it, and with it, forms a full assemblage, autosemiotic and autopoietic, announcing itself, and auguring not only new ontologies, but also earthly cyborgs.

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Thus has a new social body, a cyber-neuro-social machine, come into being. Dear and intrinsic to this new social body—i.e., an entity with potential agency—is another entity's new conceptualization: Harambe as much more than a gorilla. This conceptualization is coded as if into the very defining DNA patterns of this social body, traceable in its evolutionary path. Because of this, it could only be expected that as and if this social body flourishes and proliferates into broader kin, transsubstantiating possibly the cyber- or neuro-categories, its social actions may well necessarily return to the landmark kernel out of which it arose. If it came into being largely by transanimalizing an animal, why would not much of its future pre-occupations bear some affinity to further operations of unanimalizing, ahumanizing, why would it not foster further aspirations of transanimalizing, transhumanizing, transsundering?

Recognizing the possibility of the cyborgification of life and non-life, it could easily be argued that the greatest victory for animal rights may lie precisely in overcoming the status of animals as "animals" (and ours, correspondingly, as "human"), much as radical critique holds that the only way to overcome patriarchy would be to overcome the category of "woman" itself (and that of "man"). Of course, however, the conceptual level (this not being *regarded* as that) is only one level of the issue. Can the memosphere come to infiltrate the greater mass of society, acquire agency to influence not just the currency of affects and images, but also their concretization into new subjects?

For the longest time, it seemed that Internet culture would remain relegated to its own disreputable corners. But in the last year, as the Internet has reached new heights in areferentiality and amplified, hardly conscious of its efforts to assert its full existence, it has spilled over into what has hitherto been demarcated as the "real world"—or sometimes just other worlds, such as the planet named Dixout IV Harambe in the video game No Man's Sky.

Apart from the endeavors involving Harambe, a few of which are mentioned above, other memes and endeavors of the Internet have also pervaded into popular discourse, thus inevitably structuring the latter and rewiring it some extent. Jill Stein has also endorsed dank memes made about her; while Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash, in its prime, became a news topic and much more. Were the world truly democratic, the British research vessel RRS Sir David Attenborough would actually have been named Boaty McBoatface, as the will of the Internet pronounced. Much has been made of the Right's appropriation of Pepe the Frog and its association with Donald Trump; Hillary Clinton even released a statement explaining how Pepe is "a symbol associated with white supremacy," and more recently, the Anti-Defamation League put poor Pepe on its list of hate symbols. (Since then, the creator of Pepe also created this.) Late last month, the 24-year-old millionaire/billionaire founder of Oculus Rift, Palmer Luckey, came out as a Trump supporter who has been funding a meme-producing group called Nimble America to help Trump's campaign. A post introducing Nimble America on Reddit, which appears now to have been deleted, said all that was needed: "We've proven that shitposting is powerful and meme magic is real." As of 2016, memes have become a Presidential matter.

Particularly, as indicated by these examples, the precise kind of politicization going along with the spread of meme culture points to the significance of the kind of cyborg being that is seeing its maturation on and as (predominantly) the Internet: memes are being mobilized as weapons of ideological warfare for political tendencies denied voices by "the establishment"—and they are very effective. The memosphere carries forward the legacy of the subversive projects of the past few decades such as the Cacophony Society and Discordianism. Except, instead of going out and themselves creating situations and scenes that make social reality interesting, bizarre and unalienated, the agents of memes, more so on the pulse of popular culture and its sense of humor than their predecessors, simply curate just the right existing text, sound and image from the world into digital bits. "Vaporwave," the term itself, as an indication of the political proclivity and will of the Internet consciousness that birthed it, is a near-portmanteau of "vaporware," a business term designating a product that has been advertised but is not yet available for purchase, and Marx's waves of vapor, designating the upheavals and ephemeral creations engendered by capitalism: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind." Vaporwave, through its very name, creates a confrontation of capitalist normalcy with Marx.

All these facets of Internet culture seem to endeavor to reclaim reality and re-endow it with a sense that would fly against that which Mark Zuckerberg and other gatekeepers of stale neoliberal cheeriness and amiability would want retained. But the very fact that so many Harambe memes circulated for once in such quantity through Facebook (aside from the usual pastures of Reddit, 4Chan, etc.) and in general, Zuckerberg's hostility to his platform being rendered a marketplace of memes, reflects the potency of the moment. Of course Mark Zuckerberg would want to censor absurd and politically unorthodox meme pages before outlets of clear hate speech. Facebook's entire business model is predicated upon relegating and even moulding interactions to the most indexable and commodifiable for revenue-generation, or for utility to governments with whom alliances would allow it to corner vast markets. Oddness is dangerous for such an organ of the dominant social order, whose sensibilities are as clean and conformist as possible, for a website whose every update contrives to direct our expression and activity to forms ever-more harvestable for data and synchronous with the consumer choices it exists in conjunction with.

In this situation, the warfare between Facebook, on one hand, and Leftbook (the lush nexus of leftist Facebook pages) and Weird Facebook on the other—subliminally percipient as the latter realm is toward the violence, absurdity and alienation inherent in today's society—is not only understandable, but crucial. Facebook (and to a lesser extent, Twitter), so connected to extensive social dynamics, are serving as unwitting mediators between the cyborg of the Internet and the rest of the world that it wishes to infect with its senses. By engaging with memosphere, Facebook has given credence and avenues for it to extend its uncanny vines into the floodplains of society at large.

The Zuckening, then, is no simple protest; it is a representative moment of this new social body exercising its agency as it at once grows diffuse but also more mainstream. This diffusion and mainstreaming does not mean that the same people who made or shared Harambe memes on social media gain power in society; but it does mean that the kind of sensibilities underlying the spread of Harambe memes extend their sway in more and more social units. If politicians address Harambe and Pepe, and tech giants try to restrict them, the process of thinking of them as more than just a gorilla or frog has very much already extended beyond meme pages. The social body with potential agency and a predilection for scrambling and recreating ontologies may be rather near to worldly existence.

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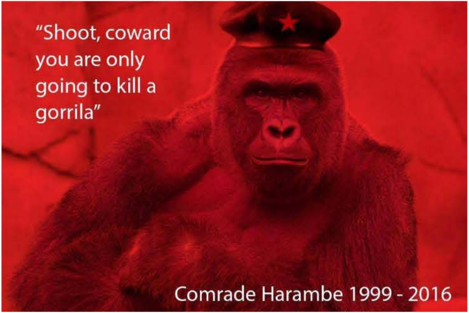
How this thought will be clarified under a coherent banner and how this social body will be concentrated to yield substantive activity is a matter of politics; in other words, a matter of alliances of social production. Something that would only in a vague, genealogical sense be an animal rights movement could come out of this—except it would not involve "animals" as created as an object of science over the last few centuries, but new ontologies.

If Harambe has reached a certain degree of permeation into our psyche, that will proffer energy toward new collective, technical cyborg endeavors. These would not be endeavors specifically to resurrect the gorilla. Rather, they would allow greater immersion of entities formerly regarded as animals into fields of signs, greater immersion of humans into physical forms and preoccupations departing from modern discourse and humanist decrees, and greater experimentation with minds that span the organic and inorganic, the human and non-human. Why not imagine artificial intelligences whose being resides at the point of the membrane—between collective neural network and organic forms, inspired by cultural stepping stones such as Harambe? In the biological triage humans will be bound to engage in during the Anthropocene, why not imagine conjoinments of populations with software, better enabling feedback with human systems of stewardship and self-regulation in radically unstable ecologies? Why not imagine an animal rights movement devoted to the cognitive enhancement of at least some advanced mammals in whom this could be capable, literally giving animals a voice for themselves? If the world out of which this cyborg consciousness arose is so worn out that defamiliarizing familiar elements of that world is therapeutic, then why wouldn't this cyborg consciousness undertake to materialize the being and aesthetic—or should we say, the a e s t h e t i c—that revitalizes the world? These are all political economic struggles—indeed as all technical endeavors are.

The initial steps for all this have already been taken, though these were possible, with retrospective necessity, only under the sign and sight of Harambe. To all that may come, the techne, logos and polity, the byword will be, even if only as a talisman, a signal toward a cosmos yet to be plied while concurrently a reminder of where we come from—Harambe. The inception point, in terms of how much an animal could mean to us without even remaining an animal, having transcended being an animal, having lifted even that most ethereal of spheres, the Internet, to bring about intrusions into the larger sociopolitical realm—Harambe. The seminal germ marking the memosis—emergence that is characteristic of transbiological, visionary cyborg reproduction, in contrast to the divisionary mitosis or meiosis of genetics—through which this autonomous consciousness came to invoke itself and linger long enough to become a social body—Harambe. This social body, too, forever inscribed, from the initial moment of this memosis with a peculiar, structuring obsession, which will haunt its ensuing consciousness, direct its vocation—Harambe. The folding upon each other of the sign and the signified into a form sublating the distinction of real and virtual, organic and inorganic, reality and consciousness, the named and the name; the calling forth of these two sides, as well as infinite others, rowdy, restless and scintillating, the coming together of desires, ontologies and subjects, as designated by the meaning of—now no different from the matter of—Harambe.


"Shoot, coward you are only going to kill a gorrila"
Comrade Harambe 1999 - 2016