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MARIYA ROHOZHA

MEMES OF WAR IN THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF UKRAINIAN MEDIA

CHARACTERISTICS AND FUNCTIONS



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ACCESS POINTS

Publication Series of the Centre for Advanced Study
Access to Cultural Goods in Digital Change
at the University of Münster

Edited by Ursula Frohne and Reinold Schmücker

Editors:
Eberhard Ortland, Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov, Nora Kluck, Daniel Schlageter

Graphic design and typesetting:
Stefan Klatt, Daniel Schlageter

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Mariya Rohozha

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Characteristics and Functions

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Cover illustration: Sheet of Ukrainian postage stamps “Русскій воєнний корабль, іді…!”, issued in 2022

Centre for Advanced Study Access to Cultural Goods in Digital Change, Münster
Published in Germany 2026

ISSN: 3054-4092
ISBN: 978-3-69012-018-0
DOI: 10.17879/02968545508
URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:6-02968546021

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at https://dnb.dnb.de.

The Centre for Advanced Study Access to Cultural Goods in Digital Change is funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) (Project number: 449836922).

Funded by
Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation

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Contents

Preliminary Remarks 5

I Entertainment and News: The Informative Function of Memes 5

II Catharsis and Relief: The Therapeutic Function of Memes 16

III Solidarity and Resistance: The Consolidating Function of Memes 23

Conclusion. 27

References 28

Illustrations 30

Preliminary Remarks

Memes are one of the phenomena that have gained prominence during the Russo-Ukrainian War ad have acquired specific functions. The term *meme* traces back to the Ancient Greek word *mimema* (imitating thing) and was coined by Richard Dawkins, who tried to explain circulating cultural phenomena, their self-replication, and their propagation using examples of catchphrases, clothing fashion, and melodies.[1]

Research on memes is multidisciplinary and has gained impetus from the Russo-Ukrainian War. The specificity of memes related to this war is attracting the attention of historians, archivists, linguists, and cultural scientists, among whom are Anna Rakityanskaya,[2] Iryna Drapp,[3] Laada Bilaniuk,[4] and Bridget Goodman.[5] In the context of recent humanities studies, the nature of memes was explored through the functions that they have performed in the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The basis for this consideration was an article by Svitlana Shvachko and Valeriia Mykhailiuk that investigated the specifics of humor in a digital environment and listed the characteristics of memes: virality, replicativity, emotionality, seriality, mimicry, minimalism of form, polymodality, topicality, humor, mediality, and fantasy.[6] The article outlined the essence and nature of memes, but did not provide arguments, explanations, or illustrations, which leaves the list of characteristics incomplete. The goal of the present article is to make up for this omission.

I Entertainment and News: The Informative Function of Memes

The term *meme* is widespread in the context of digitally born media products. It is used for the designation of stable combinations of ideas and images in visual or verbal form that quickly circulate online and have complex influences on their audience for entertainment. For example, face memes (Fig. 1) that appeared in 2011 attracted the attention of their

1 Richard Dawkins: *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
2 Anna Rakityanskaya: "The SUCHO Ukrainian War Memes Collection," *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 24/1 (2023), 53–70, DOI: 10.1080/15228886.2023.2169634.
3 Iryna Drapp: "'Khaĭmarsy', Medvedchuk i kotyky. Typolohiia ukraïns'kykh memiv pro viĭnu," *TEXTY.ORG.UA*, 5 October 2022, https://texty.org.ua/articles/107856/khajmarsy-medvedchuk-i-kotyky-typolohija-memiv-pro-vijnu/ [22 July 2026].
4 Laada Bilaniuk: "Creativity and resilience in the face of Russia's war," in: *Dispossession. Anthropological Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, ed. by Catherine Wanner, New York: Routledge, 2024, 143–166.
5 Bridget Goodman: "Russian Warship, Go F*ck Yourself": Circulating Social Media Discourses in Russia-Ukraine War," in: *Dispossession. Anthropological Perspectives on Russia's War Against Ukraine*, ed. by Catherine Wanner, New York: Routledge, 2024, 167–187.
6 Svitlana Shvachko & Valeriia Mykhailiuk: "Spetsyfika humoru v merezhi Internet," *Naukovi zapysky. Seriia: Filolohichni nauky* 187/1–2 (2020), 230–235, DOI: 10.36550/2522-4077.2020.187.36, pp. 233–234.

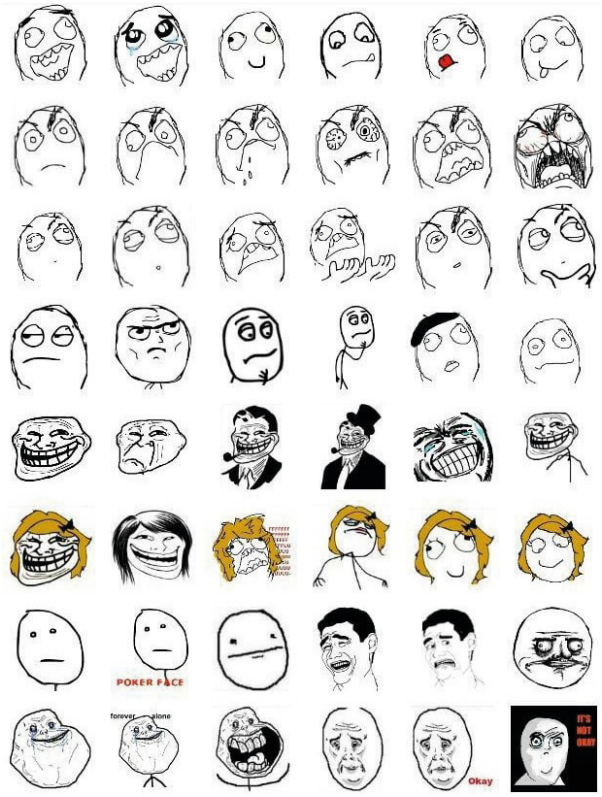


Fig. 1: Face memes (around 2011)

audience and involved them in some kind of intellectual game as memes were able to generate associations and provoke interest.

This complicated intellectual game explicates hidden cultural content and creates, activates, or renews associations for comic effect, which has to be done by the audience. Memes do not work directly and rectilinearly. A relevant example is a famous Ukrainian proverb "Козацькому роду нема переводу." The direct translation, "Cossack genealogy has no translation," is meaningless, and the literary translation, "Cossack kinship does not disappear," only briefly outlines the set of connotations of the proverb, such as the immortality of the Cossack spirit of Ukrainians, as well as their bravery, pride, endurance, and so on. The same idea applies to memes. Understanding them is possible only through complicated intellectual activities within the cultural context in which a person is engaged. Without this, many memes cannot be comprehended. Understanding presupposes a common language and cultural environment, as well as common language games of the audience (with a wide, non-special philosophical meaning) when aesthetic tasks are resolved, such as jokes, puns, and tropes, including metaphors and periphrases. This is the first approach to understanding the nature of memes.

Memes reflect the peculiarities of the media space and landscape. Thus, it is necessary to discuss "*mediality*." It is also necessary to briefly outline the contours of the media landscape of Ukraine after the full-scale invasion by Russian troops to place the memes in context. This landscape has a few main tendencies: 1) The audience is shifting from television programs to news channels on smartphones (*Viber* and *Telegram*). 2) Due to the widespread use of television in the pre-war period, the public has become unaccustomed to reading the news, but news channels on smartphones bring them back to written news, albeit in a shortened version on smartphone applications, which provide news more quickly and with varying degrees of censorship (which will be discussed in more detail below). 3) However, such abbreviated news has not replaced the entertainment block, which has traditionally been spread through television. On smartphones, however, it has partially been replaced by memes.

Thus, the entertainment function of memes has combined with the news, which they complement on a qualitatively different level. Eric P. Bucy and Maria Elizabeth Grabe, exploring television, argue that the audience remembers images better than verbal narra-

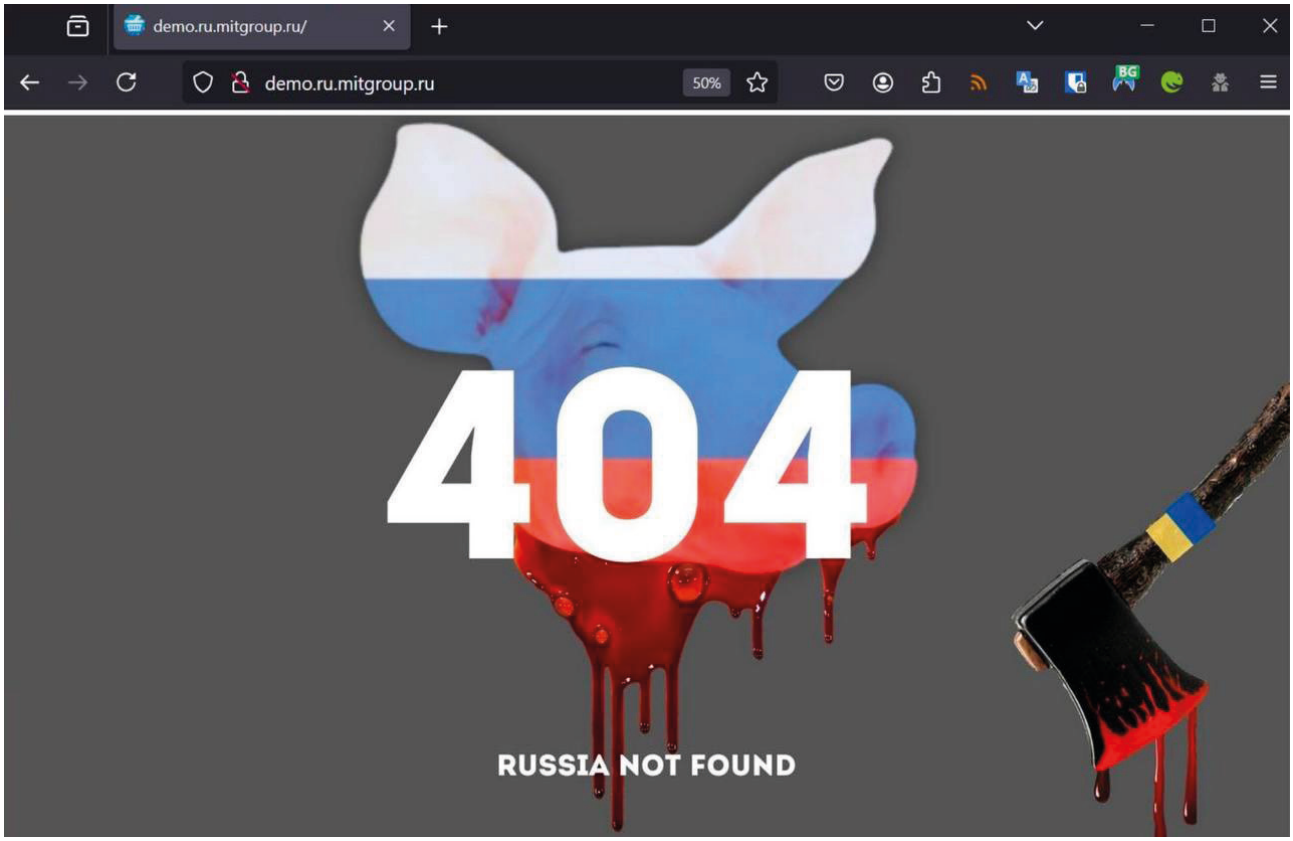


Fig. 2: "RUSSIA NOT FOUND" (15/16 July 2024)

tives.[7] This phenomenon has been explained by a biological basis of visual processing. In the process of evolution, the first skill was seeing, and skills of thinking and reading were developed much later. Thus, the audience fixes visual memes in their memory better than pure verbal news from media channels such as *Viber* and *Telegram*.

In memes, we can see news formatted as images, and visual communication has turned out to be more effective than verbal narratives in the post-television era. For example, on 16 July 2024, the *Telegram* news channel Ukraine Now posted a news item in the form of a meme (Fig. 2) and added text information indicating that the day before, the Main Directorate of Intelligence and cyber volunteers had attacked almost a hundred Russian web resources. As of 16 July, there were still 39 Russian websites under attack. This news example demonstrates that although the meme is *polymodal*, consisting of an idea presented by the image and very often the text (verbal narratives), the image is the dominant component of the meme.

Another feature of memes is *mimicry* of the image component. This refers to the imitation by memes of different genres of art, such as caricatures, posters, comics, and postcards.[8] This is despite the fact that memes are not works of art, no matter how flawlessly they are executed.

7 Eric P. Bucy & Maria E. Grabe: "Taking Television Seriously: A Sound and Image Bite Analysis of Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1992–2004," *Journal of Communication* 57/4 (2007), 652–675, DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2007.00362.x, p. 655.

8 Shvachko & Mykhailiuk: "Spetsyfika humoru," 234.

According to Walter Benjamin, (re)production in memes of definite images, even highly artistic images, devalues them because of the elimination of their *aura*—their unique existence.[9] A reproduced image becomes mass-produced and loses its uniqueness and artistic value.

Memes related to the Russo-Ukrainian War have often lacked clearly defined authorship because they appear anonymously on specialized new media channels and replicate. Meme creators generally do not claim copyright over their memes. Memes spread, multiply, and represent a modern variation of folklore. We note the *folklore basis* of memes here and will return to it for clarification.

According to Anna Rakityanskaya: "Unlike formal news media or works of art, memes survive through propagation. They are rooted in the present and disappear very quickly, being replaced by newly created ones."[10] Thus, *propagation* is an inevitable characteristic of ephemeral memes as media products. Like news, especially in the digital environment, memes live here and now, created under the current moment. An obvious feature of memes is *topicality*.

The propagation of memes and topicality have a news aspect and a dependence on cultural context. Understanding memes requires engagement not only in intellectual games but also in current cultural and social circumstances, knowing news, and knowing their prerequisites. *Background culture* is a term that John Rawls uses. Rawls never paid special attention to the development of this term and generally noted the presence of background culture in response to communitarian criticism regarding the lack of rooting of the theory of justice in the socio-cultural circumstances of public life. But the term seems apt to describe the social and cultural conditions and circumstances in this study. Background culture is distinct from the political culture and the culture of civil society and includes all citizens and their myriad associations, worldviews, discursive forums, and "full and open" discussions. The background culture "is the culture of the social, the culture of daily life with its many associations," where citizens can discuss anything and everything.[11] In other words, citizens share common cultural and historical experience, events, and news.

A good example to illustrate these specifics of memes is a series of memes based on a viral video with a Russian woman, a tourist leaving Crimea after explosions at the airbase in Novofedorivka near Saki on 9 September 2022. The woman in the video is sobbing in the back seat of a car and says that she does not want to leave Crimea: "I do not want to leave Alushta, Crimea, at all! It is so cool here and it is like being at home" (Fig. 3). In fall 2022 in Ukraine, this video was considered evidence of how Russians experienced the horrors of wartime that Ukrainians were living in and provoked myriads of memes, an eponymous series.

But it is impossible to comprehend this series without knowing the basic event of the explosion in Novofedorivka and further topical episodes in the Russo-Ukrainian War, such

9 Walter Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1936], in: *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968, 217–251.

10 Rakityanskaya: "The SUCHO Ukrainian War Memes Collection," 55.

11 Micah Lewin: "Culture, political vs. background," in: Jon Mandle & David A. Reidy (eds.): *The Cambridge Rawls Lexicon*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 171–176, DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781139026741.051, p. 173.



Fig. 3: Still from Lavka Zadovolen: *Ne khochu uezzhat' iz Kryma* [I do not want to leave Crimea] [video] (10 August 2022)

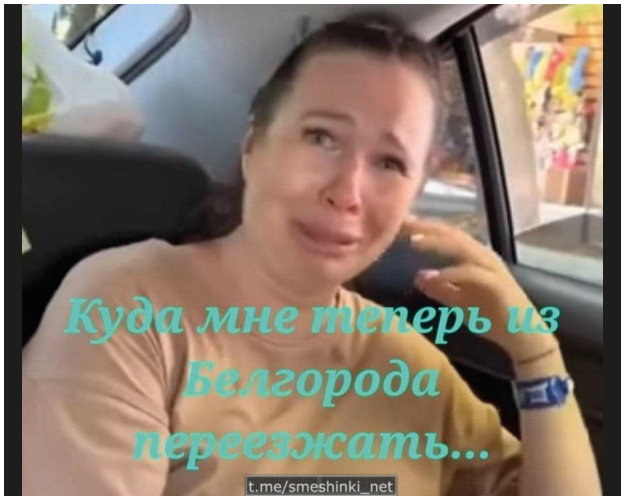


Fig. 4: "Kuda mne teper' iz Belgoroda pereezzhat'..." [Where should I move to from Belgorod now...] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 5: "—Nu perestan'te uzhe vozit' menia tuda-siuda!.." [—Oh, stop carting me back and forth already!..] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

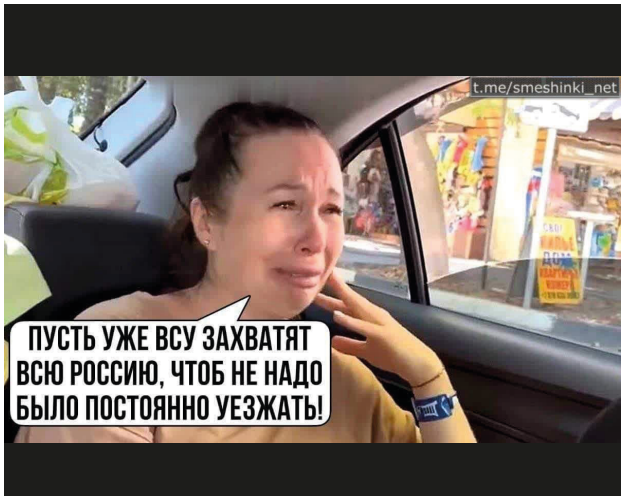


Fig. 6: “PUST' UZHE VSU ZAKHVATIAT VS ROSSIIU, CHTOB NE NADO BYLO POSTOIANNO UEZZHAT'!” [At this point, they might as well let the Ukrainian Armed Forces take over all of Russia, so we wouldn’t have to keep fleeing all the time!] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

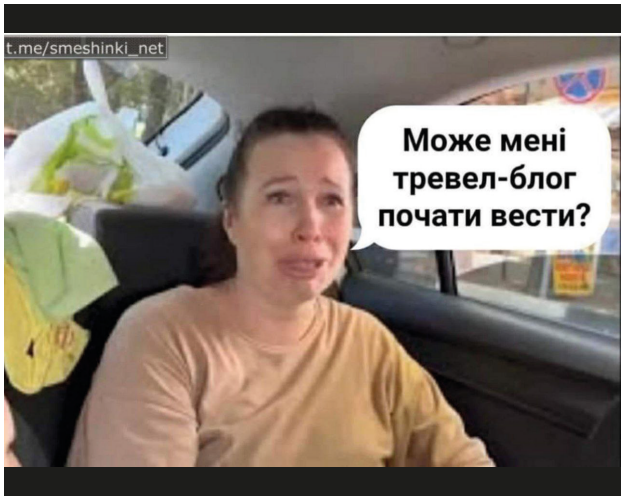


Fig. 7: “Mozhe meni trevel-bloh pochaty vesty?” [Maybe I should start running a travel blog?] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 8: “voobshche ne khochu uezzhat'! / [Vasyl Maliuk, Head of the Security Service of Ukraine:] Ne uĭdesh” [I really don’t want to leave at all! / You won’t be leaving] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

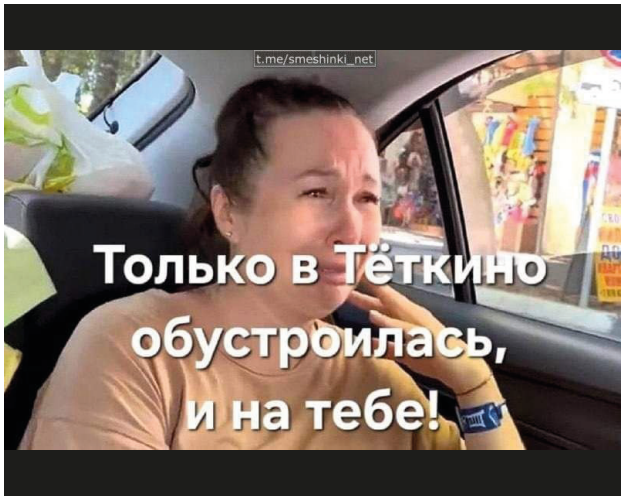


Fig. 9: “Tol'ko v Tëtkino obustroilas', i na tebe!” [I had just gotten comfortable in Tyotkino, and then—bam!] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 10: “VOOBSHCHE NE KHOCHU UEZZHAT' IZ SUDZHI!” [I really don't want to leave Sudzha at all!] [internet meme], Telegram, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 11: “Dumala khot' v Egipte mozhno pozhit' spokoĭno..” [I thought that at least in Egypt one could live in peace..] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

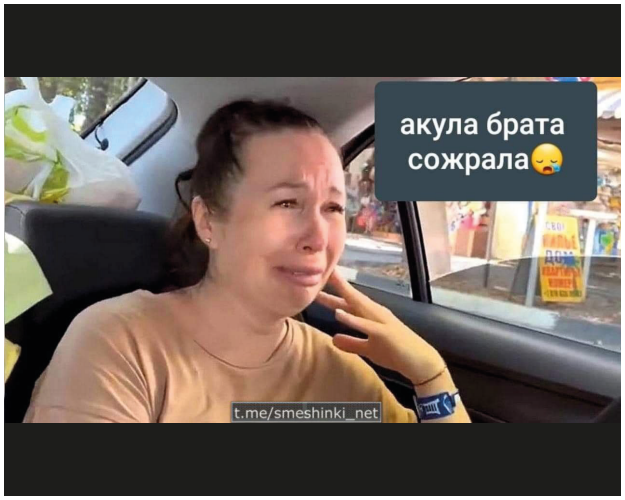


Fig. 12: “akula brata sozhrala” [a shark ate my brother] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

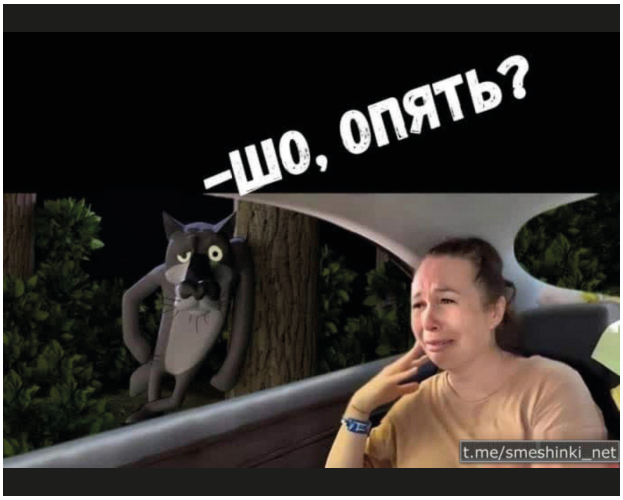


Fig. 13: “—Sho, opiat'?” [—What, again?] [internet meme], *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

as drone attacks on Russian territories (Fig. 4–9), battles for the Russian town of Sudzha in 2024 (Fig. 10), and the case of a Russian tourist who was eaten by a shark in Egypt in 2023 (Fig. 11–12) and other episodes as well as Soviet cartoons.[12]

It is also important to note the ability of memes to create series united by a common theme, design, and ascending variation of a basic image. In addition to the "I do not want to leave"-series mentioned already, the "Air Force"-meme (Povitriani syly) can be used to illustrate the *serial nature* of memes. The basic unit of the series is a typical Ukrainian Air Force morning report on the results of repelling drone and missile attacks overnight (Fig. 14), which is published in *Telegram* news channels. Further, in 2023–2024, a series of memes emerged about the destruction of the Luna-25 automatic interplanetary station (Fig. 15), failures in the *Diya* mobile app (Fig. 16), *Telegram* (Fig. 17–18), *Kyivstar*, the leading Ukrainian mobile operator (Fig. 19), the destruction of Russian equipment (Fig. 20–23), as well as other topical events in the Ukrainian media space, such as the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on 19 May 2024 (Fig. 24), the loss by the British boxer Tyson Luke Fury to the Ukrainian boxer Oleksandr Usyk in May 2024 (Fig. 25), and other events.

Here, we see the development of the "*replicativity*" characteristic in memes. Memes in series multiply, form an endless reproduction of the basic unit, mutate, and enrich the series.

Summarizing these characteristics, we can see the key characteristic of memes of *virality* based on the entertainment function combined with the news function. Dawkins' naturalistic explanation of the nature of a meme as a virus[13] helps us understand its epidemiological spread in the media space, where it affects the masses.

12 One example is an animated short film based on a Ukrainian folk tale: *Zhil-byl pës* [Once Upon a Time There Lived a Dog] by Edward Nazarov (1982), where a wolf said famous words: "Sho, opiat'?" [What, again?] (Fig. 13).

13 Richard Dawkins: "Viruses of the Mind," in: *Dennett and His Critics*, ed. by Bo Dahlbom, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, 13–27.



Fig. 14: "ZBYTO: / – 29 udarnykh BpLA 'Shahed-136/131' / Povitriani Syly" [Shot down: / – 29 "Shahed-136/131" strike UAVs / Air Force] (15 August 2024), *Telegram*, Povitriani syly ZS Ukraïny / Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine



Fig. 15: "ZNYSHCHENO: / – avtomatychna mizhplanetna stantsiia 'Luna-25' / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – the automatic interplanetary station "Luna-25" / Air Force] [internet meme] (19 August 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

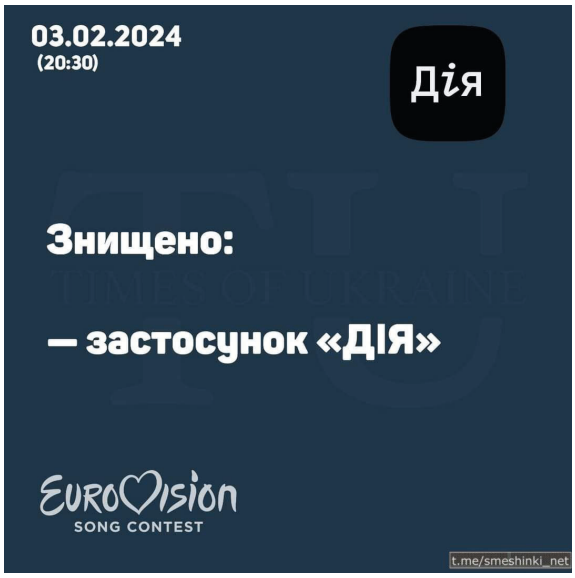


Fig. 16: "Diia / Znyshcheno: / – zastosunok 'DIIA' / Eurovision Song Contest" [Diya / Destroyed: / – mobile app "Diya"] [internet meme] (3 February 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

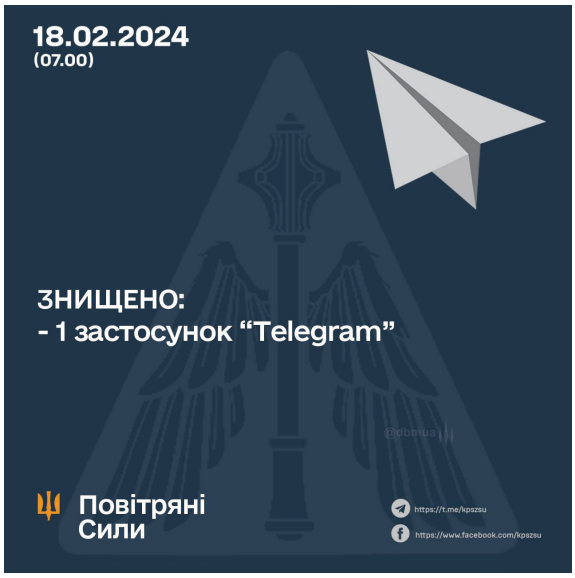


Fig. 17: "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 1 zastosunok 'Telegram' / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – 1 "Telegram" mobile app / Air Force] [internet meme] (18 February 2024), *Telegram*, Derzhavne biuro memiv

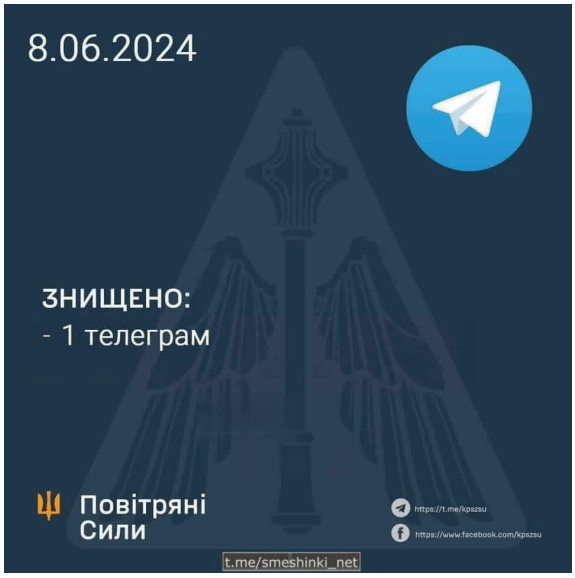


Fig. 18: "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 1 telehram / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – 1 telegram or Eliminated: – 1 Telegram account or Shut down: – 1 Telegram channel / Air Force] [internet meme] (8 June 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

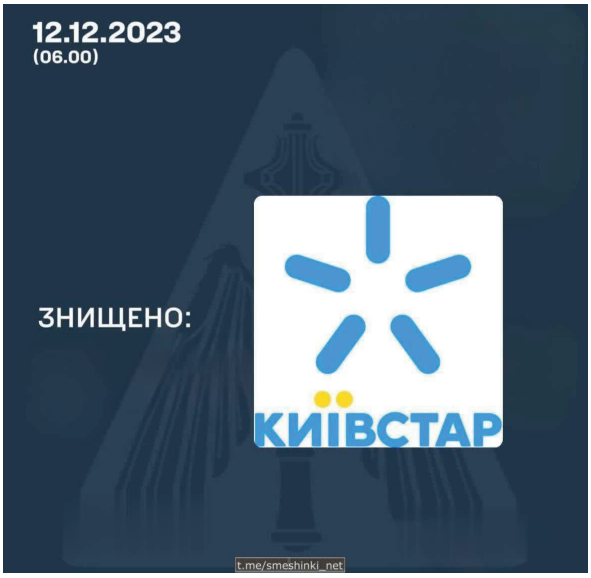


Fig. 19: "ZNYSHCHENO: / KYÏVSTAR" [Destroyed: "Kyivstar" mobile communication] [internet meme] (12 December 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 20: "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 3 vynyshchuvacha-bombarduval'nyka Su-34 / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – 3 Su 34 fighter-bombers / Air Force] [internet meme] (22 December 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 21: "Fighterbomber / Prekratite isteriku! Oni vse skriniat i rzhut!!!!!!!!! // ZNYSHCHENO: / – litak dal'noho radiolokatsiĭnoho vyiavlennia A-50 /– povitrianyĭ komandnyĭ punkt Il-22 / Povitriani Syly" [Fighterbomber / Stop the hysteria! They are all screenshotting and laughing their heads off!!!!!!!!! // Destroyed: /– an A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft /– an Il-22 airborne command post / Air Force] [internet meme] (14 January 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

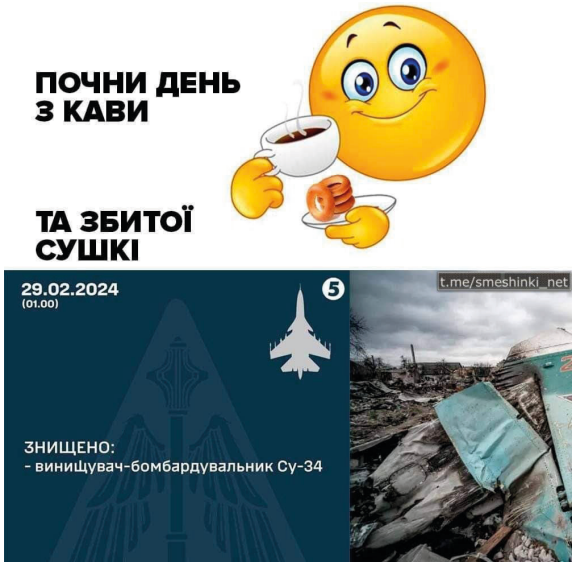


Fig. 22: "POCHNY DEN' Z KAVY / TA ZBYTOÏ SUSHKY // ZNYSHCHENO: – vynyshchuvach-bombarduval'nyk Su-34" [Start your day with a coffee / and a downed sushka // Destroyed: / – a Su-34 fighter-bomber] [internet meme] (29 February 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 23: "Diakuiemo PPO!!! // ZNYSHCHENO: / – 2 BR 'Iskander-M'/KN-23/'Kyndzhal' / – 29 krylatykh raket Kh-101/Kh-555" [Thank you, Air Force!!! // Destroyed: – 2 "Iskander-M"/ KN-23/"Kyndzhal ballistic missiles" / – 29 X101/X-555 cruise missiles] [internet meme] (21 March 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky



Fig. 24: "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 1 Mi-171, – Ibrakhim Raïsi / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: – 1 Mi 171 helicopter, – Ebrahim Raisi / Air Force] [internet meme] (19 May 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

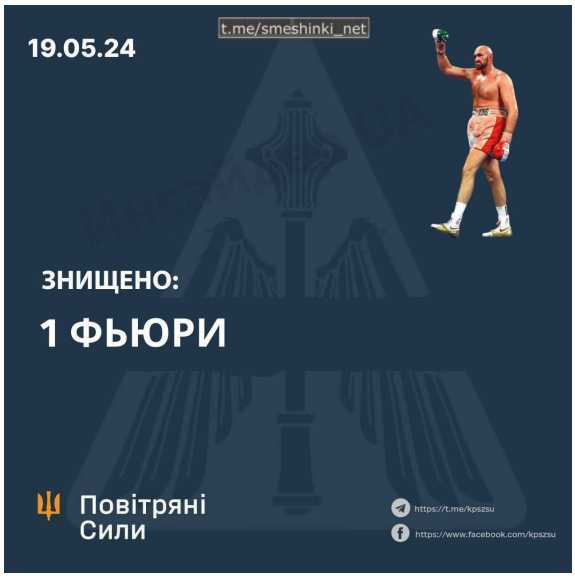


Fig. 25: "ZNYSHCHENO: / 1 F'IURY / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: 1 Fury / Air Force] [internet meme] (19 May 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

II Catharsis and Relief: The Therapeutic Function of Memes

The war has activated the therapeutic function of memes, which emerged when public safety—as a fundamental right—was compromised. The therapeutic function actualized emotional cohesion and provided a cultural good. *Emotionality* can be noted as a characteristic of memes, which is self-explanatory.

The first weeks of the full-scale invasion produced giant transformations in different spheres of the public and private life of Ukrainians, who experienced unbelievable elements in their daily life. An important element of relaxation in such extraordinary circumstances was "carnival" communication. Communication with the help of *abusive language* inherent in a carnival began to provide psychological balance for people.

The historical roots of this mechanism were explored in the book *Rabelais and His World* by Mikhail Bakhtin. He noted that in prehistoric society, abusive language was the language of magic and incantations, but in a carnivalesque world, it was transformed, it lost its magical and practical character, and it gained a universal character.[14]



Fig. 26: Boris GROH: Russkiĭ voennyĭ korabl', idi...! Slava Ukraïni! / Russian warship, go...! Glory to Ukraine!, commemorative Ukrainian postage stamp, 2022



Fig. 27: President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy (left), Ukrposhta Director General Ihor Smilyanskyi (center), and Commander of the Ukrainian Naval Forces Oleksiy Neizhpapa (right) participate in the official first-day cancellation ceremony for the commemorative postage stamp "Russian warship... Done!," Kyiv, 23 May 2022 [press photo]

At the beginning of the full-scale war, Ukrainians had a sense of their usual way of life being destroyed. This feeling is in tune with Bakhtin's assertion that in a carnivalesque world, we deal with ambivalence—the old world gives birth to a new one, and thus "that which stands behind negation is by no means nothingness but the 'other side' of that which is denied, the carnivalesque upside down."[15] However: "These abuses were ambivalent: while humiliating and mortifying they at the same time revived and renewed."[16] This is where the therapeutic function of abusive language at a carnival is manifested, that is, from the womb of the old, a new world is born.

14 See Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World,* transl. Hélène Iswolsky, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984, 16.
15 Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World*, 410.
16 Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World*, 16.



Fig. 28: "RUSSKIĬ VOENNYĬ KORABL'—IDI NA@KHUĬ" [Russian warship, go fuck yourself!], proposal for a commemorative Ukrainian postage stamp, 2022



Fig. 29: Nikita TITOV: [Russian warship, go fuck yourself!] [internet meme] (3 March 2022)



Fig. 30: "SYNIĬ EKRAN SMERTI, IAKYĬ OBRUSHYV SVITOVI KORPORATSIĬ // NAKHUĬ" [The blue screen of death that hit the world's corporations // Fuck you] [internet meme] (19 July 2024), *Telegram*, Derzhavne biuro memiv



Fig. 31: Alex Blokha: "RUSSKIĬ VOENNYĬ KORABL'—IDI NAKHUĬ" [Russian warship, go fuck yourself!] [photo] (3 March 2022)

"The object that has been destroyed remains in the world but in a new form of being in time and space; it becomes the 'other side' of the new object that has taken its place."[17] A new world and a new reality are being born for Ukrainians in war.

From the first days of the invasion, the phrase, "Fuck you, Russian warship," became famous. It was stated by the Ukrainian border guard from Snake Island, Roman Hrybov, when a Russian warship demanded that border guards surrender to them. Later on, the Ukrainian postal service would issue a stamp based on this event (Fig. 26–27). But from the first days of invasion, the variety of memes related to the slogan "Russian warship …" was impressive (Fig. 28–31).

17 Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World*, 410.

There was also widespread daily use of abusive language, and real-life phrasings were the first examples. Abusive language inscriptions about the Russian warship were placed in public places on billboards, homemade signs, and even road signs (Fig. 31). At the end of February 2022, even state-controlled media and respectable private media actively used such language.

We can distinguish two types of abusive language: light and aggressive. The light swearing, as Iryna Bondarevska considers, creates an atmosphere of intimacy in a community that uses it.[18] Both of these versions can be found in war, but the aggressive swearing tends to be more effective for a therapeutic function. It fuels anger in both the speaker and the opponent while simultaneously providing relief to the speaker. However, regardless of the type, swearing usually produces the opposite of the desired outcome.

In fact, using abusive language represents a decline in moral standards within the public sphere and broadens what is considered acceptable—the Overton window. Once this has happened, to return to a state before swearing became widespread. This is why historically, many societies forbade the use of abusive language in everyday situations and left it only for ritual actions as they believed it could adversely impact a person's fate.

The use of abusive language after the first weeks of invasion was gradually normalized, especially far from the frontline. *Humor* in memes has a particular role in this context. As we have already seen, some war news that becomes memes gains a comedic flavor. Sometimes, we see memes in social media first and later on read news about them. Thus, memes accompanied the news and turned news into comedy about the Russo-Ukrainian War.

If we mention the psychological rehabilitation of the audience, we have to note that laughter has a therapeutic function within the carnivalesque. This became obvious in the second stage of the war, when Ukrainians had understood that it would be longer than 2–3 weeks and more complicated than battle directly at the frontline. Thus, we can note *"carnivalesque"* as a characteristic of memes.

We can see the development of the idea concerning the folklore basis of memes.[19] Vladimir Propp in his article, "Ritual Laughter in Folklore,"[20] positioned laughter as a symbol of triumph over death. The defeat and death of an enemy represent the victor's survival and success and, more notably, model the prevailing spirit of life. This idea can provide therapeutic relief from traumatic experiences in the present moment and maintain a beacon of hope during times of despair and failure. In the Russo-Ukrainian War, the theme of overcoming the fear of death is actualized in black humor and addressed through memes. One such therapeutic relief is represented by the well-known series of "dead Russians" memes depicted in black body bags (Fig. 32).

18 Iryna Bondarevska (Iryna Bondarevs'ka)*: Paradoksal'nist' estetychnoho v ukraïns'kiĭ kul'turi XVII–XVIII st.*, Kyiv: Parapan, 2018, 231.

19 Special thanks are given to Anna Rakityanskaya for a hint about such a turn in the consideration of memes, who expressed it at a discussion of a presentation at a conference in Gdansk in 2023.

20 Vladimir Propp: "Ritual'nyĭ smekh v fol'klore" [1939], in: *Fol'klor i deĭstvitel'nost'*, Moscow: Nauka, 1976, 174–204.

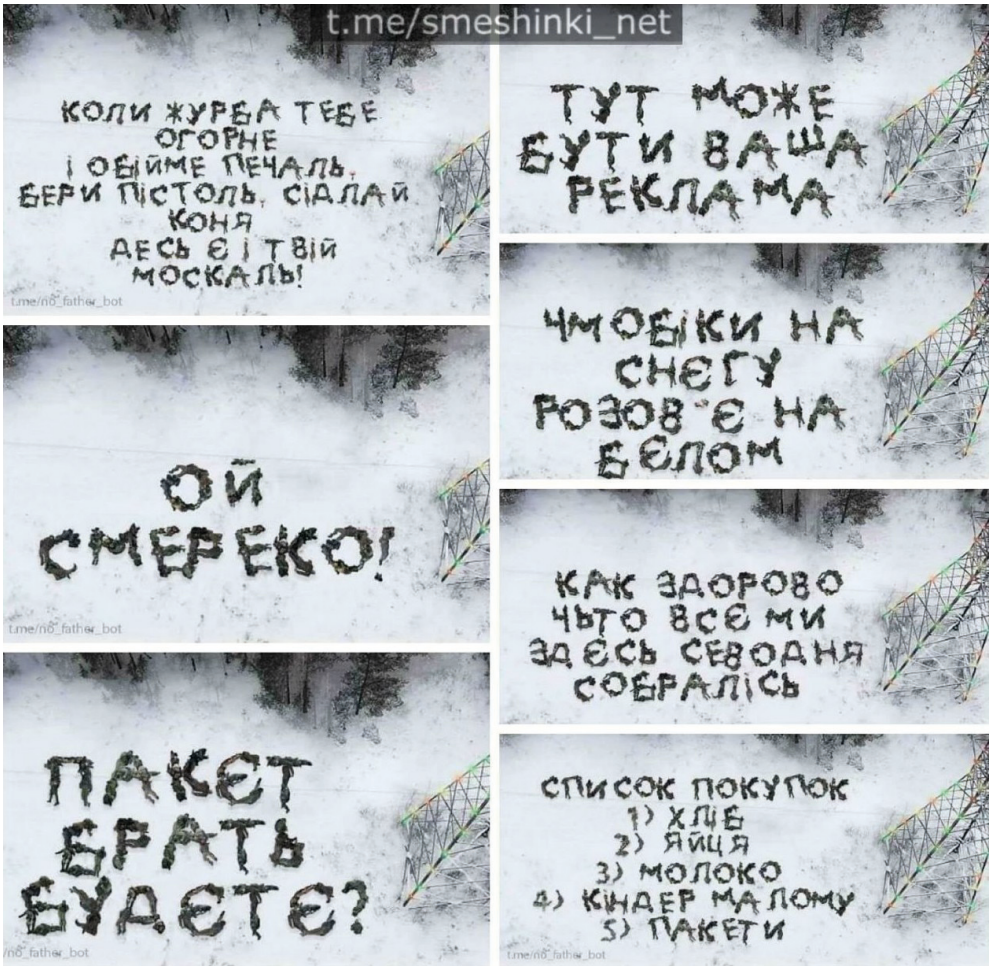


Fig. 32: "KOLY ZHURBA TEBE OHORNE / I OBIĬME PECHAL', / BERY PISTOL', SIDLAĬ KONIA / DES' IE I TVIĬ MOSKAL'! // TUT MOZHE BUTY VASHA REKLAMA // OĬ SMEREKO! // CHMOBIKY NA SNEHU ROZOV'IE NA BIELOM // KAK ZDOROVO CH'TO VSIE MY ZDIES' SEVODNIA SOBRALIS' // PAKET BRAT' BUDETE? // SPYSOK POKUPOK / 1) KHLEB / 2) IAĬTSIA / 3) MOLOKO / 4) KINDER MALOMU / 5) PAKETY" [When sorrow envelops you / and grief embraces you, / grab a pistol, saddle your horse / there is a Russian out there for you too! // Your ad could be here // Oh, spruce tree! // Chmobiks are pink on the white snow // How wonderful that we are all gathered here today // Would you like a bag? // Shopping list / 1) Bread / 2) Eggs / 3) Milk / 4) Kinder Surprise for the little one / 5) Bags [internet meme] (March 2022), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

The basic unit for this series was associated with provocative news on 1 January 2023. Then, a false claim originating from Russian websites circulated on social media. They reported that Ukrainians had displayed a portrait made of deceased Russian soldiers on the battlefield to celebrate Stepan Bandera's birthday (Fig. 33). This misinformation sparked a wave of black humor among Ukrainians. Utilizing specific software, they generated pictorial expressions and phrases.

From the very beginning, this series caused a mixed reaction from the audience. The case essentially boils down to two main viewpoints.

On the one hand, in times of war, any measures that boost national morale could be considered acceptable. And in this regard, the therapeutic effect was completely obvious. On the other hand, the cultural tradition of not disrespecting a fallen enemy's body publicly is



Fig. 33: "DA ĖTO TAK" [Yes, that's right] [internet meme] (January 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky

constant. This view is echoed in Homer's *Iliad*, where respect for an enemy's body is both discussed and confirmed within the narrative. This is what Ruben Apressyan points out in his research.[21]

There is an episode in the *Iliad* where Achilles is mocking Hector's corpse. Achilles' reprehensible actions enrage the gods, prompting Zeus to give leniency to Hector. Concurrently, Zeus sends Priam, the Trojan king, with a ransom to reclaim Hector's body. When Priam pleads with Achilles to return his son's corpse, a shift occurs within Achilles. Rather than viewing Priam as the enemy king, he sees an elderly man reminiscent of his father and treats him with the respect he would afford his parent. Consequently, Achilles consents to release Hector's body.

This represents the cultural trend in Western civilization, in light of which black body bag memes are seen as ethically questionable. Our disregard for morally inappropriate behavior aligns with an idea referred to by Umberto Eco as the "carnivalization of life."[22] This concept fixes the blurring of the line between reality and entertainment.

In such a way, we come back to the concept of carnivalesque. Moreover, we can note a special kind of carnivalization rooted in the traditions of Ukrainian culture. Iryna

21 Ruben Apressyan: "Homeric Ethics: Prospective Tendencies," in: *Ancient Ethics*, ed. by Jörg Hardy & George Rudebusch, Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2014, 67–81.

22 Umberto Eco: *A passo di gambero: guerre calde a populismo mediatico*, Milan: Bompiani, 2006, 77.

Bondarevska points to this in her research. She mentions the founder of modern Ukrainian literature, Ivan Kotlyarevsky, who demonstrated in the burlesque poem *Eneida* (1798) the tendency to blur moral coordinate systems. Kotlyarevsky invited the audience to laugh within the world of the poem about affairs that we would be shocked by in real life. But in the carnivalesque world of *Eneida*, we consider the moral opposition of good and evil as taken beyond the measures of reality. "Comedic content is born in a play of meanings of a text through correlation with the definite position of the audience. The author and the audience are in a position of a player, for whom smart combination of aesthetic pleasure is more important than moral and social arrangement."[23] Thus, traditions in Ukrainian laughter culture can be traced to the black body bag memes.

Also, we do not observe any *public* disrespect of the body of a *fallen* enemy here; the hypothetical body of the enemy is obscured by a black bag. In other words, while the bag exists, the body does not, especially given that all bags are generated by software.

Applying the statement concerning the blurring of the boundary between good and evil, reality and fantasy to the memes, we can also recall famous memes of firing Moscow within postcolonial struggle (Fig. 34, 35). Many Ukrainians view the war as an anti-colonial conflict. Memes serve a crucial role there. They reflect the struggle against Russian aggression as well as the history of relations between Ukrainians and Russians in a manner that blurs reality and creates fiction beyond the opposition of good and evil. These memes prove the thesis concerning blurring.



Fig. 34: [Internet meme of the burning Moscow Kremlin], *Telegram*, Bezpechnyĭ Rehion



Fig. 35: "Bliakha mukha, khoch spaty ne liahaĭ. / A to vstanesh vrantsi, a my vzhe pid Moskvoiu.." [Damn fly, do not go to sleep at least. Because when you wake up in the morning, our troops could already be near Moscow..] [internet meme excerpt] (spring 2022)

23 Bondarevska: *Paradoksal'nist' estetychnoho*, 234.



Fig. 36: Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers recreate Ilja Repin's painting, *The Zaporozhian Cossacks are Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan* [photo] (February 2022)



Fig. 37: Ilya Repin: *The Zaporozhian Cossacks are Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan*, 1880–1891, oil on canvas, 203 × 358 cm, The State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg

A peculiar illustration of the theme of decolonization is the meme of Ukrainian Armed Forces writing a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin (Fig. 36), which recreates a scene of the famous Ilya Repin painting, *The Zaporozhian Cossacks are Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan* (Fig. 37).

Humor expands the interpretation options of the basic unit of the meme, giving the audience the opportunity to express themselves within the memes' folklore framework. The blurring is a good illustration of such a property of memes related to the activation of *fantasy*.

III Solidarity and Resistance: The Consolidating Function of Memes

Walter Benjamin noted that the environment of technical reproducibility (and now memes) activates the political function of art. He wrote: "But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on other practice—politics."[24] It is precisely the political function of memes we will discuss further. It is obvious that the actualization of political issues by memes blurs the Rawlsian term "*background culture*," which is applied to the study of memes as fundamentally apolitical, in contrast to civil culture. In support of our theoretical construction of the study of memes with a loose use of the Rawlsian term, it can be considered that the political function of memes manifested itself precisely in the conditions of the Russo-Ukrainian War. It was not "reserved" for them initially, although the historical prerequisites for its appearance were in our socio-cultural experience.

Charles Shaw proposes finding the roots of humor in the Russo-Ukrainian War in the moral legacy of World War II. State-sponsored caricatures and humor were used to reinforce moral arguments rooted in Soviet tradition against external enemies. Prominent examples include the TASS Windows war posters, the satirical magazine *Krokodil*, and Aleksandr Tvardovsky's poem *Vasili Tyorkin*. Impulses of the consolidating role of memes can be seen in the words "*Fuck you, Russian warship*." Shaw sees them as a motto for Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion.[25]

The consolidating function can also be seen in various memes that have demonstrated the weakness of the Russian army since the beginning of the war. Thus, mistakes of the Russian army at the beginning of the war were an inexhaustible resource for Ukrainian memes (Fig. 38, 39). These included the bad equipment of Russian soldiers, their outdated weapons, low motivation of the soldiers in the military campaign at the beginning, mistakes of Russian civil and military authorities in estimation of Ukrainian military equipment and maturity of civil society and its potential and so on. However, today, servicemen worry about such a diminishing of the image of an enemy because Ukrainians do not consider

24 Benjamin: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 224.

25 Charles Shaw: "Ukraine's Caustic Wartime Humor Has Surprising Soviet Roots. The Memes and YouTube videos represented legacy reclaimed," *Slate*, 3 May 2022, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/05/ukraine-wartime-humor-soviet-union-history.html [22 July 2026].



Fig. 38: Tomas Upskas: ["The Second World Army" has stolen a toilet bowl from a Nova Poshta post office in the Kharkiv region during its retreat] [internet meme] (28 March 2022), *Facebook* and *Instagram*



Fig. 39: [Andrey Ryazantsev, a Russian conscript and teacher from Horlivka, as a Ukrainian prisoner of war] [internet meme] (March 2022)

the situation on the frontline as a serious one and consider the Russian army as it is portrayed in Ukrainian memes.

In the context of considering the consolidating function, the study of what remains beyond the attention in memes is also of academic interest.

Obviously, neither tragic events nor mistakes of the Ukrainian army are in Ukrainian memes. The situation is the same with civil life problems. Memes ignore a range of socially important resonant problems, the fear of which cannot be overcome by laughter. Memes as an element of carnivalesque suggest catharsis, liberation from fears, rebirth, and destruction of the enemy and their methods of influencing us. Therefore, existential horrors are beyond the attention of memes.

For example, missile attacks are almost absent in memes, as are environmental and technological disasters accompanying military actions. The art critic Lena Polyakova comments: "I am very glad that our humor is evolving. Step by step, sexist and humiliating 'jokes' are disappearing. Jokes become more like art, they are qualitative and smart. I even noticed it in myself. Recently, I wanted to post a picture of a tired woman, with the wording: 'When the air alert woke me up at night.' But, as it turned out, the original title of the picture was 'Young Woman on Her Death Bed.' When I found out about it, of course I replaced it with another illustration. Because it is inappropriate and not funny."[26]

Besides such existential themes, memes avoid socially explosive ones that are too ambiguous or unpopular, such as mobilization, military recruitment, inflation, reduction in social benefits, and so on.

Here, we come to the issues of censorship. The current Russo-Ukrainian War, as already noted, is a hybrid war as it is waged not only on the battlefield. The theater of military operations also covers the information space. In such conditions and circumstances, words and pictures are no less weapons than missiles and drones, if not more. And the mentioned tradition of World War II confirms this. Therefore, censorship as state control over the content of information circulating in the information space is an inevitable tool in the conditions of a hybrid war. Freedom-of-speech control is unavoidable.

However, the postmodern situation also transforms censorship. Today, this often takes the form of state-implemented censorship, which serves as an external, top-down form of power. But if we consider memes as a form of modern folklore, then it is obvious that we are dealing with self-censorship. This is a form of community self-censorship as a different form of control arising from a *culture of vigilance*. It is a kind of civil censorship.

The concept of civil censorship emerged in the 1990s in the broad Foucauldian approach, which Judith Butler outlines. She understands censorship beyond direct state or institutional control over the expression of opinions in the public space.[27] Later on, Christopher Balme

26 Lena Polyakova (Lena Poliakova): "Humor iak zbroia: iaki memy z'iavylysia pid chas viĭny i iak vony dopomahaiut trymatysia v tseĭ skladnyĭ chas" *Mind*, 1 October 2022, https://mind.ua/openmind/20247618-gumor-yak-zbroya-yaki-memi-zyavilisya-pid-chas-vijni [22 July 2026] (transl. M. R.).

27 Judith Butler: *Excitable Speech*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 127–164.

clarifies that such control takes place "on a lateral level: i.e., from citizen to citizen outside the usual vertical hierarchies."[28]

Vigilance is the mode of responsibility in circumstances of wartime. The emergence and development of the ethical issue of responsibility in its social and political components are inextricably linked with the two world wars. The tradition that comes from Max Weber and his ethics of responsibility is based on a fundamental principle: "You must answer for the (foreseeable) consequences of your actions."[29] Further research on this issue by Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt focused on the question of autonomy, which was associated with the spiritual experience endured by the individual upon leaving the war.

The issue of responsibility in Ukraine is now taking on a different dimension. The current war is not over yet. That is why important socio-political tasks are fulfilled by responsibility in the mode of vigilance as individual attentiveness to goals set by others. Vigilance is exercised by the citizen for a purpose that goes beyond individual goals. For example, the state's goal of security during war resonates with citizens who monitor the hygiene of information in society. A special form of vigilance is introspection and self-externalization, which means that one controls oneself in terms of what to say and how to phrase it in public space. An illustration can be observed in meme practice. On social media, where authorities cannot control information hygiene, citizens become vigilant and self-censored. They are vigilant concerning others and themselves.

For the domestic audience, the key goal of vigilant meme management is to provide therapy to address the fear of death and enhance therapeutic outcomes. For foreign audiences, it entails intimidating enemies and controlling potentially sensitive information.

Memes can serve as a grassroots element in articulating democracy at the fundamental non-political level.[30] A specific civic community is formed by the memes' audience. It converges through comprehension of the context and intricacies of meme content within the background culture. Life affirmations propagated through memes reinforce communal bonds and foster integration at a pre-political stage. Concurrently, this naturally enhances the influence of common citizens on public policy and intensifies their oversight of government activities.

28 Christopher Balme: "Citizen Censorship," in: Magdalena Butz, Felix Grollmann & Florian Mehltretter (eds.): *Sprachen der Wachsamkeit*, Berlin / Boston: De Gruyter, 2023, 211–222, DOI: 10.1515/9783111026480-011, p. 212.

29 Max Weber: "Politics as a Vocation" [1919], in: *The Vocation Lectures.* Edited and with an Introduction by David Owen & Tracy B. Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone, Indianapolis / Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004, 32–94, p. 83.

30 Olena Pavlova & Mariya Rohozha: "Mariupol Siege Viber-Community as a Form of Grassroot Movement in the Context of 'Declining State of Global Democracy'," *Ideology and Politics Journal* 1/22 (2023), 241–275, DOI: 10.36169/2227-6068.2023.01.00009, p. 262.

Conclusion

This article has identified a number of functions in the architectonics of memes. The basic entertainment function of memes in the context of the transformation of the Ukrainian media landscape during the Russo-Ukrainian War was combined with the news function at a qualitatively new level. The therapeutic function becomes the leading function in wartime. The current war is hybrid in its essence, actualizes the moral legacy of World War II, and activates the consolidating function with a clear political emphasis. These functions illustrated the nature of memes. As noted at the beginning of the article, such characteristics of memes were taken as a basis: mediality, polymodality, mimicry, topicality, seriality, replicativity, virality, emotionality, humor, and fantasy.

Our study showed these components in their natural habitat of meme functionality. Characteristics of memes such as minimalism of form were not noted in the study because the visual richness and brightness of the pictures in the memes related to the Russo-Ukrainian War contradict the declared characteristics. These components were identified or not identified empirically and confirmed or refuted. Such characteristics that were identified in the course of the study were not noted in the basic list but are important for understanding the nature of memes. They are: folklore basis, propagation, abusive language, carnivalesque, culture of vigilance.

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14. "ZBYTO: / – 29 udarnykh BpLA 'Shahed-136/131' / Povitriani Syly" [Shot down: / – 29 "Shahed-136/131" strike UAVs / Air Force] (15 August 2024), *Telegram*, Povitriani syly ZS Ukraïny / Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, image file archived by the author.
15. "ZNYSHCHENO: / – avtomatychna mizhplanetna stantsiia 'Luna-25' / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – the automatic interplanetary station "Luna-25" / Air Force] [internet meme] (19 August 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
16. "Diia / Znyshcheno: / – zastosunok 'DIIA' / Eurovision Song Contest" [Diya / Destroyed: / – mobile app "Diya"] [internet meme] (3 February 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
17. "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 1 zastosunok 'Telegram' / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – 1 "Telegram" mobile app / Air Force] [internet meme] (18 February 2024), *Telegram*, Derzhavne biuro memiv [The State Bureau of Memes], image file archived by the author.
18. "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 1 telehram / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – 1 telegram *or* Eliminated: – 1 Telegram account *or* Shut down: – 1 Telegram channel / Air Force] [internet meme] (8 June 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
19. "ZNYSHCHENO: / KYÏVSTAR" [Destroyed: "Kyivstar" mobile communication] [internet meme] (12 December 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
20. "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 3 vynyshchuvacha-bombarduval'nyka Su-34 / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: / – 3 Su 34 fighter-bombers / Air Force] [internet meme] (22 December 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
21. "Fighterbomber / Prekratite isteriku! Oni vse skriniat i rzhut!!!!!!!!! // ZNYSHCHENO: / – litak dal'noho radiolokatsiĭnoho vyiavlennia A-50 / – povitrianyĭ komandnyĭ punkt Il-22 / Povitriani Syly" [Fighterbomber / Stop the hysteria! They are all screenshotting and laughing their heads off!!!!!!!!! // Destroyed: / – an A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft / – an Il-22 airborne command post / Air Force] [internet meme] (14 January 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
22. "POCHNY DEN' Z KAVY / TA ZBYTOÏ SUSHKY // ZNYSHCHENO: – vynyshchuvach-bombarduval'nyk Su-34" [Start your day with a coffee / and a downed sushka // Destroyed: / – a Su-34 fighter-bomber] [internet meme] (29 February 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
23. "Diakuiemo PPO!!! // ZNYSHCHENO: / – 2 BR 'Iskander-M'/KN-23/'Kyndzhal' / – 29 krylatykh raket Kh-101/Kh-555" [Thank you, Air Force!!! // Destroyed: – 2 "Iskander-M"/

KN-23/"Kyndzhal ballistic missiles" / – 29 X101/X-555 cruise missiles] [internet meme] (21 March 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.

24. "ZNYSHCHENO: / – 1 Mi-171, – Ibrakhim Raïsi / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: – 1 Mi 171 helicopter, – Ebrahim Raisi / Air Force] [internet meme] (19 May 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
25. "ZNYSHCHENO: / 1 F'IURY / Povitriani Syly" [Destroyed: 1 Fury / Air Force] [internet meme] (19 May 2024), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
26. Boris Groh: *Russkiĭ voennyĭ korabl', idi…! Slava Ukraïni! / Russian warship, go…! Glory to Ukraine!*, commemorative Ukrainian postage stamp, multi-color offset print, face value 'W', catalogue no. 1985, 40.5 × 30 mm, issued by Ukrposhta, 12 April 2022, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Stamp_of_Ukraine_s1985.jpg#/media/Datei:Stamp_of_Ukraine_s1985.jpg [22 July 2026].
27. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy (left), Ukrposhta Director General Ihor Smilyanskyi (center), and Commander of the Ukrainian Naval Forces Oleksiy Neizhpapa (right) participate in the official first-day cancellation ceremony for the commemorative postage stamp "Russian warship… Done!," Kyiv, 23 May 2022 [press photo]. Photograph courtesy of the Press Service of the President of Ukraine, https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/volodimir-zelenskij-pogasiv-poshtovu-marku-russkij-voyennij-75309 [22 July 2026].
28. "RUSSKIĬ VOENNYĬ KORABL'—IDI NA@KHUĬ" [Russian warship, go fuck yourself!], proposal for a commemorative Ukrainian postage stamp, 2022, https://boneco-air-o-swiss.com/blog/pochemu-zimoj-otnositelnaya-vlazhnost-vozduha-osobenno-nizkaya [22 July 2026].
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30. "SYNIĬ EKRAN SMERTI, IAKYĬ OBRUSHYV SVITOVI KORPORATSIĬ // NAKHUĬ" [The blue screen of death that hit the world's corporations // Fuck you] [internet meme] (19 July 2024), *Telegram,* Derzhavne biuro memiv [The State Bureau of Memes], image file archived by the author.
31. Alex Blokha: "RUSSKIĬ VOENNYĬ KORABL'—IDI NAKHUĬ" [Russian warship, go fuck yourself!] [photo], 3 March 2022, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6f/Russian_ship%2C_go_f_yourself._Bright._2.jpg [22 July 2026].
32. "KOLY ZHURBA TEBE OHORNE / I OBIĬME PECHAL', / BERY PISTOL', SIDLAĬ KONIA / DES' IE I TVIĬ MOSKAL'! // TUT MOZHE BUTY VASHA REKLAMA // OĬ SMEREKO! // CHMOBIKY NA SNEHU ROZOV'IE NA BIELOM // KAK ZDOROVO CH'TO VSIE MY ZDIES' SEVODNIA SOBRALIS' // PAKET BRAT' BUDETE? // SPYSOK POKUPOK / 1) KHLEB / 2) IAĬTSIA / 3) MOLOKO / 4) KINDER MALOMU / 5) PAKETY" [When sorrow envelops you / and grief embraces

you, / grab a pistol, saddle your horse / there is a Russian out there for you too! // Your ad could be here // Oh, spruce tree! // Chmobiks are pink on the white snow // How wonderful that we are all gathered here today // Would you like a bag? // Shopping list / 1) Bread / 2) Eggs / 3) Milk / 4) Kinder Surprise for the little one / 5) Bags [internet meme] (March 2022), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.

33. "DA ĖTO TAK" [Yes, that's right] [internet meme] (January 2023), *Telegram*, Voienni Smishynky, image file archived by the author.
34. [Internet meme of the burning Moscow Kremlin], *Telegram*, Bezpechnyĭ Rehion [Safe Region], image file archived by the author.
35. "Bliakha mukha, khoch spaty ne liahaĭ. / A to vstanesh vrantsi, a my vzhe pid Moskvoiu.." [Damn fly, do not go to sleep at least. Because when you wake up in the morning, our troops could already be near Moscow..] [internet meme excerpt] (spring 2022), https://ua.reactor.cc/post/5326164 [22 July 2026].
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#18

MEMES OF WAR IN THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF UKRAINIAN MEDIA

This study examines memes that emerged during Russia's war against Ukraine and identifies three key functions: entertainment combined with a news function, a therapeutic function, and a political, consolidating function. Memes are treated as a form of modern folklore marked by virality, replicativity, mediality, polymodality, mimicry, topicality, seriality, emotionality, humor, and fantasy. Drawing on M. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, abusive language and black humor are shown to provide psychological relief in wartime, while raising ethical questions, such as the depiction of enemy corpses. The political function is discussed via W. Benjamin's theory of art's political turn and via censorship, reframed as citizen-driven vigilance rather than top-down state control. Memes thus consolidate community and shape wartime public discourse.

ISBN: 978-3-69012-018-0
DOI: 10.17879/02968545508
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