BEYOND BARDCORE:
BIOGRAPHY OF A MEME IN TEN TRANSLATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This paper offers an unconventional analysis of a multimodal translation: a meme's metamorphosis from September to November 2023 in ten different phases. Such phases are nothing other than translations, for they transform already existing meanings and forms into new artistic products. Also, this meme format draws on a music genre known as bardcore, whose will to render the world medievally and ironically is one of the key features of the phenomenon we address. In such a process, the meme —either on Instagram or TikTok— explores various cultures, historical times, animal species, and other dimensions of our semiotic universe, to the point of turning the format into a meme of itself.
KEYWORDS: Bardcore; Meme; Middle Ages; Multimodality

The first time I came across it was September 24. It showed up in my Instagram feed as an algorithmic revelation, and I shared the good news with my colleague and friend Javier Arroyo Bretaño. Both of us had already researched and written about bardcore from the perspective of Translation Studies, in a kitsch attempt to unironically dignify what creators themselves could not conceive without irony. The advent of a new meme, which paid tribute to the neomedieval music genre of bardcore, made us both wonder —were we beholding that genre's Second Coming?

For those who are not familiar with it, bardcore translates all kinds of popular songs into a medieval aesthetic in terms of verbal language, music, image, and cultural correspondences. It came onto the scene on April 20, 2020, at the dawn of the covid-19 pandemic, when the German youtuber Cornelius Link released his medieval rendition of Tony Igy's *Astronomia*[1]. He fired the starting signal for an endless number of medieval covers of popular songs, from David Bowie to Soviet folklore or the Tetris theme. These multimodal translations were aesthetically closer to widespread stereotypes about the Middle Ages than to actual Middle Ages' musical forms —this, far from being a flaw, was functionally ideal for the community.

Back in March, 2020, Tony Igy's *Astronomia* had already inspired the illustrious Dancing Pallbearers meme[2], which probably served a cathartic purpose in such pandemic circumstances —hence the reason why Cornelius Link decided to version it only one month later. Since then, countless medieval covers of all kinds of songs have been uploaded to online platforms like YouTube, Spotify, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, etc. However, after the once underground genre became almost mainstream, I perceived a considerable

decline not only in the number of new covers, but especially in the interest of the community towards the phenomenon. Bardcore, which had held a significant position within the imaginary of our generation, was inevitably succumbing to the rapid obsolescence so typical of our times.

But something found me (because it is information that finds you on social media, and not the other way round) two months ago. I ran into this brand-new meme — a multimodal product that combined a brief archaizing text, bardcore music, a medieval background, and a chroma videoclip of an old woman dancing. Although in Spanish, a picture is worth a thousand words:
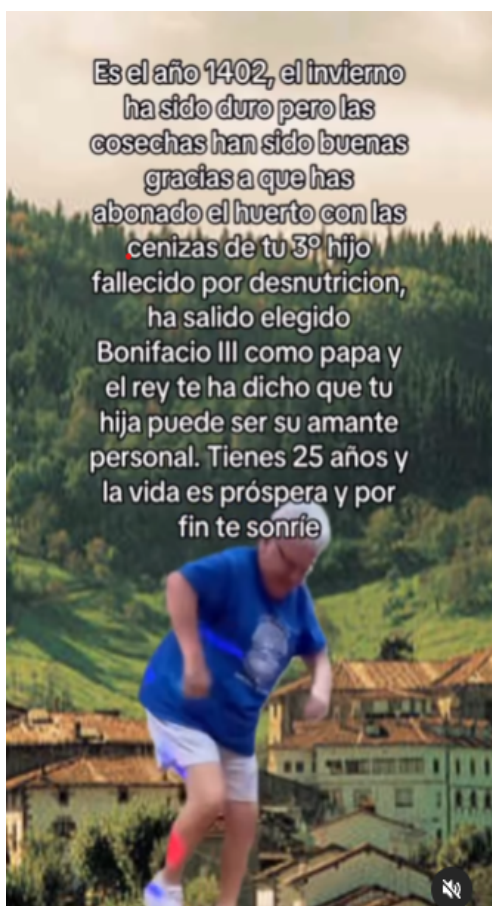

Figure 1. Post by @hendricksity on Instagram[3]
My translation: "The year is 1402, winter was hard, but harvest has been good because you fertilized your land with the ashes of your 3rd son, dead from malnutrition, Boniface III has been elected as Pope and the King said your daughter can be his personal lover. You're 25 years old, life is prosperous and finally smiles at you".
Sidenote: in the Instagram reel, the old woman can be seen actually dancing, while Beedle the Bardcore's medieval cover of *Because I Got High* is playing in the background.

Figure 1.

Since I shared this meme with a friend, the algorithm understood that I wanted more, so I ran into many similar posts in the following days. After the third one, I found myself observing them, with a certain academic detachment, as if this was a newborn species finding its place in the digital ecosystem. A couple weeks later, the young meme was

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[3] Available at:
instagram.com/reel/Cx3PovfR6Fy/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=NTYzOWQzNmJjMA%3D%3D
(Accessed: 27 November 2023).

already a grown creature and had begun to evolve through the different stages of its own (translational) life cycle.

Spoiler: as I write these lines at the end of November, the meme is officially dead, except for some residual, anachronistic content creators that refuse to accept that the format no longer holds a relevant position within the memesphere. Now, still mourning but with some hindsight, I feel I have the moral duty to record the meme's progress through the cyberworld, and to give an account of the various phases of its metamorphosis. These phases are nothing other than *translations*, for they involve the transposition of original meanings and forms into new ones, regardless of the semiotic codes, modes, or media transformed in the process.

Translation 0. A new meme is born. Although I built a good-sized corpus[4], I struggled to identify the inaugural meme, the very first one that translated the original videoclip medievally —indeed, these are usually impossible to trace with total certainty, except for some cases. Following the translational analogy, could this be a sort of unstable source text, such as the Bible or the Thousand and One Nights'? Drawing on the multiple earliest manifestations of the meme, we can conjecture that Translation 0's nature was multimodal from the beginning, combining various semiotic codes, as well as modes and media, but that it was still relatively impoverished in terms of formal structure and collective consistency.

Translation 1. Consolidation of a format. The awareness that other people were using the format led to the tacit stabilization of an arbitrary structure. An insightful analysis of our corpus suggests that many memes had several features in common:

a) Beedle the Bardcore's medieval covers (frequently *Because I Got High*, *Candy Shop*, or *Real Slim Shady*) were chosen as soundtrack. Note that the artist's name comes from a witty (?) adaptation of J. K. Rowling's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

b) The dancing old woman is present in almost every meme. The source of the video-meme will be disclosed in Translation 8. Other dancing characters have been documented, but she is by far the most popular. None of them is related to the Middle Ages at all, which probably serves the purpose of deliberately mismatching the medieval narrative in order to make the product even sleazier.

c) The background picture, which acts as a chroma wallpaper, usually conveys the idea of a medieval landscape, with an at least questionable degree of accuracy. Illustrations of old villages and cities, tavern settings, or martial scenes, many of them generated by AI, are amongst the most common. Although some of them represent battles of the Roman Empire or even Egyptian monuments,

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[4] A total of 76 memes (34 from Instagram, 42 from TikTok) were documented from September 24 to November 16. Most of them (48) are in Spanish, followed by English (21) and other languages, like German (4) or French (3), that I cannot speak so fluently.

well before the Middle Ages, they still transmit a key idea: whatever it is, it happened a long ago.

d) The verbal message presents a recurrent structure. First, an indication of the year, sometimes preceded by "pov" ('point of view'). Second, a variable number of ironically optimistic allusions to some of these topics: food, work, family/body members, diseases, religion, or warfare. Following this, one or two references to historical figures or events that are considered relevant for a culture, regardless of the faithfulness of such references. Then, a happening that, although being pitiful from today's perspective, could be viewed as successful back then (e.g., being the king's lover). And, finally, a sarcastic mention to your fictitious self's age, often implying that dying after 30 was a privilege in the Middle Ages.
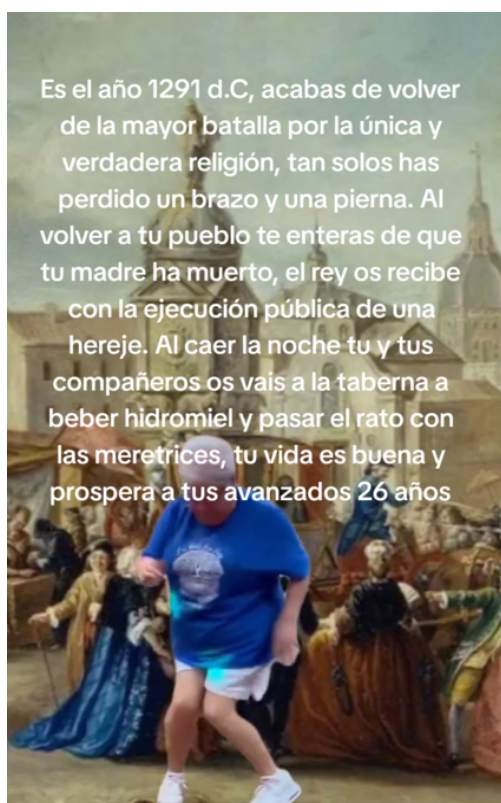

Figure 2. Post by @idkwsiw on TikTok[5].
My translation: "The year is 1291 AD, you have just come back from the greatest ever battle for the true and only religion, you have only lost an arm and a leg. Back in your village, you find out that your mother has died, and the king welcomes y'all with the public execution of a witch. Come nightfall, you and your companions go to the tavern to drink mead and have a good one with the harlots, your life is good and prosperous at your advanced age of 26".
Sidenote: again, Beedle the Bardcore's version of *Because I Got High* is playing.

Figure 2.

Naturally, the cultural references change between contexts, as memes are interculturally translated across boundaries. In Spain, references to the Reyes Católicos or El Cid are common, along with renowned religious characters, while Anne Boleyn is the undisputed superstar of the English memes (although she hardly belongs to the Middle Ages). The level of historical inaccuracy is in some cases so ludicrous that I believe —or hope— it must be intentional (for instance, Figure 1 refers to Pope Boniface III, who lived mostly in the 6th century, while the meme is dated in the 15th). As regards the linguistic

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[5] Available at www.tiktok.com/@idkwsiw/video/7283204120629087521 (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

style, some memes seem to try to emulate archaizing forms and vocabulary (though they sometimes mistake *archaic* for *formal* or *literary*, with grotesque results). Others even dare to write in a sort of medieval English, which, according to current stereotypes, ends up sounding more like Shakespearian speech.

Translation 2. Exploring a more recent past. Some memes, while maintaining the basic format and medieval aesthetic, venture into closer periods of our past. Such an enterprise is probably not as conscious as one could believe —it is likely that some users announced "the year is 1689" with the conviction that this was long enough ago to be considered medieval. See this example:
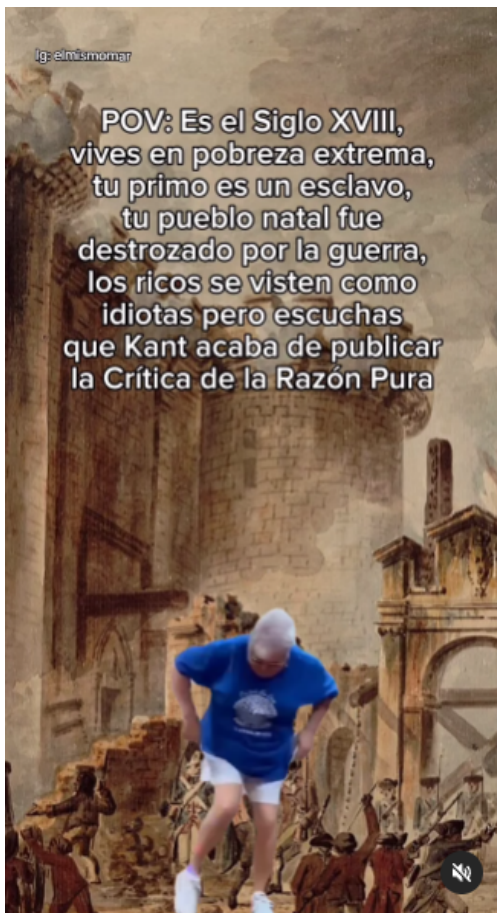

Figure 3. Post by @elmismomar on Instagram[6].
My translation: "POV: It's the 18th century, you're living in extreme poverty, your cousin is a slave, your hometown has been devastated by war, rich people dress like idiots, but you hear that Kant has just published his Critique of Pure Reason".
Sidenote: the illustration is taken from the Wikipedia entry "Storming of the Bastille"[7], which is chronologically close enough. On the contrary, Beedle the Bardcore's *Because I Got High* was still picked as a backtrack for this one, even though its medieval vibes have little to do with 1781 (*Critique of Pure Reason*'s year of publication).

Figure 3.

At this point, we can openly state that the meme is no longer a translation of reality, but a translation of itself —a metalanguage whose changing structure is a subversion of its own original form. The meme is now a third-stage simulacrum, a segment of human language celebrating its newfound autonomy.

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[6] Available at: www.instagram.com/reel/CxobPfcrb5-/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=NTYzOWQzNmJjMA%3D%3D (Accessed: 27 November 27 2023).
[7] Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storming_of_the_Bastille (Accessed: 27 November 27 2023).

Translation 3. Exploring a more distant past. As we travel back in time across the centuries, borders between ages get blurrier and blurrier. That is why the Middle Ages may be confused with ancient times, since both of them are often perceived as remote. In the following example, though, the creator was quite conscious of the difference. The bizarre combination of imprecisions, redundancies, and witticisms makes this meme one of my favorites:
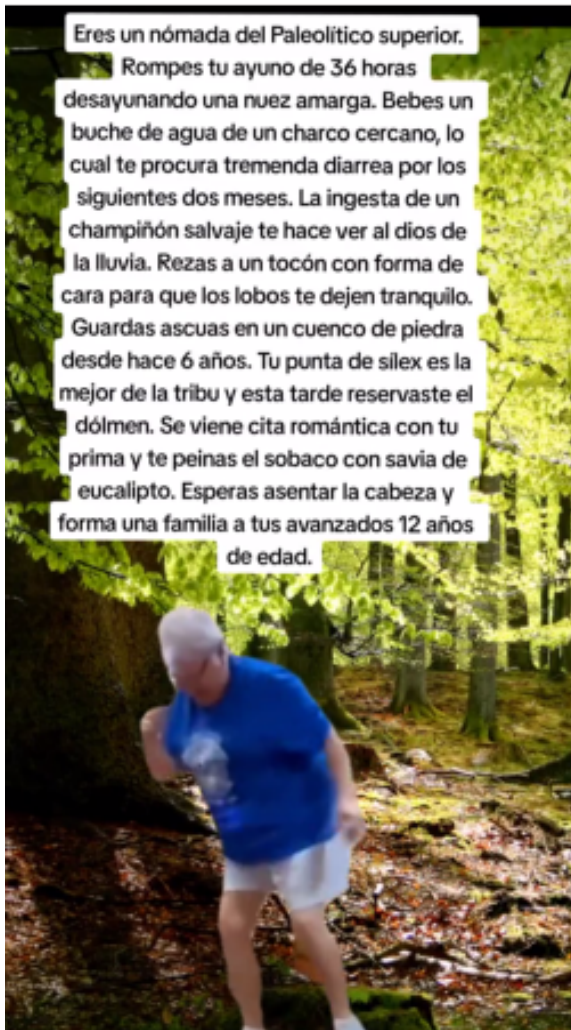

Figure 4. Post by @opinion.impopular on TikTok[8].

My translation: "You're an upper Paleolithic nomad. You break your 36-hour fast with a bitter walnut. You take a sip of water from a nearby pool, which gives you terrible diarrhea for the next two months. Your ingestion of a wild mushroom makes you meet the god of rain. You worship a face-shaped stub to keep the wolves away. You've been keeping embers in a stone bowl for 6 years. Your silex arrowhead is the best in the tribe and the dolmen's booked for you this evening. You're going on a date with your cousin and you comb your armpit with eucalyptus sap. It's time to settle down and raise a family at your advanced age of 12".

Sidenote: even here, Beedle the Bardcore's *Candy Shop* medieval cover is playing.

Figure 4.

Translation 4. Exploring other cultural traditions. In a bid to challenge a narrow-minded, colonialist Western conception of the centuries comprised by the Middle Ages (or maybe just for fun), other creators have translated the format into different cultural contexts. Among the various examples, which range from the Vikings to the Mongols, I enjoyed this one especially:

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[8] Available at: https://www.tiktok.com/@opinion.impopular/video/7283570416709422368?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7212930782641374726 (Accessed: 27 November 2023).
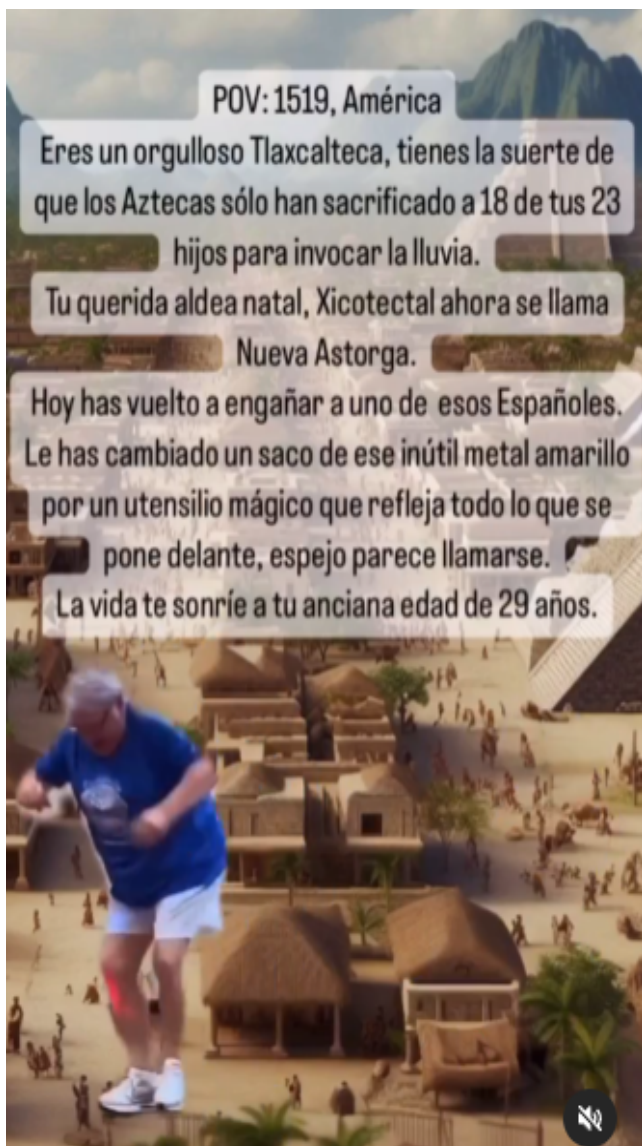
Figure 5. Post by @aldeanoafortunado on Instagram[9].

My translation: "POV: 1519, America. You're a proud Tlaxcaltec, lucky that the Aztecs only sacrificed 18 of your 23 children to invoke the rain. Your cherished hometown, Xicotectal, is now called Nueva Astorga. Today you fooled one of those Spaniards again. You gave him a sack of that useless yellow metal in exchange for a magical instrument that reflects everything, apparently known as mirror. Life is happy at your ripe old age of 29".

Sidenote: this post is puzzlingly inaccurate, since Nueva Astorga never existed, nor any city called Xicotectal (the closest reference is Xicotencatl, a memorable Tlaxcallan warleader from Tizatlan), among other historical aspects. *Because I Got High* makes it even funnier.

Also, @aldeanoafortunado kindly said to me that the background image was created with DALL·E.

Figure 5.

Translation 5. Exploring the present. Inevitably, the meme was predestined to project into the year 2023 at some point of its natural evolution. The joke here entails an intriguing implication —if the format can be applied to our days, it might be because not so much has changed after several centuries. From a collection of excellent examples (a sarcastic catalogue of concerns about late capitalism), I chose to share this one:

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[9] Available at:
www.instagram.com/reel/CyNsKNXMd17/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=NTYzOWQzNmJjMA%3D%3D (Accessed: 27 November 2023).
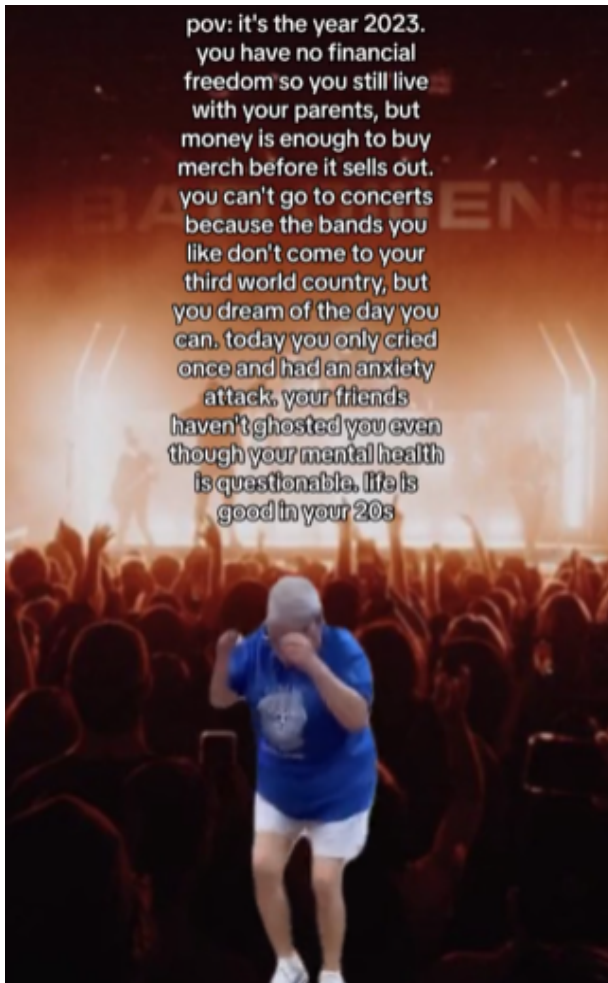
Figure 6. Post by @_taurus.baby on TikTok[10]. Sidenote: Beedle the Bardcore's *Because I Got High* is once more the official soundtrack, confirming the medieval, musical substratum's irremovability throughout all the data.

Figure 6.

Translation 6. Exploring the future. It is difficult to stipulate with any precision if the focus on the present appeared prior to the focus on the future, so we decided to follow the traditional order. However, the translational nature of memes does not correspond to the linear, unidirectional way we perceive history —even if we accept that the future is a translation of the present, and that the present is a translation of the past, memes travel carelessly through time and bring meanings from other epochs, either past or future, to (re)shape the present in which they were born. In this sense, memes about prospective centuries are particularly symptomatic of our current worries and fears —perhaps even more than those that start with "the year is 2023".

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[10] Available at:
https://www.tiktok.com/@_taurus.baby/video/7290716702260595974?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7212930782641374726 (Accessed: 27 November 27 2023).
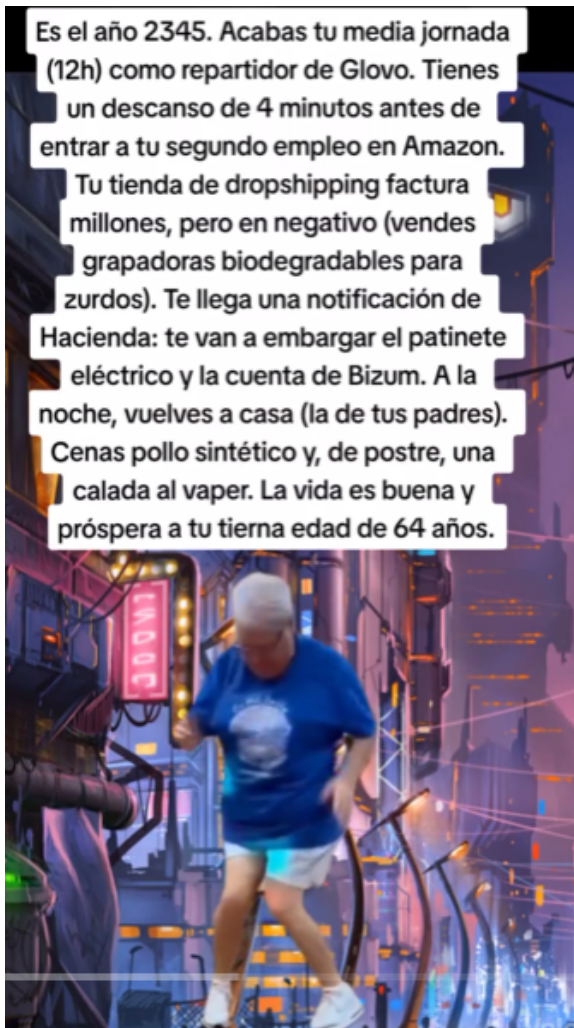
Es el año 2345. Acabas tu media jornada (12h) como repartidor de Glovo. Tienes un descanso de 4 minutos antes de entrar a tu segundo empleo en Amazon. Tu tienda de dropshipping factura millones, pero en negativo (vendes grapadoras biodegradables para zurdos). Te llega una notificación de Hacienda: te van a embargar el patinete eléctrico y la cuenta de Bizum. A la noche, vuelves a casa (la de tus padres). Cenas pollo sintético y, de postre, una calada al vaper. La vida es buena y próspera a tu tierna edad de 64 años.

Figure 7. Post by @opinion.impopular on TikTok[11].
My translation: "The year is 2345. You just finished your part-time job (12h) as an Uber Eats rider. You have a 4-minute break before your second job in Amazon starts. Your dropshipping business is now millions of dollars worth (you're selling biodegradable staplers for left-handed people) in debt. You receive a notification from the tax office —your e-scooter and your Venmo account are being seized. At night you go back home (to your parents'). You have cell-cultivated chicken for dinner, and a vape puff for dessert. Life is good and prosperous at your youthful age of 64".
Sidenote: guess the song.

Figure 7.

Translation 7. Exploring other species. Again, despite my numbering, some of the memes of this phase may have been posted before some of those from Translations 5 or 6. However, I thought this would be the right order to present the transformation. In this case, having already covered almost every segment of human history, some geniuses extrapolated the format to other species of the biological kingdom Animalia. Among mammoths and oysters, I chose a much more common —but sublime— form of life: cats.

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[11] Available at:
https://www.tiktok.com/@opinion.impopular/video/7283212599372614945?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=7212930782641374726 (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

The year is 1452, thy mother hath not (yet) been branded a witch, thou snatcheth a morsel of roasted hen from the mead hall where the hearth be warm and the mice be plentiful

Figure 8. Post by @badboymoosh on Instagram[12].
Sidenote: the background song is Beedle the Bardcore's medieval version of *Real Slim Shady*. Aside from the use of English and the animal perspective, I think this meme is somewhat poor.

Figure 8.

Translation 8. The Big Crunch. The end of a meme's life cycle is not so different from that of the universe. After they are formed, memes expand in all potential shapes and materials, like a semiotic, multimodal Big Bang. During the process, memes leave reality behind and become self-sufficient constructs, fourth-stage simulacra, in which nothing but the format itself is (hyper)real. And like the universe, at the end of their evolution, saturated by their own growth and infinite possibilities, memes collapse and go back to their original form – a fossilized palimpsest of superposed, but no longer circulating, meanings. This may sound vague and presumptuous. Well, it definitely is. But the following meme will surely make things clear:

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[12] Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxuosSbuhpB/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=NTYzOWQzNmJj MA== (Accessed: 27 November 2023).
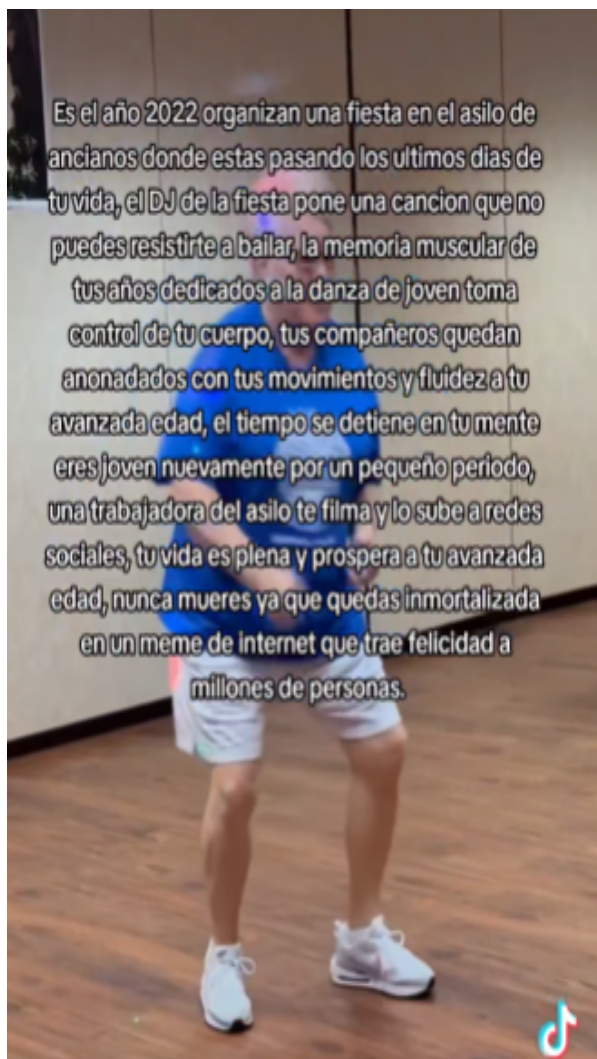
Figure 9. Post by @vidigoztv on Instagram[13].
My translation: "It's the year 2022, the nursing home where you're spending the last days of your life is throwing a party, the DJ plays a song you can't help dancing to, the young dancer you used to be takes over your muscles, your fellas are astounded by your moves and skills at such an advanced age, time stops, you're young again for a few seconds, a nurse videotapes you and posts it on social media, your life is full and prosperous at your advanced age, you'll never die because you are immortalized by an internet meme that brings happiness to millions of people".
Sidenote: in the original video, DLOW's *Do It Like Me* is playing in the background, along with other people's loud voices.

Figure 9.

Far from being a nursing home resident, this woman was actually attending a family reunion, as can be read on the wall in the background (check the very first upload of the original video on a TikTok post by @reneedavis573[14]). After a long sequence of translations, it is in Translation 8 that we finally learn the origins of the videoclip that spawned the meme in the first place. At this point, lacking more realms of reality to ironize, and having fully twisted its own format, the meme becomes the ultimate parody of itself by unveiling its raw nudity. This means announcing the end of its own life by offering the audience one last trick —its magnificent self-destruction.

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[13] Available at:
https://www.instagram.com/reel/CywFeCePpVm/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=NTYzOWQzNmJj
MA== (Accessed: 27 November 2023).
[14] Available at:
https://www.tiktok.com/@reneedavis573/video/7126538094995721518?is_from_webapp=1&web_id=721
2930782641374726 (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

Translation 9. The scholarly afterlife. Reaching this stage should be considered a privilege, for very few memes have ever received academic attention. I have already written about shitposting and the hermeneutic nature of memes[15], but in a casual overview, rather than the analysis of a single format's evolution. In my opinion, memes in general should be a matter for academic study; but this one was a particularly complex and interesting multimodal product, as well as a great example of how all manifestations of a format are consciously translating each other in different ways.

As of December 2023, scarcely two months after its birth, the meme has entered the scholarly realm. And this, I think, is great news: as a pop, kitsch, ephemeral, ever-changing, acidly sardonic, sometimes antiesthetic form of art, its acceptance as research-worthy material is a wonderful achievement. Translation 8 has meant the conclusion of the meme's functional life, which makes the once capricious format now steadier and easier to study.

Translation 10. The meme's scholarly afterlife becomes a meme itself.

Figure 10. Private post on the author's TikTok account.

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[15] Stavans, Ilan, and Adrada de la Torre, Javier, "Sobre la gramática del *shitposting*", *Nexos*, November 18, 2021. Available at: https://cultura.nexos.com.mx/sobre-la-gramatica-del-shitposting/ (Accessed: 27 November 2023).

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