

Collective Dreams and Nightmares: what is about memes' Infowars?

Geopolitical tension and especially hybrid conflicts occur on the ground battlefield and within the symbolic environment, fighting for the hearts and minds. Memes, as the cultural "DNA" able to trigger strong emotions, drive behaviour, hold collective perception and frame sharing meaning, are among the most potent weapons in information warfare. As a media artefact, memes can incite public debates, layering them with emotional and ideological weight. But simultaneously, they mirror deep societal tensions and shared archetypes. Is it enough to look only at the narrative they compose?

Cultural "DNA"

Memes as information constructs were introduced decades ago. For the first time, they were described in 1978 by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in the book "The Selfish Gene"¹, where they were defined as a component, like DNA, that can hold and pass along cultural information, travelling across generations. In some articles, memes are represented as media viruses because of their nature and ability to be shared and disseminated rapidly². According to this approach, they become viral content, with the vast audience paying attention to the transferred message.

Meme is a rhetorical configuration manifested through bold textual material, video, or image that transfers a message related to a hot-debated topic. A meme can be drafted from the intentional campaign element, spontaneous comments, "slips of the tongue," fake news, or other incidents. The main distinction of a Meme from other forms of communication is that it is derived from the shared point between the overlapping ideas or senses of two opposing actors (states), which is purposefully presented in different lights³.

Today, in a rapidly digitalised world and rising AI, memes play a crucial role in constructing meaning between competing environments due to "clashing"

¹ Dawkins, R. (1989), *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 192.

² <https://mail.amazoniainvestiga.info/index.php/amazonia/article/view/2601/3854>

³ <https://www.fielding.edu/how-memes-and-media-are-crafting-the-way-we-see-war/>

different senses of competing actors and belligerent parties. Therefore, Memes always have two "authors": the first one is the source of information contained in the Meme, and the second "author(s)" is the interpreter, who introduces this information into the context of the Meme, shaping, revisiting, and reframes a new perception of the rhetoric construct in this way.

Bridge into the mirror of society

While Dawkins emphasised Memes' evolutionary function, contemporary scholarship has begun to explore their semiotic, political, and psychological dimensions. The Department of Communication and Journalism professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Limor Shifman (2014), classifies memes as participatory structures of digital culture that convey group identity and social norms.

From this perspective, memes increasingly serve as vehicles for political expression, emotional coping, and ideological warfare, especially in conflict, empowered with digital capacities. In parallel, psychological operations (PSYOP) and Cognitive warfare have drawn attention to the role of symbolic and memetic messaging in influencing perception and behaviour.

Scholars such as Keir Giles, a British writer who is considered an expert on the Russian military and Mark Galeotti, who is director of the consultancy Mayak Intelligence and an Honorary Professor at University College London, have explored the Russian Federation's sophisticated use of memes in its information warfare strategy, where humour, irony, and archetypal (strategic) narratives are weaponised with the scope to destabilise and confuse the target audience.

In the international context, the concept of strategic narratives—developed primarily by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle in 2013—remains a leading analytical framework for understanding the storytelling of events in global affairs⁴. However, it often overlooks the deeper essence and meaning embedded within the story frame itself. The concept of archetypes adds significant value to analysing highly emotional content, such as memes, by deepening understanding and expanding the available analytical tools.

⁴ Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315871264>

⁴ <https://journals.4science.ge/index.php/mid/article/view/477>

Archetypes are schemes, not the content themselves. According to C.G. Jung, who elaborated on the archetype theory, placing them in the "collective unconscious," archetypes are psychological prerequisites that determine the possibility and emergence of something new. In Jung's opinion, archetypes are not meaningful but exclusively formal in nature and regulate the formation of new "material."⁵

An archetype acquires the characteristic of the content when it penetrates consciousness and meets with the experience. Therefore, the archetype is the function, and within the framework of mythological and modern consciousness, it can be clothed in the most diverse figurative "flesh," including memes in our case.

Jung's analytical approach on archetypes and the collective unconscious, offers a missing theoretical bridge. It allows us to interpret memes not just as strategic signals, frames, or cultural products but as symbolic expressions based on shared collective emotions. In this sense, archetype and strategic narrative work together when the archetype represents deep structure and the narrative—the story built around it.

The memes in the context of Russian information warfare often masquerade as humour or patriotism but serve as instruments of more profound influence. Jungian approach offers a powerful analytical tool, which allows to decode how symbolic communication operates to manipulate and reveal the collective unconscious by viewing memes as expressions of archetypes and psychic projections.

Projection and processing

Applying Jungian theory to discovering memes in wartime, we can observe how symbolic communication allows people to navigate fear, incite irrational emotions, reshape identities, and externalise repressed anxieties in response to politically conditioned drivers (long-term catalyst) and triggers (short-term catalyst).

⁵ Юнг К.Г. «Об отношении аналитической психологии к поэтико-художественному творчеству // Зарубежная эстетика и теория литературы XIX – XX вв. Трактаты, статьи, эссе. М, 1998.

These archetypes form clichés that serve as building blocks for narratives of different orders, shaping diverse types of content and promoting a wide range of ideas. Archetypes—and their underlying psychological foundations—are fundamental to consider when emotions play a dominant role. This is evident in the manifestation of myths, dreams, art, and modern media, where memes represent a particularly influential and emotionally charged form.

Memes can thus be seen as crystallisations of archetypal content based on the classical Jungian binary archetypical couples: Ego vs. Shadow, Persona vs. True Self, etc. These figures are projected onto nation-states, leaders, and populations in geopolitical conflict, and in the context of information warfare, such manifestations become the battleground extension.

During the war, memes frequently operate as vehicles for shadow projection, representing darker aspects of the Self within the collective identity. National trauma, guilt, or aggressive instincts are externalised onto the enemy, simplifying complex historical and emotional realities into digestible visual binaries.

For example, Russian memes portraying Ukrainians as Nazis revive Soviet-era traumas and unresolved narratives about fascism, allowing Russian society to project its authoritarian tendencies on Ukraine as the "Other". Conversely, Ukrainian memes that mock Russian incompetence or depict Putin as a grotesque figure may serve to externalise collective fears while reinforcing national unity through funny and entertaining content which seeks to release this frustration.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi embodies a hybrid archetype: the Trickster-Hero. Memes in Western and Ukrainian information environments portray him as a cunning underdog and defender of democracy. In contrast, memes in Russian sources describe him as an incompetent clown and even a dictator.

Meanwhile, Russian state communications often cast Putin in the Hero archetype as the protector of a besieged civilisation. At the same time, external memes recast him as a tyrant and criminal. These polarities highlight how memes serve as arenas where competing archetypes contend for narrative dominance.

The memetic representation of leaders becomes a symbolic conflict over meaning itself: who represents order, who embodies chaos, and who ultimately deserves loyalty. In this context, memes symbolically enact a society's desire to find or reject the hero's identity.

War also awakens the collective archetypal binary of the Hero and Trickster, especially as societies seek meaning in events (Russian authority justifying the role of military intervention is changing its objects repeatedly) and moral clarity (in the form of frustration within Ukrainian society).

Memes can most profoundly serve a reparative function in wartime, allowing societies to process trauma and aim for psychological integration⁶. For instance, memes that mix humour with horror and darkly comic representations of everyday life under siege facilitate communities with coping mechanisms within unbearable conditions. Such memetic expressions resonate and trigger collective reactions because they confront the surreal or tragic with irony, releasing sources for emotional processing.

In Ukraine, such memes have served as emotional anchors, holding space for contradictory experiences of grief and courage, anger and support within communities. Through repetition and circulation, they reinforce resilience and psychological cohesion, enabling the collective to begin the slow work of integration.

"Traumatised" by Russkii mir

The current state of ideological confrontation and information war began right after the collapse of the USSR, reflecting Russia's aim to pursue influence over the post-Soviet republics and ex-Warsaw bloc states⁷. Ukraine has always held a central place in this ambition for multiple symbolic, historical, and strategic reasons.

At the core of this ideological revival lies the appropriation of historical narratives — most notably through the expansion of the concept of the "Russkiy mir" (Russian World), which positions Russia as the spiritual and cultural heir of

⁶ <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1796187/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

⁷ <https://eu.eot.su/2023/08/04/kurginyan-the-collapse-of-the-ussr-cannot-be-reduced-solely-to-a-geopolitical-catastrophe/>

Kyivan Rus and claims a unifying mission over Slavic nations. Ukraine, the largest country in the post-Soviet space after Russia and central to the legacy of Kyivan Rus, occupies a particularly contested space in this ideological matrix.

Over time, the "Russkiy mir" ideology permeated Russian domestic policy and foreign strategy. What began as cultural discourse evolved into a comprehensive framework that legitimised geopolitical revisionism, aggression, and expansionism under the banners of Slavophilism, Eurasianism, and even neo-Soviet visions of global mission. Propaganda became the primary vehicle of this ideological assertion, using mass media, digital culture, and strategic messaging to disseminate a grand narrative: Russians are not only the defenders of Eastern civilisation but the rightful leaders of a reimagined Slavic order.

The reference to the post-Soviet ideological revival shows that Russia's current behaviour is not a sudden reaction but a structured return to archetypal myth-making. The desire to reconstruct a unifying myth—the "Russkiy mir"—mirrors Jung's observation that societies under stress will revert to deep, collective archetypes in search of coherence. This archetype anchors modern geopolitical ambition in a sacred past (Kyivan Rus), which becomes a projected Self-image of Russia as a unifier, protector, and civilisation-bearer.

Key archetypal memetic clichés

As remarked earlier, the peculiarity of the persuasive cliché of information warfare is that Meme results from two opposite interests – 1) the attention of a "native" audience to a phrase or character and 2) the interpretation of the opponents.

In many cases, the same expression or image is used in propaganda language and counter-discourse, only with different appraisal marks and in diverging perceptual contexts. The counter-frames, correspondingly, work to deny the original meaning of the "source substantially."⁸

"Russkiy mir" (Russian World) represents the Savior / Self vs. Shadow binary. Through this archetype, Russia assumes the role of the Self, the higher integrative force, while denying its aggressive Shadow projected onto the Other.

⁸ https://science.lpnu.ua/sites/default/files/journal-paper/2019/aug/17794/16_0.pdf

"Crimea is ours" ("Крым наш"). The narrative represents a binary of Hero / Conqueror vs. Invader / Shadow. The message transforms national trauma into triumph, reinforcing a narrative of historical destiny.

"Russian Spring" represents the Rebirth / Trickster binary — a corrupted image of the Renaissance that cloaks destabilisation and repression.

"Polite People" ("вежливые люди") represents the Persona / Shadow binary—a perfect example of a false Persona concealing violent intent, later exposed by the counter-meme.

"Ikhtamnet" ("They are not there") represents the Trickster / Shadow binary. The message embodies the concealment of the military presence and the duplicity of state policy.

According to Jung, "Iskander's laugh" represents a Warrior / Destroyer binary meant to intimidate, rooted in the fear of vulnerability.

"Stones from the sky" ("Пусть даже камни с неба") represents the Martyr / Victim archetype, which appeals to suffering for a higher purpose, twisted into nationalistic obedience.

"Green Men" / "Little Green Men" represent the Trickster / Phantom archetype, reflecting hidden intentions and forces that disrupt order.

"Nuclear ashes" represents the Destroyer / Death archetype, related to profound annihilation, embodying existential fear.

Concluding remarks

In the context of AI's growing dominating role in digital environments shaping communication, existing analytical approaches to information warfare must develop. These frameworks should be able to predict societal vulnerabilities, anticipate responses, and decode adversarial messaging. A multidisciplinary approach incorporating psychological models offers a powerful and adaptable toolkit. Memes, as emotionally charged forms of communication, can be exceptionally well decoded through such a mixed approach, relying on archetypal analysis alongside the classical operational concepts in strategic communication, revealing deeper symbolic and psychological dynamics.