



Internet Folklore

Sociocultural Implications of Folkloric Narratives and Characters in
Contemporary Online Communities

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Abstract

This thesis contributes a new interdisciplinary framework to folklore studies for analysing how folk traditions manifest and evolve within contemporary online communities, while also demonstrating the value of comics-based research as a methodological tool for analysing folkloric phenomena. Contemporary online communities have become sites of folkloric expression, where users create, adapt, and circulate narratives through memes, viral characters, and participatory online rituals. These practices often echo longstanding folkloric traditions, drawing on familiar character archetypes and narrative structures while unfolding within the continually evolving environment of online networks. Whilst the digitisation and network architectures of folk narratives have been explored in academic writings since the inception of digital media communications, less attention has been paid to the sociocultural dynamics through which online communities adopt, reinterpret, and transform traditional folkloric motifs and practices.

This thesis asks: *In what ways do the processes of narrative dissemination and community rituals that define traditional folklore shape and adapt to the sociocultural dynamics of contemporary digital platforms?* To address this question, the research analyses how folkloric practices manifest and evolve within online communities, examining examples such as viral meme characters and online narratives that draw upon traditional folkloric archetypes.

Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from folklore studies, digital humanism, and media anthropology, the thesis examines and reconciles contradictions within these scholarly perspectives, to crystallise an integrated understanding of human communication and creative expression within digital culture. This reveals contemporary online communities as a vibrant system of collaborative, multimodal engagement in which folkloric traditions adapt to and enhance the affordances of contemporary digital platforms. At the core of this study is

the development of the *Seismic Cultural Event* (SCE) model, a bespoke analytical framework that provides a means of identifying and tracking folkloric practices as they unfold across media, during significant cultural events. A key argument concerns how media channels shape and amplify folkloric traditions by accelerating the rate of narrative diffusion, destabilising traditional media hierarchies, and expanding collaborative access to media editing and sharing devices. Folkloric artefacts, in turn, inform the development and use of these media channels as it adapts narratives, characters, and symbolic frameworks to exploit the affordances of these evolving media technologies.

Case studies of notable cultural events and associated patterns of digital folklore generation are used to demonstrate how particular folk narratives and character traditions underpin internet culture while being transformed and extended through the affordances of networked media. Importantly, the research has been designed using an interdisciplinary, multimodal approach, in the form of an “illustrated thesis” format, which utilises comics to both present and guide academic analysis. This format has four key benefits: it intuitively represents the layering of narratives and contexts present in internet folklore; it extends beyond the expressive limits of text through diagrammatic visual summaries; it fosters a reflexive approach for the researcher that encourages a generative process of research and analysis; and it invites the reader to engage with the material interpretively, more so than traditional academic prose in which meaning is more rigidly prescribed. In doing so, the thesis contributes to folklore studies, digital humanities, and media anthropology by providing a new conceptual framework for analysing the sociocultural impact of folklore in networked environments, while also demonstrating the methodological potential of comics-based research in the study of contemporary digital culture.

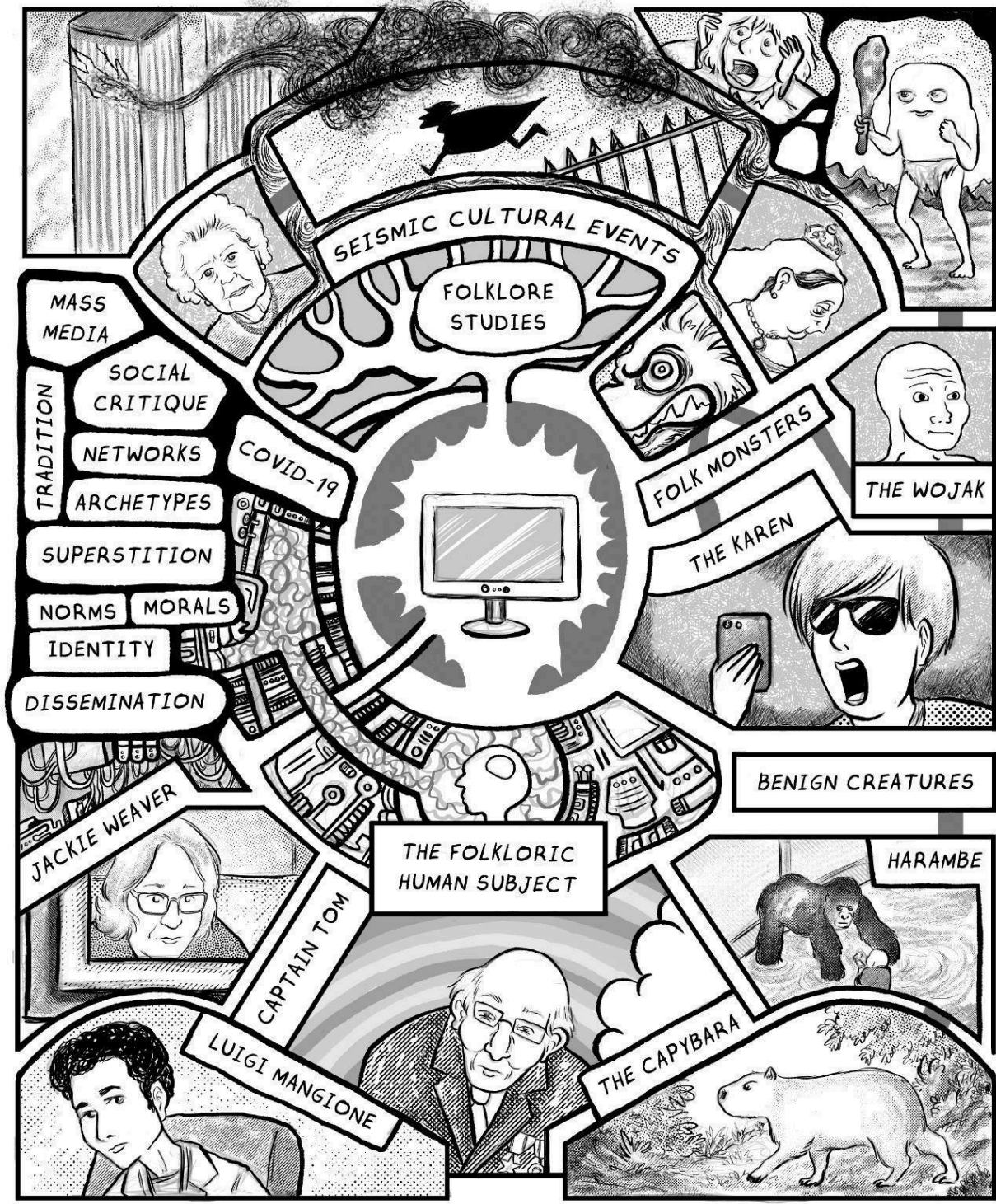
Declaration

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis. During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared, the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Ellen Walker

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ellen Walker', written in a cursive style.

10 April 2025



INTERNET FOLKLORE-
SOCIOCULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOLKLORIC NARRATIVES
AND CHARACTERS IN CONTEMPORARY ONLINE COMMUNITIES

ELLEN WALKER

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Navigating the Thesis

This is a PhD by project submission, comprising a written thesis and a body of practice consisting of one-page comics. These comics are interspersed within the thesis, placed to preface the sections they illustrate and expand upon. The rationale for employing comics as a representational and analytical tool is detailed in the *Methodologies: Comics for Academic Presentation and Inquiry* section.

This thesis frequently references user-generated forums, platforms, and wiki-based sites such as *Know Your Meme*, which may be classified as non-scholarly. However, in the context of this thesis, engaging with these platforms is methodologically necessary. These sources evidence the communal, participatory processes that define contemporary online platforms, and reflect the core principle of folklore that meaning and tradition are shaped by collective participation.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Peter James Walker (1966–2024). His endless curiosity, sharp wit, tenacity, and lifelong love of learning continue to inspire me every single day.

I am deeply grateful for the support of my supervisors, Danielle Barrios-O'Neill and Peter Nencini, whose insight, expertise, and constructive feedback have indelibly shaped both this thesis and my development as an arts practitioner and academic. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to Professor Teal Triggs, whose fantastic *Methods of Intent* weekly were a constant source of intellectual stimulation and community with fellow researchers, and whose generous support kindness provided much-needed reassurance throughout the process. Special thanks are also due to Caroline Vulela, whose exemplary work as course administrator and constant support, deserves particular recognition. I remain especially thankful to all four of these individuals for their compassion and understanding during the most difficult period of my life: navigating the sudden loss of my father at the beginning of my final year.

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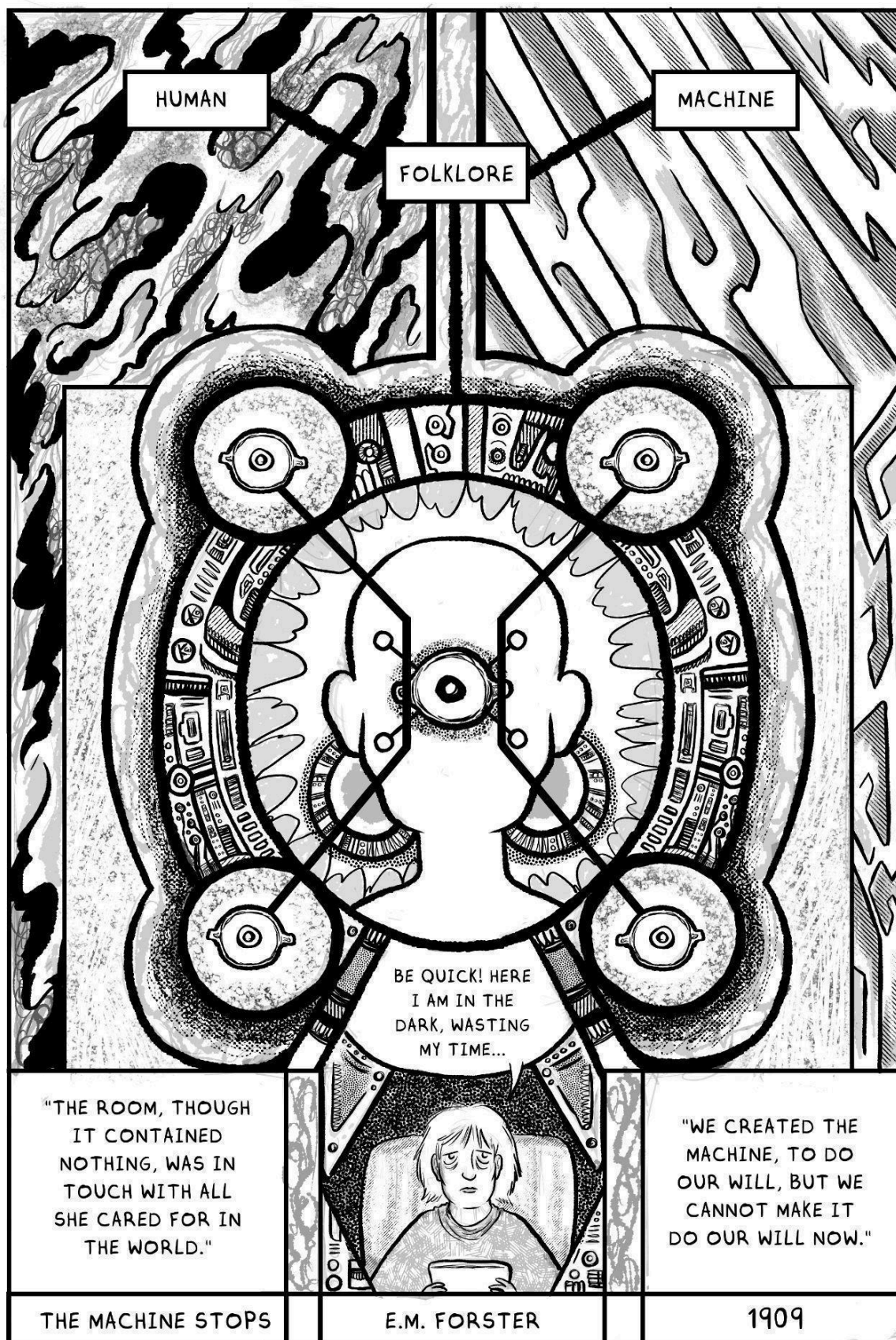


Figure 1: Humanising Digital Folklore

Introduction

The labelling of digitised societies as inhuman is observable in the earliest depictions of oppressive, futuristic dystopias in science fiction literature. Published in 1909, E. M. Forster's short story "*The Machine Stops*" situates humanity in a society governed by an omnipresent, totalitarian machine that provides for all on the condition of absolute subservience. Society lives underground, detached from nature, and is purely information-oriented. Few physically travel, as the world is "alike all over," and it is only necessary to communicate remotely. Over fifty years later, the "instantaneous nature of the co-existence among our technological instruments" was trepidatiously described by eminent media scholar Marshall McLuhan (1962, p. 5) as signifying a human crisis. Separate media channel systems, he argued, were "socially and psychically supportable," as opposed to the emerging simultaneous interplay of technologies. In the digital age, *human versus digital* research semantics have reflected this concern. Linguist Naomi S. Baron (2021, p.27) argued that our ability to discern and analyse text is compromised by digitisation, which fosters "shallower reading" and leads to "a more superficial approach to text than traditional print." There is also digital detox literature, such as Barney's (2004, p.49) argument that digital communities are limited in their scope, able to thrive "only in a particular, truncated form" and Tennant's (2012) determination that online social platforms such as Facebook encourage "false intimacy and feigned friendship." However, whilst some individual studies have pointed to health benefits of digital detox, when analysed in bulk to draw conclusive findings, the results remain inconsistent and require more stringent empirical research (Radtke, 2022). Additionally, as prophetic as McLuhan's conception of simultaneous media was, he did not foresee how folklore, which originates from and is sustained by humanity, would flourish in this new media ecosystem.

Folkloric practices, as expressed through technological communications, do not compromise the human emotion rooted in folk narratives. Instead, they broaden its reach and enhance its influence. Blank (2018, p.6) argues that digital platforms can "complicate, amalgamate, and

inculcate everyday practices across virtual and corporeal venues.” Alan Dundes, considered one of the most influential folklorists of his time, agreed that technology isn’t “stamping out folklore, rather, it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore” (Blank, 2014, p.11). While the impact of technology on our physical and neurological health is an important consideration, as Konte (2020, p.102) observes, digital media is not inherently good or bad; rather, it is *how* we use digital media that is often overlooked in this discussion. Building on this, my research examines the impact of digital media on the dissemination of folklore, and the wide-ranging implications this has, both beneficial and detrimental. Folklore may be delivered by inhuman, automated tech, but it remains “a tool of cultural production that we utilise on a daily basis” (Blank, 2014, p.15). The basic principle of this thesis is firmly against the notion that internet-mediated folklore stifles human expression or connection. Instead, it acknowledges that, while traditional folkloric processes have adapted to digital transmission and media platforms, they have not been compromised by them. To show the continued vitality of folklore in contemporary online communities, this thesis proposes the following question: *In what ways do the processes of narrative dissemination and community rituals that define traditional folklore shape and adapt to the sociocultural dynamics of contemporary digital platforms?* In answering this question, it will be shown that folklore disseminated through internet-mediated platforms has had a significant sociocultural impact, reflecting not a diminution of human expression, but an active proliferation of it through new media channels.

It should be noted that within folklore studies, there are some conflicting perspectives on the exact definition of *folklore*. Bronner (2016, p.7) recounts this dissent with a quote by folklorist Dan Ben-Amos, who reported that American Folklore Society members were split between English and anthropology departments and concerned with the “indefiniteness of folklore, or the inertness of the discipline that the term had initiated.” Ben-Amos (2020, p.xx) himself would write that folklore is “not a closed system,” but instead interconnected with, “other social and cultural systems, such as those of religion, art, law, values, governance, kinship,

and, in literate societies, literature, art, popular culture, film, and social media.” Today, the American Folklore Society (2025) offers an inclusive definition, regarding it as “our cultural DNA,” encompassing “fake news, cryptozoology, legends, holidays, internet memes, traditional and world music, and the supernatural.” Dundes (2005, p.406) welcomed digital media as a source of fresh folklore scholarship, viewing the “increased transmission via e-mail and the Internet” as a sign that folklore was not, as others had opined, a “vanishing subject.” As Bronner (2007a, p.xii) writes, Dundes offered an idea of folklore that leaned on its adaptability, referring to it as “expressive items enjoying multiple, variant existence, rather than restricted,” which are not restricted by “the criteria of time and orality.” Dundes’ broadening of what constitutes folklore and his methods for identifying folklore genres and contexts have become an accepted approach to scholarly research. As Hansen (2006) observed, just as classical scholars have specific subspecialties within their region of preference, folklore studies are often organised as a discipline by genre, with individual scholars typically specialising in “one or two geographical regions and one or more genres.” Folklore is ever-renewing and ubiquitous, as surmised by Bastet and Houlbrook (2023, p.188); it possesses a “quiet pervasiveness” in our lived experiences and is “by necessity fluid—otherwise, it would not retain its relevance.” Given the dense variety and overlap of subcultures and creative expressions in contemporary online communities, a folkloric analysis of online phenomena must recognise folklore’s adaptability across diverse genres and digital contexts.

However, whilst it is essential to acknowledge that folklore can thrive regardless of how it is technologically disseminated, this should not preclude critical examination of how the mode of transmission can influence the content and function of folklore itself. Dundes (1980, p.32) was critical of focusing on transmission and material cultures as contributing factors; “it will no longer be necessary to rely upon such vague definitions as those depending upon such external criteria as the means of transmission.” It is this sentiment that gives rise to a divergence in principle in the development of my thesis. I would argue, instead, that while

digital communication should not be viewed as rendering the processes of folklore obsolete or dated, ignoring the transformative properties of these channels can yield incomplete analyses. It is indeed true that the dramatic shift in basic conventions of mass media communication has made it difficult for folklore scholars to maintain “stable definitions of their analytical categories”; however, it is still important to recognise “how the movement into digital folklore happened” (de Seta, 2020, p.169). This is evidenced comprehensively by Bronner (2016, p.15) in the paper *Toward a Definition of Folklore in Practice*, itself a nod to Ben-Amos’ 1971 essay *Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context*, agreeing that folklore is best defined when it emphasises “activity or practice” so the analyst can connect “repeated action across oral, social, and material forms. “Taking these factors into consideration, and in the interest of providing as concrete a foundational definition of the term as possible for this thesis, “folklore” refers to *any group-based activity or practice of delivering knowledge via various formal and contextual creative outputs*. This definition can be applied to both pre-digital and post-digital communication infrastructures, as it acknowledges both form (the means of transmission) and context (the historical or cultural setting in which it is engaged with and interpreted).

There is scholarly value in addressing individual folk narratives that exist within their respective narrative genres and contexts, while also acknowledging the means of transmission and how certain activities and practices recur with successive advancements in media technologies. As Wilson (1988, p.157) stated, folklore is unique in its ability to synthesise our cultural heritage while simultaneously “revealing the interrelationships of different cultural expressions.” How the form and content of folklore interrelate with its means of transmission is central to my interrogation of how it manifests within contemporary online platforms. Therefore, **Chapter One** will introduce the Seismic Cultural Event (SCE) model, which maps out folkloric activities and practices that occur during a sudden and significant event, and how technological means of transmission influence this process. Building on these findings, **Chapter Two** examines how characters used in meme culture incorporate

the traditional functions of folk creatures as tools of contemporary social critique. **Chapter Three** examines the phenomenon of contemporary online communities projecting traditional folkloric archetypes, such as “hero” and “villain,” onto real figures, effectively transforming them into *folkloric human objects*. Ultimately, the goal of these three chapters is to argue that folkloric activities and practices shape and adapt to contemporary online communities, demonstrating that online platforms not only transmit folklore but actively transform and expand its sociocultural role.

Methodologies: Comics for Academic Presentation and Inquiry

A growing body of research integrates comics creation into methodological approaches, using it to “collect and elicit data, to analyze data, and to disseminate findings to various audiences” (Kuttner, 2021, p.199). Comics can expand the scope of academic inquiry beyond the static, linear format of text-based analysis, a position that was notably argued by comics artist and scholar Nick Sousanis. In the purely illustrated thesis *Unflattering*, Sousanis argued that visual narrative can convey “both our own dimensionality and dynamic capability” (2015, p.150). This multimodal approach is further supported by Langley et al (2022, p.203) calling for “a willingness to put methodological narrow-mindedness aside in favour of diversity and plurality,” and van Es and Verhoeff (2023, p.15) who argue that taking digital data seriously requires a “situated, reflexive, critical, and productive (or creative) perspective,” by acknowledging that it is “produced by culture and culture-producing.” This thesis builds upon these perspectives by leveraging comics-based research as a methodological approach to present academic research and engage in reflexive, generative analytical inquiry.

The unique structural capabilities of comics, specifically their ability to juxtapose visuals, contexts and meaning through panel structures, offer a particularly evocative way of

depicting the layered nature of folklore. Bronner (2016, p.16) describes the “multiple connotative layers created along the path of transmission” that define folklore in practice. This concept resonates strongly with the narrative strategies employed by comic artists such as Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware. Spiegelman employs “competing or nonsynchronous narrative layers” (Chute, 2008, p. 457), while Ware grounds multiple interdependent narratives within the confines of a single apartment building in *Building Stories* (2012). These approaches reflect the synergistic interplay between digital media and folklore, in which form and content are mutually shaped, allowing each to influence and redefine the other. Comics retain the traditional denotative functions of both verbal and visual elements, “while affecting each other in complex, form-determined ways,” thereby blurring the distinctions between the text and image (Kannenbergs, 2006, p.96). This quality makes comics an ideal medium for capturing the blurred distinctions between interrelated text, visuals, and media forms that circulate across hyperlinked online platforms to create narrative. Furthermore, researchers have identified the structural affinities between comics and memes, including their complementary use of verbal and visual elements, as well as the use of panel sequences (Chaudhary, 2022, p. 4; Ling et al., 2022, p. 7). Comics thus not only represent the content of internet folklore but also serve as a unique tool for expressing its structural and semiotic logic, in terms of how meaning is constructed, layered, and disseminated. It also expresses the adaptability and vitality of folklore within contemporary online communities, not diminished by this new means of transmission, but galvanised.

One of the defining features of comics is their demand for active reader participation. Consider, for instance, how readers logically connect the time and space between comic panels by imagining the “unseen actions” for themselves (Iyyer et al, 2017, p. 7186). Through these spatial juxtapositions, the reader is invited to envision the space and events that occur between each image. As cartoonist Chris Ware opines, the experience of reading a comic is akin to experiencing music “beat by beat,” conceiving the information that exists suspended between each panel, ultimately forming a “structure that you could turn around in

your mind and see all sides of at once” (Dittmer, 2014, p. 483). This interpretive process, in which fragmented panels are pulled together into a cohesive narrative, parallels how users engage with internet folklore, in which the meaning and structure of a narrative is derived by synthesising information between various media platforms and digitised formats. The “multiple variety of temporal modes and rhythms that technologies enable” (Barassi and Zamponi, 2020, p.601) and the “ubiquitous interconnection of everyday items of interest” (Barthwal, Misra and Obaidat, 2013, p.1749) can be further correlated with how comics engage readers’ imagination by requiring them to infer connections between panels, images, and text. As folklore studies are dedicated to understanding the participatory and dialogic creation of cultural meaning, a mode of presenting academic research that invites the reader’s participation is a compelling way of presenting these processes. To enact this, in this thesis, the comics are strategically placed at the beginning of each section, prompting readers to engage with key themes, structures, and visuals before delving into the written analysis. This visual engagement is intended to activate the reader’s interpretive faculties, enriching their understanding of the material by reflecting the participatory processes central to both comics and contemporary internet folklore.

Further supporting the reader’s interpretive agency is the decision to structure the comics as single-page compositions with a non-linear visual design. This approach emerged from earlier visual experiments inspired by the *mappa mundi* (see appendix), medieval world maps that are schematic rather than navigational, bringing together diverse folkloric beings, mythologies and belief systems within a single, flattened visual plane. Though not a “comic” in the traditional sense, the sectioned and labelled compartments of the *mappa mundi* bear a clear resemblance to the panel structures of comics, and closely parallel what Sousanis describes as the “unflattening” effect of the medium. By presenting multiple channels of meaning simultaneously, the page invites an omnipresent gaze, allowing the eye to traverse the artwork in any direction. While comics are inherently interpretive even in their most conventional, panel-by-panel forms, this non-linear, single–page visual structure amplifies

the reader's agency, granting viewers an especially heightened role in constructing folkloric meaning from the information presented. Additionally, the decision to render the comics in black and white reinforces their function as interpretive structures. Black and white images prioritise tonal contrast and diagrammatic clarity, whereas the use of colour would introduce emotive cues that risk constraining reader interpretation.

Comics, however, are not only tools for presenting research; they are also a reflexive and generative method of cognitively engaging in academic inquiry. My early visual experiments, inspired by the *mappa mundi*, led me to conceive of this format as analogous to how my comics should operate within the thesis: as works structured through an interconnected, non-linear visual language. This approach, in turn, prompted further interrogation of the role of mythology and monstrosity within medieval maps, informing the analyses of the second chapter on Folk Creatures. As Smith and Luke (2024, p.583) note, when researchers engage in reflexivity, "not only will the methodological coherence of the research be concomitantly increased, but the processes can also transform the researcher." Through creating comics, I engage more deeply with the material, offering a spatial, dimensional understanding of how internet memes, for example, interrelate across various contexts and meanings. Comics, with their unique ability to visually articulate and "flatten" juxtaposing contexts, force the researcher to consider new perspectives on how meaning is constructed and communicated in folklore. Consider, for example, Ware's work, in which diagrammatic compositions and the use of "isometrically rendered space" elucidate broader panoramas of space and time, while also condensing and interpreting metaphysical concepts (Cohn, 2017, p. 35). In the same vein, translating the contextual layers of a meme into visual form enables me to gain a more comprehensive, three-dimensional understanding of the spatial and temporal abstractions folk narrative undergoes when translated into online media formats. Comics not only synthesise layered meanings for the reader's benefit, but also for my own; this approach has helped to broaden my cognitive and analytical processes beyond what is

possible through text-based analysis, offering a more active and intuitive method of working through complex, culturally embedded material.

Furthermore, comics-based research also places the researcher in a dual role, both as analyst and participant in folklore itself. The comics in this thesis are subjective, reflecting my engagement with the material. Far from compromising academic rigour, this approach honours the active, organic, and participatory nature of folklore, which is deeply rooted in subjective, interpretive experience. Indeed, behavioural and cultural shifts in folk narrative history are made possible via creative practice and cultural artefacts (Abrahams, 1963), and visual narrative plays a central role in the proliferation of folklore due to its “processual, polyphonic, and dialogic form” (Li, 2020). Immersing oneself in the practice of constructing meaning through interpreting folkloric phenomena and theoretical frameworks allows me, as a researcher, to gain a more embodied understanding of folkloric activities and practices as they evolve in online spaces.

The comics featured in this thesis take on varied forms depending on the analytical context. Thematically, they are inspired by diagrammatic models, which blend the nuances of visual storytelling with the conceptual clarity of diagrams. However, while the comics that precede sections focusing on theoretical frameworks lean toward the abstract and diagrammatic, those illustrating case studies adopt a more sequential and narrative form. This variation highlights the comic medium’s adaptability in serving distinct analytical and communicative functions in academic research. With these methods I aim to demonstrate that comics are not only an effective tool for communicating ideas beyond the expressive limitations of text, but also for fostering an immersive engagement with the material for both the researcher and the reader. Taken together, the use of comics in this thesis yields four core benefits: it intuitively represents the layering of narratives and contexts present in internet folklore; it surpasses the expressive limits of text through diagrammatic visual summaries; it fosters a reflexive, generative approach to research and analysis; and it invites the reader to

interpretively engage with the material, unlike traditional academic prose in which meaning is more rigidly prescribed.

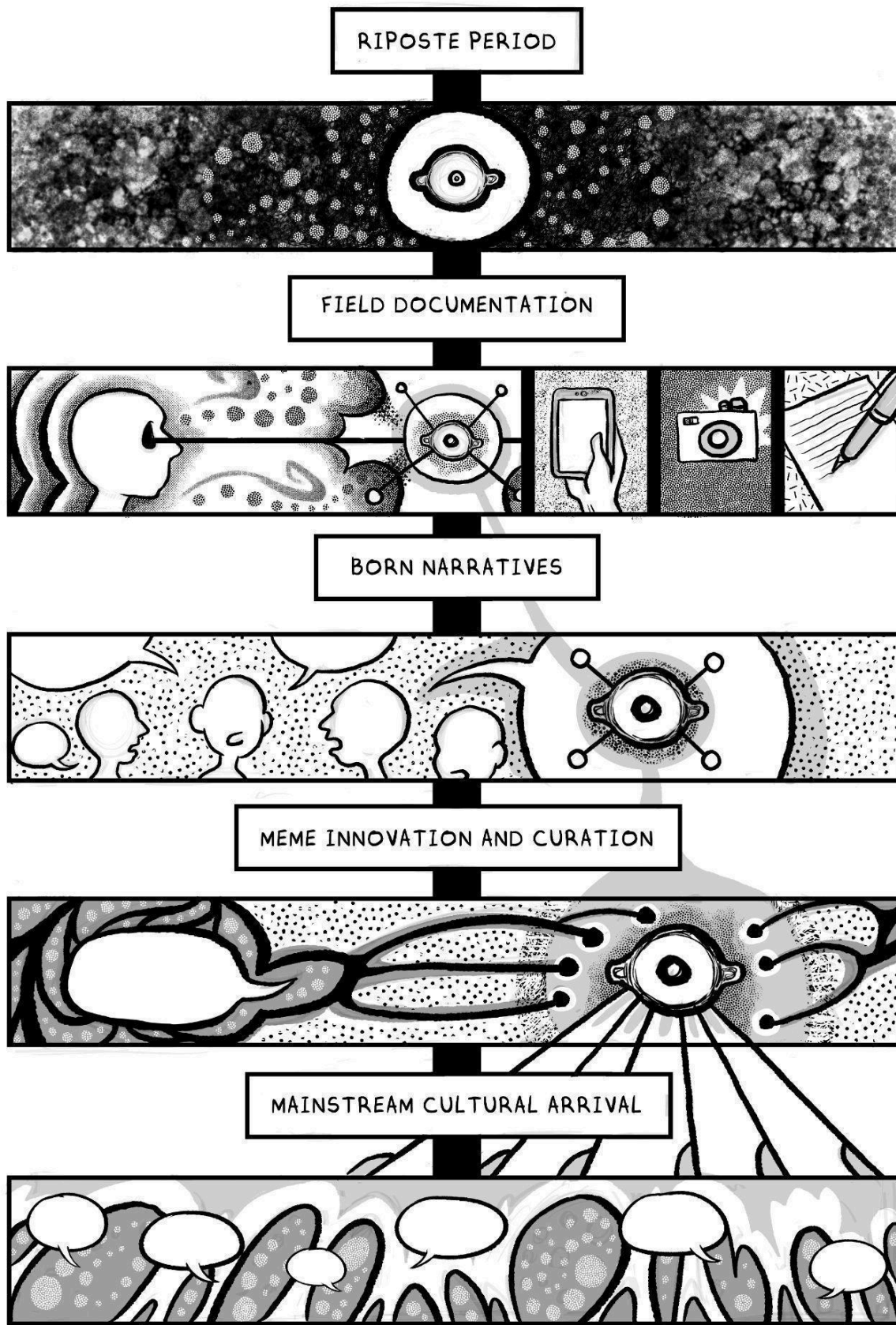


Figure 2: The Seismic Cultural Event Model

Methodologies: Case Studies/ The Seismic Cultural Event Model

Throughout this thesis, I use case studies that focus on particular events, memes, and viral figures. These case studies follow a basic selection criteria; the memes and viral figures in Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate cross-platform cultural persistence and virality between approximately 2015 and 2022, and are unified by their engagement with recurring folkloric motifs, in this specific case folk creatures and folkloric human objects. The selection criteria for the events and accompanying theoretical model in Chapter 1 is detailed on the following pages.

Ethical considerations were central to the collection and analysis of online material for this research, particularly given the blurred boundaries between public and private digital spaces. UK Research and Innovation (ukri.org, 2025) asserts that whilst publicly accessible forums and social media platforms are considered to be in the public domain, the ethical implications of this should be critically examined. In line with this principle, this thesis followed principles of responsible netnography. Memes and forum posts were only cited from sources with anonymised usernames, with only the posts of public figures being referenced by name. Discussions of viral figures were framed within the wider context that these individuals had already been the subject of widespread media coverage, rather than targeting individuals popular in niche online spaces or those especially vulnerable to online harassment. Some memes referenced in this research contain insensitive or offensive material, including deliberate inaccuracies or conspiracy theories. Consideration was given to the potential ramifications of reproducing such harmful material. However, the surrounding analyses make the damaging nature of these materials explicitly clear. Addressing and therefore mitigating such content online requires critical interrogation and understanding of the material itself. It is also important to acknowledge this content within the context of folklore, which has historically transmitted harmful or problematic ideas, as identified by

Erickson (2004, p.115), who observes that complicity in extermination campaigns in Nazi Germany depended on “evil folklore (...) an essential element in a set of practices imbedded in asymmetrical power relations.” Therefore, critically engaging with harmful or offensive online content in this thesis is not an endorsement, but a necessary effort to highlight and understand the implications of damaging folkloric narratives influencing contemporary media platforms.

The methods used to gather source material for case studies featuring meme analysis were adapted according to whether the meme under examination was contemporary or primarily accessible through online archives. The gathering of source material for the Luigi Mangione case study in Chapter 3, for instance, was undertaken as the meme existed as a trending, circulating format. As the case was current within online discourse, source material was gathered through direct engagement with social media feeds, with attention paid to their platform-specific modes of media circulation, remixing, and audience interaction. However, in the case of interrogations into online materials appearing during September 11, 2001, at the cusp of an internet era seeing an expansion in user-driven online content, this necessitated an approach which relied on archived webpages of inactive discussion threads and message boards. This adaptability in analysing online material reflects the challenges of researching memes, where the varying conditions under which they are experienced and preserved demand flexibility from the researcher. Certainly, the decision to seize upon the Mangione case in real time exemplifies both the potential and the risk of this method. Gathering materials as the meme circulated meant working with an event whose long-term significance and place in the cultural zeitgeist was not yet certain. Research into internet culture and memes, limited by the pitfalls of inconsistent archiving and the difficulty in capturing the ephemeral mood of trending topics, requires an adaptive, responsive approach.

The case study method enables “in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life settings” (Crowe et al, 2011). This is ideal for examining folkloric phenomena,

as it can encompass the various traditions, activities, practices, and narratives that converge to form a cohesive folkloric entity. Dundes (1986, p.137) observed that a criticism of folklorists is that they have failed to “employ a broader, more comprehensive form of the comparative method.” When coupled with the comics-based approach to presenting research, which visually contrasts overlapping contexts and narratives, it is possible to address this criticism by yielding a comprehensive perspective through the case study method. Case studies also allow for comparative insights, as they involve

analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal in a way that produces knowledge that is easier to generalize about causal questions ... (Goodrick, 2014)

Comparative insights will be crucial for understanding how folklore functions differently across various media communication platforms and the interplay between enduring folkloric traditions and innovations in contemporary media. To analyse this interplay, I have created a theoretical model which I refer to as the “Seismic Cultural Event” (SCE) model. The term *Seismic Cultural Event* refers to a moment of cultural and sociological significance involving the participation of large numbers of people, such as a mass panic, disaster, or commemorative occasion. This definition builds on Deluze’s concept of events as rupturous, transformative moments, “part of the process of becoming and differentiation ... rhizomatic and part of an ever-changing, ongoing process,” (Beck and Gleyzon, 2016, p.329), and Badiou’s concept of the event as leaving behind a “trace ... which is itself incorporated in the new present,” (Badiou, 2007, p.40). The SCE extend these philosophical frameworks by tracking and identifying folkloric activities and practices as they proliferate through evolving media technologies during culturally significant events. These technologies play a transformative role in shaping folkloric expression, and the traces left behind are the traditions and narratives that have been reshaped within the context of the event itself. As asserted by Zou and Priscilla (2023, p. 3.) folklore is an integral engine of cultural and

sociological practices, as it “mirrors ways of traditional cultural expression and initiates customary social interactions with people.” It is therefore through examining folklore as it filters through media technologies during pronounced, extreme events that I will be able to illustrate how the sociocultural implications of folklore are influenced by the media in which it thrives. The SCE model will be demonstrated through its application to three case studies of significant events in Chapter 1, and its findings will be built upon in Chapters 2 and 3, where I examine online cultural phenomena that manifest folkloric activities, practices, and traditions. The baseline template for the model is detailed as follows:

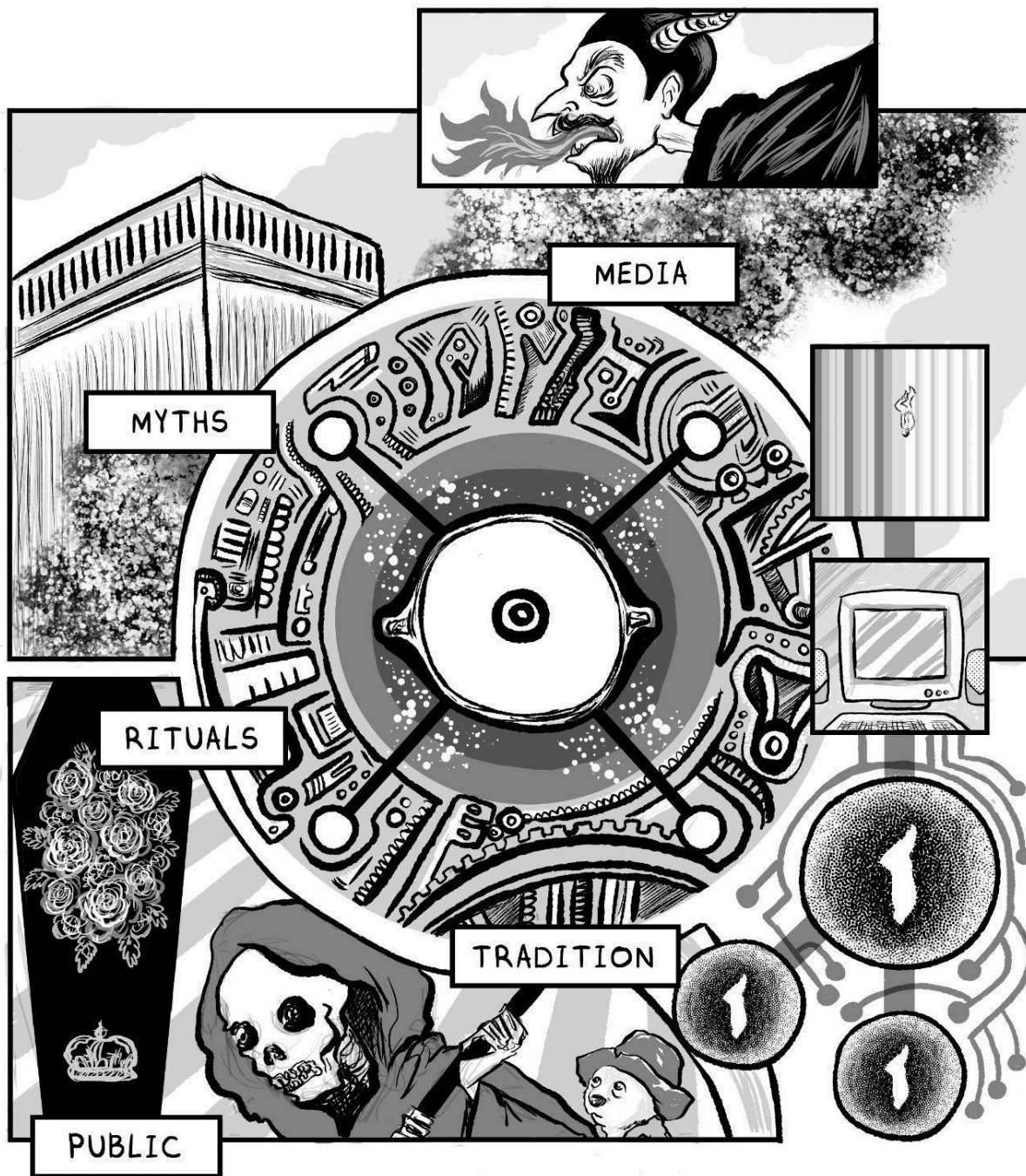
1. **Riposte Period:** Immediate public reactions, defined by spontaneity, rumour, lack of thoughtful critique/commentary, and speculative postulations.
2. **Field Documentation:** Media users and communicators utilise their platforms to report on what is happening at the epicentre of the event.
3. **Born Narratives:** As the narrative’s authenticated details are solidified, media users and communicators begin to share more measured and contemplative reactions, establishing what will later become iconic symbols and cultural mascots of the event.
4. **Meme Innovation and Curation:** Media users and communicators will begin to further explore narratives and cultural mascots by subverting and elaborating on them through memes and artistic expression and interpretation via various media.
5. **Mainstream Cultural Arrival:** Now that the narrative has permeated all corners of collective discourse, it has attained the status of cultural ubiquity and is referenced in subsequent events and narratives.

I draw on existing frameworks developed by previous researchers that examine the usage of media communication channels during significant public events. In *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Dayan and Katz (1992, pp. 1-12) refer to ceremonial events such as John F. Kennedy’s funeral and the Olympics as “high holidays of mass communication,” where the public is invited to immerse themselves in an event that “enthral[s] very large

audiences.” As Brügger (2022, p. 42) addresses in a retrospective analysis of *Media Events*, some have noted the datedness of this research, given the evolution of mass media communication under new digital media channels. A way of mitigating this, he writes, is to centralise further expansion of these models with attention given to these naturally occurring “historical trajectories” in digital media, which can contextualise and identify “trends, similarities, and differences, continuities, and breaks.” Brügger puts this theoretical framework into action by using a “historical outline” that traces the shift in media environments through the Olympics as a “concrete media event” from 1996 to 2016. By using historical forms and outlines, we can identify the fixed features and invariant traits that have survived in online media formats. The SCE model employs a similar analytical principle by focusing on folklore, which itself is embedded in historical context through the preservation of enduring cultural traditions. It not only tracks how folklore persists through time; it also addresses how media technologies serve as critical agents in both preserving and reshaping folkloric activities, practices and traditions.

The SCE model also draws from Leavy’s *Iconic events: Media, politics, and power in retelling history*, which she defines as an “event that undergoes intense initial interpretive practices but also becomes mythic within the culture.” This mythic status will then prompt the event to become a “representational vehicle for a host of purposes” (2007, pp. 4-5). Representational value is an intrinsic feature of folklore, serving as a repository of knowledge by conveying it through interpretive imagery and symbols. The SCE model builds on this framework by recognizing that not only does the event itself gain representational value, but so too does the symbols, memes, and cultural mascots that emerge from it via the media technologies available at the time. The three events I have chosen to analyse using the SCE model—the Spring-heeled Jack legend, the September 11 attacks, and the death of Queen Elizabeth II—correspond to key transitional periods in mass media innovation, creating new ways for folklore to thrive and remain culturally significant. Each event serves as an inflection point where traditional folkloric activities and practices converge with

substantial innovations in media communication technologies. Examining these events will engender an insightful look into the way folklore shapes and adapts to these advancements. Ultimately, the SCE model provides a crucial lens for understanding the evolutionary trajectory of folklore as it relates to mode of transmission, revealing how traditional practices are transformed and reimagined through media innovations. Establishing this will also lay the essential groundwork for detailed case studies in the following chapters, which examine online phenomena that incorporate and adapt folkloric activities and practices.



CHAPTER 1
THE SEISMIC CULTURAL EVENT MODEL

Figure 3: Chapter 1 Header



Figure 4: The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack Case Study

Chapter 1: The Seismic Cultural Event Model

1.0. Case Study: The Legend of Spring-heeled Jack (1837-1904)

“Spring-heeled Jack” was a folkloric figure that arose in 1837 as a mass panic regarding the alleged nighttime attacks inflicted upon young women, with reports continuing until 1904 (Mackley, 2016, p.1). The endurance of the legend benefited from the technological innovations of the Industrial Revolution, creating a high-yielding period for the development of mass-produced print media. This provided artists and writers with “absorbing models for narrative form, visual perception, human relations, spirituality, and scientific objectivity,” as Ketabgian (2011) observes. The increased number of factories producing models of material replication on a mass scale prompted newspapers to expand their role into managing a growing population with rising literacy rates and cultivating a greater sense of collective consciousness. As Anderson (1983, p.35) explains, the newspaper became a tool of “mass ceremony,” where the individual's act of absorbing the information on the page becomes a collective “simultaneous consumption” (1983, p. 35). As Jack’s story was delivered daily through newspaper media, the advent of innovations in mass-produced print materials served to accelerate his rise to cultural prominence, unifying the populace as receptacles of an unfolding narrative event.

As historian Karl Bell (2012a, p.47) surmises, “Spring-heeled Jack was not so much born as evolved, his legend defined by a transformative, acquisitive nature that left him in a state of constant gestation.” It is this gestative process that the SCE Model can dissect and, in doing so, reveal how folkloric activities and practices intersect with the formal transmission of an event during a groundbreaking era in mass media communication technologies. The creation and proliferation of Spring-heeled Jack, as it pertains to the Seismic Cultural Event, can be understood as follows, with specific chronological details drawn from extensive research into the legend of J.S. Mackley (2016) and Karl Bell (2012a, 2012b). Following this brief

overview, each phase will be examined in detail to justify the reasoning behind how the chronology of the event is aligned with this model and to unpack how each phase operates.

1. **Riposte Period:** In late 1837, several purported sightings of a spectral humanoid attacking women are reported, circulating among the populace and sparking local intrigue and gossip.
2. **Field Documentation:** In January 1838, a complaint reaches the Mayor of London, Sir John Cowan, at a public session held at the Mansion House. It claims that an assailant disguised as “a ghost, a bear, and a devil” is harassing Londoners. The mayor’s acknowledgement of the complaints leads to a detailed summary in the *Morning Chronicle*, collating the reported incidents.
3. **Born Narratives:** A solid descriptive perception of the character is fully realised. A pamphlet is circulated entitled *The Apprehension and Examination of Spring-Heel’d Jack, who has appeared as a Ghost, Demon, Bear, Baboon, etc.* Further attacks are reported in February, describing a character shooting “blue and white flames” from his mouth and eyes that resemble “red balls of fire.”
4. **Meme Innovation and Curation:** Spring-Heeled Jack inspires the production of creative responses, becoming a cultural mainstay in penny dreadfuls (*The Boys’ Standard* and the *Newsagents Publishing Company*), illustrated serials, plays performed in cheap theatres, and even as a villain in Punch and Judy puppet shows.
5. **Mainstream Cultural Arrival:** Spring-Heeled Jack becomes a ubiquitous folkloric character in popular culture, periodically resurrected to provide creative and descriptive parallels to related events, most notably the Whitechapel Murders of 1888, where the sobriquet “Jack” was assigned to a serial killer who targeted young women in the slums of East London. The vampire character in Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula* appropriates his predatory behaviours and aristocratic traits.

The **Riposte Period** marks the beginning of a potentially significant event. Here, the first signs of an emerging narrative are confronted by multiple people, who then spread it among a community, predominantly through means of transmission that are immediately accessible, in this case, word of mouth. It occurs before any engagement with officially sanctioned media channels and public outlets, which makes it difficult to pinpoint an exact point of origin. As Mackley (2016, p. 2) writes, authors record Spring-heeled Jack incidents using fact and fiction "interchangeably," resulting in some contemporary reports being later exaggerated. What is clear, however, is that the legend was born from a series of urban myths circulating among the London populace, involving a mysterious figure known for pranking or attacking women. This basic detail was established as the starting point for the first instances of active documentation and chronicling: the **Field Documentation** phase. In the case of Spring-Heeled Jack, this stage of the SCE process was crucial for determining whether the rumours warranted broader dissemination and interest. This was achieved by ventilating it in Mansion House, an active communal space involving a focal point of community leadership, in this case, the mayor, who responded to the complaint. As observed by Jørgensen (2019, p.117) using Arendtian philosophy, effective leadership is a point of action where "focus is redirected from the attributes of what single individuals do to what people do together—collective action." In Jørgensen's terms, Mansion House became a "relational, embodied, discursive, and material space," which drew attention to the "material affordances for action" (p.121). This action came in the form of the Morning Chronicle, following up the Mansio House public session with a published summary of reported attacks, which described the location of Jack's appearances and visual traits. These reports are inconsistent regarding Jack's appearance and abilities, alternately describing him as a "white bull," "bear," or a ghost "wearing steel armour," and "leaping over high walls" (Mackley, 2016, p,4).

This wealth of information set the stage for less impulsive and more strategic processes of spreading the legend of Spring-Heeled Jack as a viable threat to the community during the

Born Narratives phase. Here, responses begin to settle on Jack's basic appearance, behaviour, and status as a demonic being. Reports in February 1838 point to his clawed hands, red eyes, and ability to breathe "blue and white flames" (Briggs, 2010). Reports of Jack's appearance as an animal, such as the widely-circulated pamphlet referring to him as "Ghost, Demon, Bear, Baboon" , converged into depicting a man with animalistic features and abilities, with "spring-heeled" referring to his ability to leap unnaturally great heights (Mackley, 2016, p.4). The focus on Jack's supernatural quality reflected the collective anxieties that plagued Victorian Britain at the time. Bell (2012b, p.15) observes the legend as a "messy tangle of reality and fiction, past and present, reality and fear," transforming a seemingly innocuous case of a nighttime menace into a personification of superstitious thinking and spiritual curiosity. The contemporary rift between avid spiritualism and secularist philosophies is known as the "Crisis of Faith," where advancements in modern science challenged the notion of divine creation and authority (Willis, 1984, p. 123). Folklorists have cited superstition and fear of the unknown as historically having the ability to induce "the emergence and formation of folkloric phenomena" which explains the fixation on Jack's supernatural nature in media reports (Hiimäe, 2004, p.65). The process of "modelling," which involves using storytelling to reveal an underlying societal problem or set of values, is explored by A. Mar and Oatley (2008, p. 174), who describe it as necessary when "access cannot be direct." Jack's characterisation as an animalistic, devil-like being, which would be repeatedly evoked in subsequent sightings, was fixated upon because it modelled and provided an access point for the Victorian era's sensibilities and fascinations with the supernatural.

The **Meme Innovation and Curation** phase is the point at which Spring-heeled Jack was explored through various media by writers, artists, and public performers, cementing the idea of a supernatural, devilish menace in the cultural consciousness. Jack became a prominent figure in published serials known as "Penny Dreadfuls," beginning in 1863, as print culture continued to boom throughout the Victorian Era. Penny Dreadfuls marked a critical point in

bridging the gap between the literate and illiterate, where affordable booklets prompted the working class to pursue literature (Kimball, 2017). In the hugely popular Punch and Judy puppet shows of the time, referred to by Charles Dickens as “extravagant reliefs from the realities of life,” the “Devil” villain character was renamed Spring-heeled Jack (Howard, 2013, p.22; V&A, 2019). Such playful depictions of Jack aimed to achieve exactly this: provide relief from the bristling fears that stirred within the darkly ruminative atmosphere of the Born Narratives phase. However, what is particularly important about the Meme Innovation and Curation phase is how it becomes clear that Jack earned fame by intersecting with the advances in widely circulated print media. Jack’s character conformed to the mould of Penny Dreadful villains through more concrete descriptions: an “aristocrat with a devilish mask and spring-loaded boots,” which caused the legend to lose its mysteriousness (Mackley, p. 16). This curation of a solid character indicative of the Jack legend, however, cemented his role as a Victorian-era bogeyman, with the traits of which were incorporated into new cultural figures.

This leads neatly into the final phase: **Mainstream Cultural Arrival**, in which Jack was permanently ingrained into the cultural imagination. He became a ubiquitous entity, periodically resurfacing in public discourse and the arts whenever his symbolic power was made relevant by contemporary interests. In 1888, a series of gruesome murders took place in the Whitechapel district of London. A letter sent by someone claiming to be the Ripper was headed, “Spring Heel Jack, The Whitechapel Murderer.” This association with the “folk devil” Spring-heeled Jack helped to transform the real-life serial killer into a “dramatis personae” (Stapleton, 2014, p.71). Like his namesake, Jack the Ripper became a lucrative mainstay in penny dreadfuls, depicted as a fictional villain who incorporated supernatural themes (Thompson, 2018, p.59). While Spring-heeled Jack had now become less of a genuine threat in the collective consciousness and more of a storybook monster, it remains apparent that through these subtle allusions in real-life crimes and popular media, the character had become a “cultural cipher,” (Bell, 2012a, p.51). The hugely popular gothic

horror novel, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), can also be considered a cultural descendant of Jack's popularity. Although no evidence suggests that Stoker drew inspiration from Spring-heeled Jack in writing *Dracula*, cultural themes and traits interweave between the two. As I observed in an article for *JSTOR Daily*, Jack's defining traits were mirrored by *Dracula*, who was similarly "a well-dressed, suave gentleman with a veneer of aristocratic panache (...) powerless by day yet physically invigorated by night" (Walker, 2022). Further illustrating the link, in 1899, a boy's magazine serial centred around a vampire used Jack's name, which Bell (2012a, p. 51) opines was an attempt to capitalise on the popularity of *Dracula*. However, these parallels between the two do not end there. *Dracula*, a novel born equally from the "Crisis of Faith," explores the dichotomy between supernatural belief and secular scientism by presenting "the existence of the supernatural through both experience and outright statement of truth" (Sanders, 2015, p. 166). This dichotomy between supernatural experience and 19th-century scientific modernity is present in Spring-heeled Jack's rise to prominence; scientific advancement dispelled the supernatural yet allowed it to reach vast numbers of people through mass-produced serials featuring a devil-like menace. This illustrates how folklore is not only adaptable to, but shaped by, the technological and cultural innovations of the era.

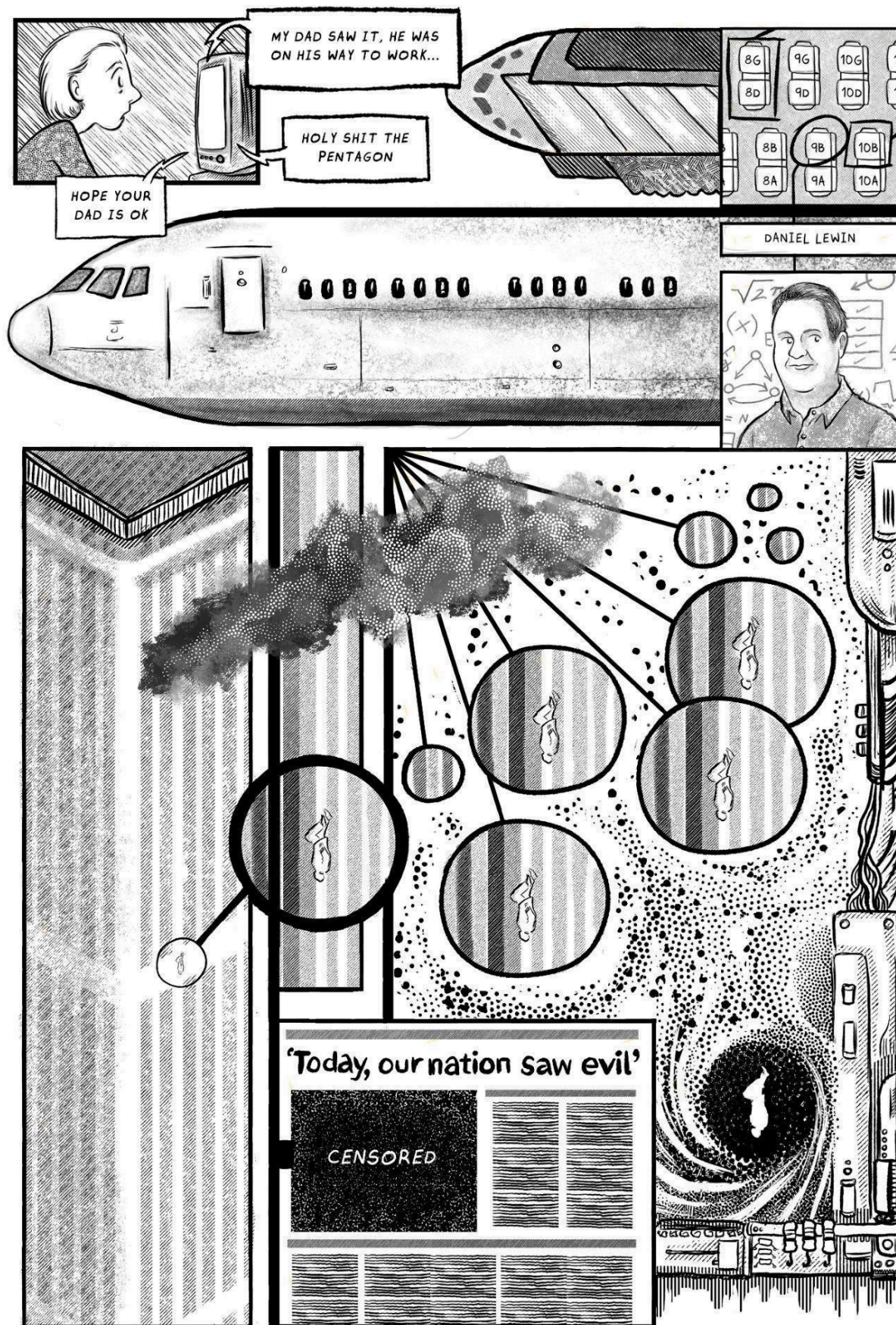


Figure 5: The September 11 Attacks Case Study

1.1. Case Study: The September 11 attacks (2001)

The Spring-heeled Jack panic and the September 11 attacks, while differing significantly in scale, context, and legitimacy, share notable similarities. The former capitalised on the era's burgeoning print culture, while the latter occurred in a media environment that was beginning to expand through digital communication infrastructures which, while in their nascent stages, were providing new channels for disseminating information. These events differ vastly: Spring-heeled Jack was a fictional figure limited in terms of cultural impact to the UK, whereas 9/11 was an indisputably real, devastating and globally impactful event. Despite this, both can be understood in terms of how folkloric processes shape how societies understand and process traumatic experiences. It is important to note that folklore does not necessarily imply falsehood or fabrication; rather, it encompasses both authentic narratives and those which are culturally meaningful yet erroneous interpretations. Glassie (1987, p.190) rails against those who regard history and folklore within binarised terms of true and false, stating, "folk history and academic history cannot be sundered by truth, for both are as true as their practitioners can make them." When viewed through the lens of how collective memory, cultural narratives, and myth-making shape public understanding of traumatic events, 9/11 is a folkloric event just as Spring-heeled Jack is.

Furthermore, the emerging digital infrastructures which offered an alternative to the monolithic news media landscape by providing "interactivity; availability and use of diverse sources of information; critical and collective examination of mainstream media texts; insularity of conversation, and civility," can themselves be understood as folkloric (Williams 2003, p.179). Increasingly decentralised media communication platforms mirror how traditional folklore spreads through the communal circulation of personal narratives and perspectives through word-of-mouth. As Fallon (2019, p.36) notes, one of the fastest-growing portions of the Internet before the rise of social media was digital archiving, to "finally arrest the process of physical decay, thereby transforming them into durable,

universally accessible resources.” 9/11 produced perhaps the most extensive catalogue of eyewitness accounts, material evidence, and assorted documentation of any terrorist attack in world history, with the official museum boasting a growing online catalogue of over 74,000 artefacts (The Collection, 2024). Hathaway (2005, p.46) identified the sheer expanse of material that emerged both during and after 9/11 as a suitable basis for revisiting the foundational concepts of folklore studies. She recounts using her collection of “9/11 e-lore” to provoke discussion in a folklore class less than a year after the attacks, citing the domination of visual media in electronic reactions to 9/11 as indicative of how “pictorial e-lore allows for multiple meanings to be perceived simultaneously.” This pictorial emphasis is key to understanding how folklore began to adapt to digital platforms in the years following the attack, which saw the emergence of social media sites that thrived on image-sharing databases, including Friendster, Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter (Lamberton and Stephen, 2015, p. 148).

In his introduction to a publication by the Western Folklore Society centred on 9/11 folklore, Goldstein (2009, p.150) cites folklorists' ability to be sensitive to “vernacular responses” to contemporaneous issues and events as beneficial for providing unique insights. The SCE model responds to this perspective by exploring folkloric responses as they relate to the contemporaneous context of not just 9/11 itself, but the emerging digitised media landscape during which it occurred. The chronological details that inform the SCE model as it pertains to 9/11 are derived from national security expert William M. Arkin's definitive chronology of the attacks *On that Day: The Definitive Timeline of 9/11* (2021), archived online forum posts on *Metafilter* and *Something Awful*; the documentary film *102 Minutes That Changed America* (2008); and the oral history compiled by Garrett Graff in the book *The Only Plane in the Sky: An Oral History of 9/11* (2020). They also derive from archived live televised news reports from the day itself.

1. **Riposte Period:** Immediate reactions occur upon the first plane crashing into the North Tower of the WTC at 8:46 AM. New York City television station WNYW interrupts a Paramount Pictures movie trailer for *Zoolander* to make the first broadcast report of an incident at the World Trade Center, less than two minutes after Flight 11's crash. One of the station's camera crews, already out on location to cover New York's mayoral primary election, captures the first live pictures of black smoke coming from the North Tower. The volume of emergency calls causes the cell phone network to become overloaded.
2. **Field Documentation:** The public and press descend on the World Trade Center. News anchors and on-site journalists interview eyewitnesses and experts to confirm details. Those who live close to the site set up cameras on tripods in their homes to record the burning tower. Forums begin to discuss the unfolding attacks in real-time, comparing inconsistencies in reporting on various news channels.
3. **Born Narratives:** Following several more attacks, the deliberate nature of the event becomes obvious. In response to the crash of reputable news and government websites, online forums develop strategies to direct users to helplines and emergency webpages. Definitive iconographical symbols of the event are captured from thousands of hours of real-time audiovisual documentation.
4. **Meme Innovation and Curation:** The key symbols captured through images, videos, and audio are further culturally ingrained by sharing them widely, as seen in the "*The Falling Man*" photograph. Initially censored by mainstream media, it is revived through online dissemination. Images are shared in their original form and subjected to creative adaptations digitally to condense and epitomise the event, such as the "9/11 Tourist Guy" edited image.
5. **Mainstream Cultural Arrival:** Having seeped into the social and cultural consciousness, 9/11 becomes a genre of folklore in and of itself. Conspiracy theory films and amateur documentaries deeming the attack an "inside job" are distributed

widely online. 9/11 humour garners traction through internet memes, some of which overlap with talking points and phrases popularised by said conspiracy theories.

In the previous SCE examination of the Spring-Heeled Jack legend, it was identified that the **Riposte Period** marked the immediate spread of a story amongst a community. What we find with 9/11 is that the suddenness and extremity of the event exposed a significant strain on contemporary communication technologies, which struggled to meet the demand for instant, reliable networking. This is noted in an eyewitness account by Mallory Carra, an NYU student at the time, who said,

[t]he internet on all of the NYU library computers was painfully slow. After 10 minutes of pressing refresh, I read a three-line AP story to my friend Jia aloud. “Two planes have crashed into the World Trade Center.” It took me a second to even realize what those words even meant. In this pre-Twitter world, I finally summed up my feelings in my LiveJournal at 9:14 am: “omg i am so scared.” (Graff, 2020, p.340).

Cellular telephone systems in New York City were overloaded by a 400% increase in call attempts, resulting in damage to telephone lines and rendering cell sites inoperable (National Research Council, 2003, p.38). Radio systems failed, resulting in first responders from different departments and jurisdictions being unable to communicate effectively. Public safety communications expert Dereck Orr (2021) cited this as a factor in the inability to evacuate over 300 firefighters before the towers collapsed. Websites which managed to stay live amidst the surge in traffic were those that had purchased services from Akamai Technologies, a company specialising in content delivery networks. The company was, ironically, founded by Daniel Lewin, who was reportedly stabbed with a box cutter knife by hijackers on Flight 11 before it crashed into the North Tower, making him the “first victim” of 9/11 (*9/11: Four Flights*, 2021). Primarily, people outside of New York City received their information through televised broadcasts of the event. However, it is apparent from the

crashing of digital networks that people were yearning to document and experience the event through these emerging technologies.

As such, the **Field Documentation** phase, where news stations and amateur reporters alike attempted to understand the event by documenting it through visual and textual means, was also marked by a struggle to keep up with the demand for communication technologies.

West and Lee (2021) explain that faults in communication networks during the attacks, such as cell phone lines and radio communication networks crashing, led to “substantial alterations in news transmission, technology innovation, and telecommunications networks.”

While Rogers and Seidel (2002, p. 213) noted that the internet played only a “minor role in providing news about the terrorist attacks,” a closer examination of archived forum threads from the day itself reveals the beginnings of a new means of news transmission. The

Something Awful forum thread dedicated to documenting the September 11 attacks was spearheaded by an on-site eyewitness sharing webcam pictures of the burning North Tower.

These images were accompanied by the caption, “I just woke up after hearing a crash.

There's a big-ass hole in the World Trade Center.” The eyewitness then edited the post with a new photo showing the immediate aftermath of the subsequent attack on the South Tower, marking this detail as retrospective with the affirmative note, “Ed: SHIT. THE OTHER ONE IS ON FIRE” (0n0g, 2001). Reading through these posts, it is easy to see parallels with the use of contemporary social media platforms to document an unfolding event.

The forums also reveal that the community-based rituals of traditional folkloric activities drive the impetus behind hyperlinking and image-sharing. These traditions have been easily translated to digital platforms, despite the simulacrum and impersonal nature of the virtual format. Principally, the preference for common behaviour in cultural transmission, as hypothesised by Henrich and Boyd (1998), is exhibited in the fundamental design of forum threads, which can compartmentalise specific topics or images determined to require more in-depth discussion. In the format of a comment thread, this is established by the “author”

post, from which other users can respond with their insights. To return to Jørgensen's (2019, p.117-118) interpretation of leadership through Arendtian philosophy: the leader, in this case the eyewitness who started the thread with photos of the World Trade Center, triggered the collective action of others adding to the thread, engaging in "negotiations, alliances, networks, compromises and struggles." This collective action is evident in the use of the forum format to create a support network, despite users not being in physical proximity to one another. "My Dad saw it," says one user on the forum site *Metafilter*. "He was on the ferry going over to the Dow Jones offices across the street (...) I hope he gets home. shit shit shit" (adampsyche, 2001). Another user responds reassuringly, "I'm glad your dad is ok (...) hopefully he'll get the f out of the city as soon as they open it up" (mich9139, 2001). These self-narrating functions, as Bard (1994, p.85) writes, are an effort to "evaluate the situation and formulate a resolution." Interactions such as this offer a glimpse into how the internet would later become a primary space for instigating group action through the folkloric ritual of sharing stories. Indeed, as Smith et al (2010, p.25) note, 9/11 folklore was used to initiate community-centred "terror management," whereby storytelling following an incident of widespread trauma is used to "re-establish a sense of control and restore belief in an immanent, universal justice." This shows that folklore adapted to online digital environments because these environments synthesised the dynamics of community-based rituals.

The measured and contemplative reactions during the **Born Narratives** phase took the form of strategising methods for navigating the growing disadvantages of traditional media channels. A report by the US National Research Council (2003, p.47) cites the ingenuity of company-based sites such as Amazon.com in using Internet billing systems to funnel donations into the American Red Cross, which was in turn linked to forums, where casual internet users would spread the links as far as they could. Dutta-Bergman (2006) found that those who participated in online communities were more likely to become involved in volunteer work and political lobbying in the aftermath of 9/11. The forum threads also reveal the roots of an interactive experience that would soon shape the way large-scale tragedies

are filtered through contemporary online communities. Constructing support-oriented online spaces is evident in studies cited by McClendon and Robinson (2013, p.2), which examined how disaster relief efforts in response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake relied upon online crowd-sourced information, utilising “crisis maps based on location data” extracted by hyperlinked communications. The human element of folkloric expression in online communities provides a space where those in a crisis can, as Bronner (2009, p.33) observes, “foster commentary and communal alteration, often with an instrumentality that signifies cultural space.” These communities, as a utility for public and cultural expression, are highly visible; people can make sense of a tragedy in a space removed from “the confines of one’s traditional social networks,” meaning that the geographical limitations of connecting with others during a crisis are no longer an issue (Siegl and Foot, 2004, p.16).

As a result, it was rightly recognised that online communities as a space for support and documentation would be a valuable asset for future events. A research agenda following the attacks became framed around “network science,” which sought to address the new phenomena of online communication systems (Downey, 2004). Unlike the constrained, even-handed delivery of mainstream news coverage, which operates on principles of stringent, vetted source verification, the digital medium welcomed a wave of “accidental journalists” (Johnson, 2011). Perhaps it was the issue of traditional media falling short of its requirements that invited web users to “be the media” and fulfil a growing need for such openness (Allen., 2002, p.127). All at once, official news and government media outlets were confronted with the platforming of previously censored images and an unrelenting content stream granted by the “blogosphere.” The iconic symbols and cultural mascots established through the Born Narratives phase were now given an unedited, free space to thrive in online spaces. For example, *The Falling Man*, a photo that captured a man falling from the North Tower of the World Trade Center, became a defining image of 9/11 through its spread on social media outside of mainstream outlets (Anderson, 2011). A distressing yet strangely lyrical image, it shows the man positioned in immediate symmetry with the perimeter

columns of the looming tower, momentarily appearing to exist in dimensional balance with his surroundings. Despite appearing in mainstream news publications the day after the attacks, the image was quickly removed from all future print publications following an avalanche of criticism and it rarely appeared in print again. However, this image, along with others depicting the “jumpers” of 9/11, became, as Junod (2021) wrote for *Esquire*, “relegated to the Internet underbelly, where they became the provenance of the shock sites.” It led Richard Drew, the photojournalist who captured the image, to refer to it as “the most famous photograph no one has seen.” *The Falling Man* is emblematic of a broader shift in the relationship between folkloric activities and practices and traditional news media. The internet’s constantly replicative form of transmission echoes how folklore depends on its “relevancy, its own appeal to enough people to keep it actively circulating” (McNeill, 2017, p.21). This means that images like *The Falling Man* can now thrive outside formal media platforms, propelled instead by the recursive mechanisms of the internet. On the fifth anniversary of the attacks, social media consultant Matthew Yeomans told WIRED magazine:

This collective tragedy demanded a forum to be shared by people all around the world who wanted to talk about what happened with anyone because it was the only way of making any sense of it. Were it to happen again, blogs and social networks would play an enormously cathartic role. (Andrews, 2006).

His words are prescient; not only has the internet continued to serve as a space for processing traumatic events, but it has also reshaped how we culturally preserve and leverage images of these events as symbolic entities. Contemporary examples of viral online images would be the photo of Alan Kurdi’s body, which came to epitomise the Syrian refugee crisis (Devichand, 2016) and footage of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, which galvanised online communities to organise mass protests in response (Burch and Eligon, 2020).

The **Meme Innovation and Curation** phase, during which 9/11 became ubiquitous in popular culture, further demonstrates the impact of folkloric activities and practices in online spaces. Muktopāvela (2018, p. 6) opines that because internet memes act as a cultural determinant, they allow us to consider them a genre of contemporary folklore. As folkloric artefacts, memes are vehicles through which narratives and critiques can be exchanged. Interpreting 9/11 through the medium of viral images and videos also means interpreting its cultural identity. McKenzie Wark (1994 p.vii) predicted this media ecosystem through her designation of a “virtual geography,” where the convergence of informational channels “doubles, troubles, and generally permeates our experience of the space we experience firsthand.” This “expanded terrain from which experience may instantly be drawn” can be applied to how internet culture and memes have expanded the scope of how an event such as 9/11 can be experienced. 9/11 occurred at a time when, as Edwards (2022, p.36) observes, the ability to “isolate, extract, and repurpose images and video” was made possible by digital platforms, leading to the popularisation of memes such as *9/11 Tourist Guy*. One of the earliest ever memes about the attacks was an image depicting a man posing for a photo at the top of the World Trade Center, with an incoming commercial airliner visible behind him. Message boards and inboxes widely shared the image due to its cryptic nature, prompting questions about the identity of the man (*Know Your Meme*, 2025a). It was later confirmed that the man in the photo, 25-year-old Péter Guzli, was responsible for the edit, which was intended to be a joke shared only with close friends. Hickman (2001), writing for *The Guardian* just two months after the attacks, refers to countless digital manipulations of the image, placing the man at the site of other significant historical events. He presciently refers to Richard Dawkins’ theory of mimetics and cultural replicators; indeed, the term “meme” would come to refer almost universally to replicated online content. The image marked the beginning of a new form of folkloric dissemination, where online sharing rituals determined, as Livingstone (2011, p.1472) put it, “nothing remains unmediated.”

Bronner (2009, p.64) notes that memes are folkloric as they “often take the form of catchphrases, rumors, schemes, and legendary material.” Novelist John Banville declared that “art is simply not equipped to give an immediate response to contemporary events” (Armitstead, 2021). However, I would regard memes not only as folkloric but also as a form of visual art, capable of capturing an idea and creatively embellishing it. Contrary to Banville’s statement, patriotic art in the form of memes was able to provide an immediate response to the attacks, days before news channels began utilising media slogans and branding with “bold, patriotic graphics on air” (Barnett and Reynolds, 2009, p. 156). On the afternoon of September 11, various users shared GIFs of US flags flying in the *Something Awful* thread along with image files depicting Uncle Sam, the national personification of American patriotism (Norman_Bates, 2001; rope kid, 2001). The day after, a user shared an embedded “in memoriam” meme to commemorate the event, personalised with their own quote along with the phrase, “never forget,” (Degauss, 2001) a phrase that would become synonymous with 9/11 remembrance strategies “that work as a form of resistance against forgetfulness” enduring well into the 20th anniversary proceedings of 2021 (Paganoni, 2011, p.284). Even the iconic date notation “9/11” emerges as early as 10:15 AM on the *Fark* forum, just ten minutes before the collapse of the North Tower, amid discussion as to the significance of the chosen date (Nevdull, 2001). Scouring through news footage and transcripts of the initial live coverage shows no sign of commentators using this notation. Yet fascinatingly, this mnemonic would come to serve as a shorthand for a catastrophic event, serving an analogous function to the “-gate” suffix for political scandals, such as 7/7 for the 2005 London bombings and 3/11 for the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami.

Examining the cultural ubiquity of 9/11 during the **Mainstream Cultural Arrival** phase, it becomes clear that one of the defining legacies of 9/11 is its intersection with evolving online folkloric practices. “9/11 humour” became a genre of folklore that emerged from the attacks, seen “almost exclusively in electronic contexts” (Hathaway, 2005, p.33). Goldstein (2009, p. 148) regards humour transcribed through interactive folkloric transmissions as integral to

comprehending the traumatic magnitude of the 9/11 attacks and rebelling against media discourses about the disaster. Ellis (2002, p.2) argued that 9/11 humour relies heavily upon centralising and domesticating key imagery from the attacks to provide emotional closure. This can be observed online as early as March 2002, when a retrospective thread was created on *Something Awful*. There, users who originally congregated on the day of the attacks critiqued their actions as purveyors of digital information during that time. One user recounts the harrowing experience of witnessing their aunt “scream in my ear and cry that we had been attacked,” as they repeatedly refreshed the forum page for further information. They refer to a “totally inappropriate image macro” they created as a result of their anxiety, depicting a plane crashing into what appears to be web server hardware, labelled as “SA FORUMS.” They insist, “I wasn't trying to be irreverent, I just needed some release, so even when the forums came back up, I didn't post it” (Enuii, 2001). This act of situating traumatic imagery within the context of a more comforting, familiar symbolic entity is an earlier form of what would become a mainstay of 9/11 memes: digital manipulation tools collaging traumatic images of 9/11, with references to the movies and celebrities. This places the disaster “back where they are usually seen—in fiction and popular culture” (Kuipers, 2011, p.81). However, it should be noted that 9/11 humour in meme form does not hold a chiefly solipsistic role. I suggest that the concept of prosthetic memory proposed by Landsberg (2003, p.148-149), “experientially-oriented encounters with the mass media’s various technologies of memory,” aligns with the use of humorous 9/11 memes. They can provide a space for sharing personal experiences and collective trauma, while also allowing for “collective horizons of experience” and paving the way for unexpected political alliances. 9/11 memes as prosthetic memories can not only create a space for processing trauma, but also create the potential for political influence.

The latter element is most prevalent in 9/11 memes, which overlap with conspiracy theories, another crucial aspect of its cultural legacy. Soukup (2008, p.10) argues that to understand the scope and scale of 9/11 conspiracy theories, it is necessary to understand them as a

“digital, hypertextual, and multimedia experience.” The hypertextuality of 9/11 folklore means that both humour and politically charged conspiracy theories can coexist, as seen in the use of the “Jet Fuel Can’t Melt Steel Beams” phrase in various image macros (*Know Your Meme*, 2025b). This refers to the debunked argument that the buildings could not have collapsed on their own, popularised by the *Loose Change* film series (Manavis, 2021). These films present the conspiracy theory that the 9/11 attacks were a false flag operation, and were “distributed widely through online video platforms,” making them “a crucial document in the histories of both conspiracy theory and the early internet” (Bath, 2024). Conspiracy theories, say Fivecoate and Kitta (2025, p.4), are “formed from other genres of expressive culture (a mixing of folklore and popular culture).” The ease with which the internet can platform and intertwine a diversity of expressive culture has augmented the spread of conspiratorial narratives. The hyperlinked system of the internet “mimics” the hallmark of a conspiracy theorist’s rationale: that no connection is accidental (McGee, 2011, p.63). The capacity of a hyperlinked web browser to “easily move between diverse facts, conclusions, and ideas” (Soukup, 2008, p. 13) further enhances the immersive nature of 9/11 conspiracy theories; they have been prevalent in all forms of digital media, including memes, videos, blogs, podcasts, and forums. This increases the likelihood that users can become engrossed and thus convinced by their arguments, as supported by Hathaway (2005, p. 42), who cites an experiment in which students grew bored with hearing the “usual” story and instead leaned towards hearing narratives that varied. By offering multifaceted narratives of events beyond the restrictions of mainstream news, the internet satisfies our desire to experience events through various tonalities, media, and expressions, formulating new, sometimes fallacious, perspectives.

9/11 internet culture exemplifies a dichotomy: it showcases how the mechanisms of internet folklore can foster altruistic community engagement, yet also encourage conspiracy-fueled mindsets which blur the line between fact and fiction. Concerning the former, since 9/11, social media platforms such as Twitter have become command centres for relevant

information during “emergencies, disasters, and incidents of national and international significance” (Crowe, 2007, p.83). The use of web forums during 9/11 to direct users to donation links and encourage volunteer work has extended to networks such as *CrisisCamp*, which help set up online spaces for victims of disasters to locate missing loved ones and create inventories of needed items (Crowe, 2007, p.208). The ubiquity of social media as a complete exoskeleton of our life stories has even encouraged the “almost daily ritual” of journalists requesting to republish the images and videos of citizens posting their original content online (Barr, 2022). Online users with recording devices can now report on and document unfolding events, which, to a certain degree, can challenge the traditional authority and institutional structures of mainstream news media. In terms of the spread of conspiracy theories, some researchers attribute the internet's role as a sociocultural engine for promoting the belief in conspiracy theories. Neuhaus (2016, p.5), who refers to several studies that point to a trend where young people, often internet users, are more likely to believe 9/11 conspiracy theories. It should be noted, however, that studies have since proven a susceptibility in older generations to adopt a conspiracy mentality (Guess et al., 2019; Zwar et al., 2022). Since its inception, the internet has influenced all who use it, largely due to its ability to integrate folklore, a universal human practice, into its structure. However, Neuhaus (p.12) does conclude that teachers need to consider adapting “traditional strategies” for teaching history to address the impact of online conspiracism on students. This is a sentiment I agree with; greater awareness of how digital media platforms can amplify and distort cultural events would minimise conspiratorial thinking, and the SCE model is one possible opportunity for enacting this.

The SCE model helps us recognise how the digital dissemination of folklore influenced cultural depictions of 9/11, which in turn shapes our understanding of how internet-mediated communication impacts society and culture.

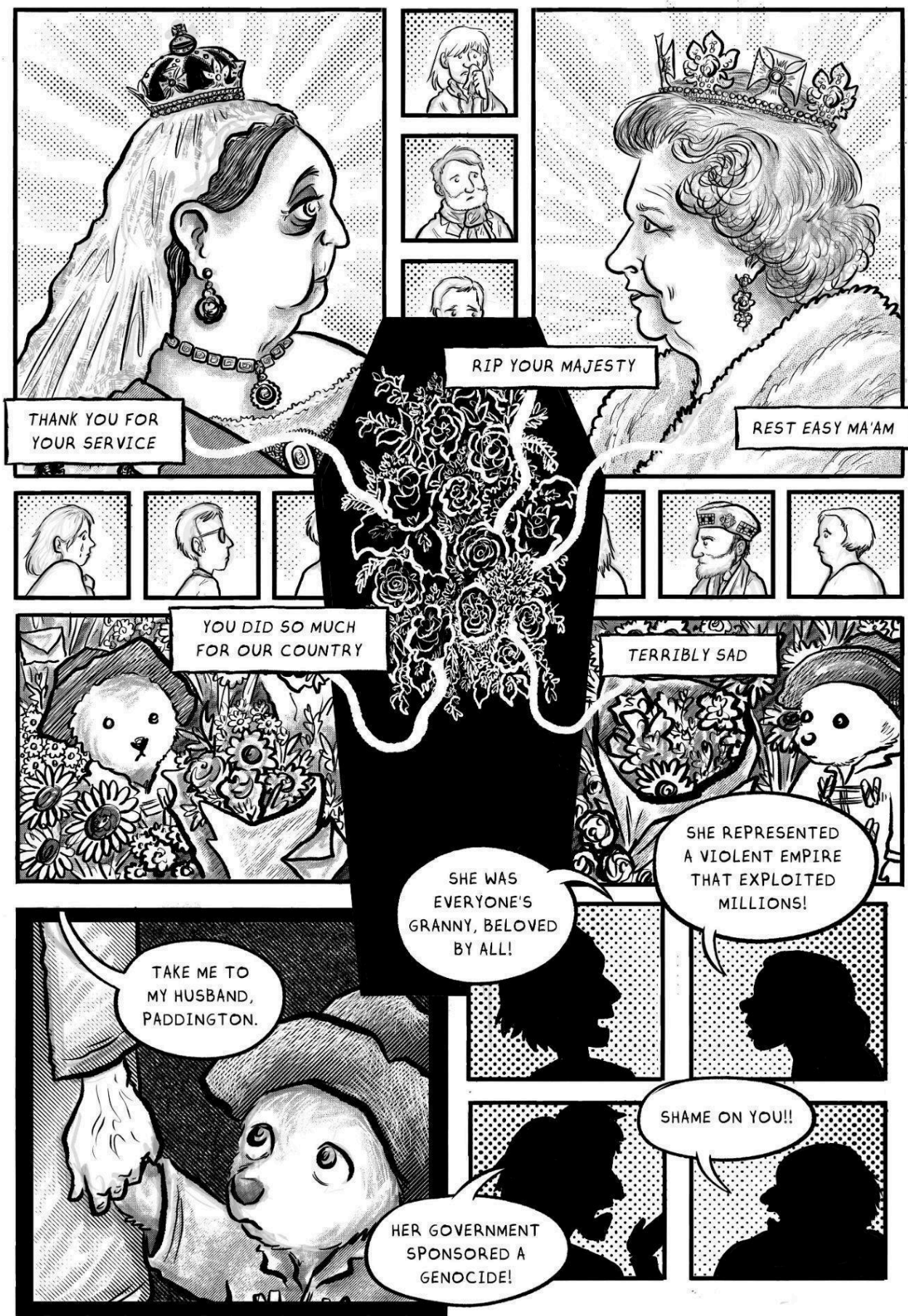


Figure 6: The Death of Queen Elizabeth II Case Study

1.2. Case Study: The Death of Queen Elizabeth II (2022)

In the 15 years since 9/11, researchers have cited Twitter (known as “X” since 2023) as a defining force for the political landscape and an increasingly valuable resource for preserving information, which directly reflects and documents contemporary society (Fiske, 2021; Risse et al, 2014). Phillips and Milner (2020, p. 68) point to the devoted following amassed by Donald Trump through his use of the platform as representative of a “breakdown between vernacular and institutional communication.” Just as online commentators in the wake of 9/11 were able to curtail the blacklisting of *The Falling Man* from print media, they utilised Twitter in the aftermath of the death of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022 to recontextualise officiated media narratives of current affairs. This case study provides an ideal focus for the third and final SCE case study, as it represents the pinnacle of the folkloric activities and practices in digitised spaces tentatively explored during and after 9/11. Tracking news of the Queen’s death through the SCE model will illuminate how internet folklore interacted with and subverted the prescribed ritual traditions associated with the death of a monarch, producing a dissonance between the state-sanctioned commemoration of the Queen and the undercurrent of unfiltered public dissent delivered across online platforms.

Of the three case studies examined in this chapter, the death of Queen Elizabeth II most explicitly embodies traditional folkloric iconography, given the centuries-long symbolic role of the British monarch as a living incarnation of national identity and longstanding folk traditions associated with it. Rowbottom (1998, p.86) argues that the creative performances of royalists constitute a “folk version of the official civil religion, which illustrates (...) the institutional aims and official conceptions of contemporary society.” This is reflected in how the Coronation of Charles III in May 2023 embraced imagery and rituals commonly associated with British folklore, yet subtly adapted to contemporary perceptions without compromising their integrity. This, as folklorist Francis Young (2023) observed, was an

example of how royal public performance, rather than dramatically changing form to suit modern conventions, responds to change by “altering the meanings of ancient rites.” The royal image and performance also adapt to take advantage of enhancements in media technology, such as the merchandising of Queen Victoria’s image, which was “driven by the growth of commercially oriented print and visual culture.” Successive reinventions of the royal family’s image have continued to recognise the value of integrating royal traditions into evolving media communication technologies via a controlled “royal media aesthetic” (Plunkett, 2001, pp.7-8). As Schama (1986, p.183) writes in an analysis of royal family portraiture from 1500 to 1850, the strength of the monarchy’s relationship with the public lay in the domesticated “transmission of images,” cultivating a nurturing spirit. Victoria’s successor, Edward VIII, is characterised by Wolffe (2003, p.23-24) as the first “media monarch,” and his death a “media event,” beginning with the bulletin posted at the gates of Buckingham Palace, followed by a published drawing of the King’s body, his hands clasped around a red rose. The increasing “domestication” of the monarch reached its apex with Queen Elizabeth II, as her image became increasingly accessible due to the mass media culture that emerged during the 20th century.

The emergence of the internet at the cusp of the 21st century has added a new dimension to public engagement with the royal image. Harris (1998, p.280-281) points to how the locations, key players, and props in the life of the late Princess Diana’s tragic life are conflated with classic tropes of fairytale princesses, making particular reference to the ingenuity of online communities in constructing these parallels:

The story of the beleaguered princess, so crucial to Western culture, turns the Internet bulletin boards into a great costume drama in which writers play the role of feudal peasants dancing morris dances in Ye Olde Merrie Englande, dressing up in the tunics, tights, and cod pieces of a bygone era enshrouded in the mists of Arthurian legend.

This interplay of the royal family's public image with British folk culture illustrates how digital platforms have become a fertile ground for the circulation of royal folklore in contemporary contexts. However, expansions in mass media communication have equally initiated sharp criticism towards the royal family. The excesses reproducing Queen Victoria's image were subject to mockery by satirical publications of the time, engendering a state where "the narrative of Victoria's reign and an acute reflexivity about the nature of that narrative" existed in direct opposition to one another (Plunkett, p.7). Similarly, the democratising force of the internet on media industries, offering "abundance, convenience, and mobility of information and entertainment," has allowed the royal family to be subject to greater scrutiny (Hesmondhalgh, 2019, p.118). In fact, during the coverage of the Queen's death and mourning period, conservative journalistic outlets were almost "beaten by new media, the social media" (Soehardjo, 2022, p.43). The SCE model in this case can be outlined as follows:

1. **Riposte Period:** The Queen dies at 15:10 BST on 8 September 2022 at age 96. Despite her death not being publicly announced until 18:30 that evening, via newswires and a Twitter post on the official Royal Family account, users speculate throughout the day about "Operation London Bridge" in light of the Queen's reported declining health. Users react to the official announcement by reposting her recent Jubilee comedy sketch with children's book character Paddington Bear.
2. **Field Documentation:** Crowds gather outside royal residences nationwide. With the Paddington sketch garnering online traction, mourners leave teddy bear plushies and marmalade sandwiches amongst the flowers, wreaths, and cards (Millward, 2022).
3. **Born Narratives:** In the hours following the official announcement, contemplative tributes to the Queen's legacy and criticisms of the monarchy's relationship with colonial rule spread online. Paddington becomes a bespoke "mascot" for the period of mourning.

4. **Meme Innovation and Curation:** The “reaction meme” format pushes critiques of the monarchy’s colonial history via Twitter and TikTok. Paddington’s commemorative role is subverted through sardonic memes, such as those depicting him as the Grim Reaper.
5. **Mainstream Cultural Arrival:** Criticisms directed at the Queen and the monarchy via social media platforms are given formal acknowledgement by mainstream news outlets through articles and op-eds (Bergman, 2022; Rios, 2022). Months later, online conversations and memes ignited by this event are revived to cover Charles III’s coronation, certifying the Queen’s death as a culturally ubiquitous event.

Compared to the previous two case studies, which focus on unexpected events, the **Riposte Period** follows a predetermined structure shaped by decades of planning and preparation. Since the 1960s, the official funeral and media protocol for the Queen’s passing had been referred to as “Operation London Bridge,” a name that alludes to the traditional English nursery rhyme *London Bridge is Falling Down*, subtly linking the death of the monarch to a deeper folkloric tradition. The knowledge of such a plan sparked intense media speculation about what would happen when the day finally arrived, lending it an aura of curiosity and anticipation. Predictions by Knight (2017), published in *The Guardian*, on how the Queen’s death would unfold in the digital age are revealing. He expresses apprehension about the increasingly destabilising “monopoly on broadcasting to the empire” in an era of omnipresent, simultaneous media channels. Knight also predicts and anticipates a delay between the Queen’s death and the official media announcement: “information will travel like the compressional wave ahead of an earthquake, detectable only by special equipment.” Yet on the day of her passing, such control over information dissemination proved difficult to maintain. The Queen’s deteriorating health had already become known around midday, with the BBC posting on their *Breaking News* Twitter account that she was “under medical supervision at Balmoral after doctors became concerned for her health” (@BBCBreaking, 2023), other reports of Royal Family members jetting into Scotland, and newsreaders

reappearing in black formal attire (Cartter, 2022). Whilst such conjecture is not unheard of in the event of reports about the Queen's health generally, the fact remains that the scale and immediacy of online media communication in 2022 meant such open speculation could not be restrained. One BBC presenter announced the Queen's death over Twitter just after 3:00, before quickly retracting this statement at 3:19 pm (Hakim, 2022). Responses to this tweet illuminate the speculative vibrancy of the **Riposte Period** when filtered through communal digital storytelling, as many users pooled their resources to cross-reference prior knowledge of Operation London Bridge protocol; "Your (sic) fired," one user replies. Another states, "You are not allowed to announce it until 6 pm...." These responses reflect how online users can now collaboratively piece together fragmented information to fill in the gaps and construct a real-time, crowd-sourced account of unfolding events. This aligns with the theory of "transmedia storytelling" proposed by Jenkins (2007) who argued that such "gaps or excesses" in an emerging narrative existing across multiple media platforms create openings for users to expand and contribute to it: "readers ... have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own."

An example of this is how online users collectively fixated on Paddington Bear as a focal point for their grief. At 6:41 PM, just ten minutes after the official announcement on The Royal Family's Twitter account, the Paddington Bear Twitter account posted a tweet that read, "Thank you Ma'am, for everything" (@RoyalFamily, 2022, @PaddingtonBear, 2022). Immediate replies to this Tweet predominantly featured an embedded video from the much-loved sketch. The relationship between these two icons, first established during the Jubilee celebrations, provided a ready-made symbolic framework for users to cultivate as a tribute to the deceased monarch, which was easily accessible and customisable through digital archiving and video-sharing platforms.

As crowds descended on royal locations to pay their respects, the **Field Documentation** phase shows the widespread circulation of photos depicting gates at the Queen's residences

adorned not only with traditional flower offerings but also with Paddington Bear toys and marmalade sandwiches. This prompted the Royal Parks organisation, responsible for handling tributes during the period of mourning, to issue a statement requesting that members of the public refrain from leaving sandwiches due to the “negative impact on the park’s wildlife” (Burack, 2022). In this context, Paddington serves as a representational vehicle for public participation in mourning rituals, reminiscent of how Hannah Arendt’s description of narrative as a tool to “reopen the idea of public space and to facilitate dialogue/action amongst citizens aimed at attaining a more participative society” (Tassinari, Piredda and Bertolotti, 2017, p.S3486). The participatory nature of public mourning means that its standards do not represent a fixed societal expectation, as Otto (2014, p.581) notes. Intense displays of public grief have experienced undulating levels of popularity and societal permissibility, shifting from Freudian notions of dismissing any “pathological, uncivilised and neurotic” public mourning, to “re-humanising” loss through the impassioned cultivation of memorials. Indeed, the Queen’s death presented a complex and often contradictory array of public responses, reflecting broader questions about the nature of national grief when mediated in online spaces. Woodthorpe (2022) writes that, irrespective of the state funeral spectacle and the construction of a “national community of grief,” to label it as simply a manifestation of grief itself risks simplifying a “profoundly social event.” The public response to the Queen’s death was a multifaceted act, influenced by the new, freely participative mechanisms of internet folklore.

Consequently, the **Born Narratives** phase was typified by a rapid emergence of irreverent and subversive public dialogues that institutional gatekeepers could not easily suppress. Traditional rituals of national mourning, once reinforced by a hierarchical media structure, were being derailed. A contributing factor to the quick spread of creative and satirical responses to the Queen’s death was the “dry run” of the Queen’s husband’s passing a year earlier. One of these was a video showing a comically blunt interruption of EDM music on BBC Radio 1 Dance to announce Prince Philip’s death, only to resume playing immediately

afterwards with a perfectly timed beat drop (*Know Your Meme*, 2025c). Memes such as these left a ready-made bank of content to be easily interpolated and recontextualised almost immediately following the Queen's death. The aforementioned dance break death announcement meme would thus reemerge with similar edits, the most popular being an interpolation of rapper Yeat's synth-infused track "*Talk*," which garnered over two million views and over 155,000 likes on Twitter (@Kurco, 2022). The internet's endless bank of templates for reinterpreting imagery has enabled more rapid creative interpretations, beginning in the Born Narratives phase, than ever before. It also shows the widening divide between state-sanctioned mourning and the organically generated response provided by the free space of online discourse. When the boundaries between vernacular and institutional expression are now "eroded by the frequent collapse and reconstitution of novel audiences across social media," the scales are tipped evermore in favour of the critical, as the sanctity of folk traditions in national mourning are instantly subverted through memetic constructions in online discursive spaces (Phillips and Milner, 2020, p.70). As a democratising force in public criticism, the internet unleashed jokes and hostile commentary that began to outpace well wishes, with the third most popular tweet about the Queen that week being a sarcastic joke about the "woke nonsense" of having a male succeed Elizabeth (Reimann, 2022). A highly critical viral tweet by Carnegie Mellon University professor Uju Anya, celebrating the death of a "thieving genocidal empire," was also quickly removed by Twitter (Reimann, 2022). Calls for "restraint" and earnest expressions of grief were met with similar derision, in the form of irreverent jokes and memes, "making light of the pomp, ceremony, and hypocrisy of it all" (Staples, 2022). In another viral Twitter video posted on September 19, BBC footage of the Queen's coffin passing Buckingham Palace was replaced with the same broadcaster's audio commentary of North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong il's funeral, which was comparatively critical and demeaning towards displays of public mourning (@Karl_Was_Right, 2022). Other media artefacts would undergo a semantic recycling process, such as a viral video of an Irish river dancing group dancing to the tune of "Another One Bites The Dust" outside Buckingham Palace, captioned with "The queen died and the

Irish are already on it lol" (@AngryBlackLady, 2022). Users posted the video just over half an hour after the Queen's death was officially announced, attributing the turbulent history of Ireland and the British Crown as the primary narrative behind it. As observed by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2022) there is an increasing disengagement with official news sources, with young people accessing the news through online networks in "more fragmented ways," and missing "key context that was previously carefully packaged into linear narratives by the mainstream media." Such is the case with the Irish dancing video, as both reposts and commenters falsely reported that someone filmed it on the day of Queen Elizabeth's death, when, in fact, the clip was posted months earlier in January 2022 (*AP News*, 2022). Irrespective of this false attribution, the tone was already set, beginning to supplant the mainstream media's perspective, which embodied a conversely pro-monarchal sentiment. This supports the argument that the internet has enhanced the sociocultural impact of folklore, facilitating a shift from top-down, state-sanctioned expressions of cultural meaning to more decentralised, participatory, and subversive cultural practices.

By the point of the **Meme Innovation and Curation** phase, the fixation on Paddington in the early hours of the death announcement had evolved into a unique yet potent symbol of public mourning. Users widely reposted a watercolour illustration produced during the Jubilee celebrations, which depicted Paddington walking hand-in-hand with the Queen (*BBC News*, 2022). The meme-based responses born from the Born Narratives phase expanded in scope and creativity once they began to repurpose this symbol. In one meme edit, a caption read, "Don't worry, ma'am...the world will be holding your hand." Another more explicit caption read, "I've (sic) done my duties, Paddington, please take me to my husband." However, other memes hijacked Paddington's symbolic role by imposing satirical commentary upon it, such as mocking Paddington's supposed portrayal as a "Grim Reaper" figure (Clarke, 2022). The Grim Reaper is a recurring figure in folklore surrounding the personification of death; Milner has referred to its use in the context of performance and folk

drama as immersive “dark play,” which I would argue is being further simulated through these Paddington memes.

As Paddington became a symbol, he became synonymous with the event itself, and thus became the recipient of the same criticisms. This led publications such as *Dazed*, *GQ*, and *The Face* to publish articles regarding Paddington's new role as a poster child of the monarchy (Goyal, 2022; Grieg, 2022). *The Face* questioned whether this contradicts his original status as a “beloved anthropomorphic emblem of immigration and social mobility” (Lanigan, 2022). The “Grim Reaper” meme even endured separate from the Queen; following the loss of rapper Coolio a month later, artist Jim'll Paint It received a request to draw Paddington leading him into the afterlife. Jim obliged, accompanying the image with a caption satirising the original: “I've done my duties, Paddington. Please take me to gangster's paradise.” In *The English Constitution*, Walter Bagehot (1891, p.90) is scathing of the human inclination towards symbols as a vessel for understanding the world around them, viewing any susceptibility to their influence as a form of blindness. He states, “the fancy of the mass of men is incredibly weak; it can see nothing without a visible symbol, and there is much that it can scarcely make out with a symbol.” In the context of internet-mediated mourning rituals, this insight speaks to both the power and volatility of symbolic figures like Paddington, which can encompass national grief one moment and serve as the basis for satire the next. He forgets, however, the ingenuity of public interaction with the symbol. The “mass of men” is not simply obedient in acclimation to a state-established symbol. Rather, it actively problematises and refashions the symbol through folkloric practice, which itself possesses the virtue of delivering social protest and encouraging critical consciousness (Brenner, 2021). The social commentary expressed through Paddington Bear is not mere frivolity; it has empowered those unaffiliated with authoritative mainstream media to engage on the public stage. Arendt's framework of storytelling as a “design tool (...) for social innovation” is apparent in how the Paddington meme generated dialogues around the legitimacy of the royal family as an institution (Tassinari, Piredda, and Bertolotti, 2017, S3492). This is further reflected in the construction of a social union between “Irish Twitter”

and “Black Twitter,” two online communities that share a difficult relationship with the monarchy as “survivors of colonialisation” (Abraham, 2022). These communities recognised a common ground through which to collaborate on meme-based storytelling and social commentary; in one such case, a Twitter account used a popular meme known as *Epic Handshake*, in which two characters of different ethnicities clasp hands to express strong, united companionship (@dublincelticfan, 2022). The internet's indexing system facilitates the instantaneity of folkloric practices, allowing users to draw from a broad range of visual artefacts to respond immediately to global media events and affirm social bonds. Memes are thus able to not only transmit the sociological, emotional, and cultural zeitgeist surrounding a significant event, but also serve as tools for community building.

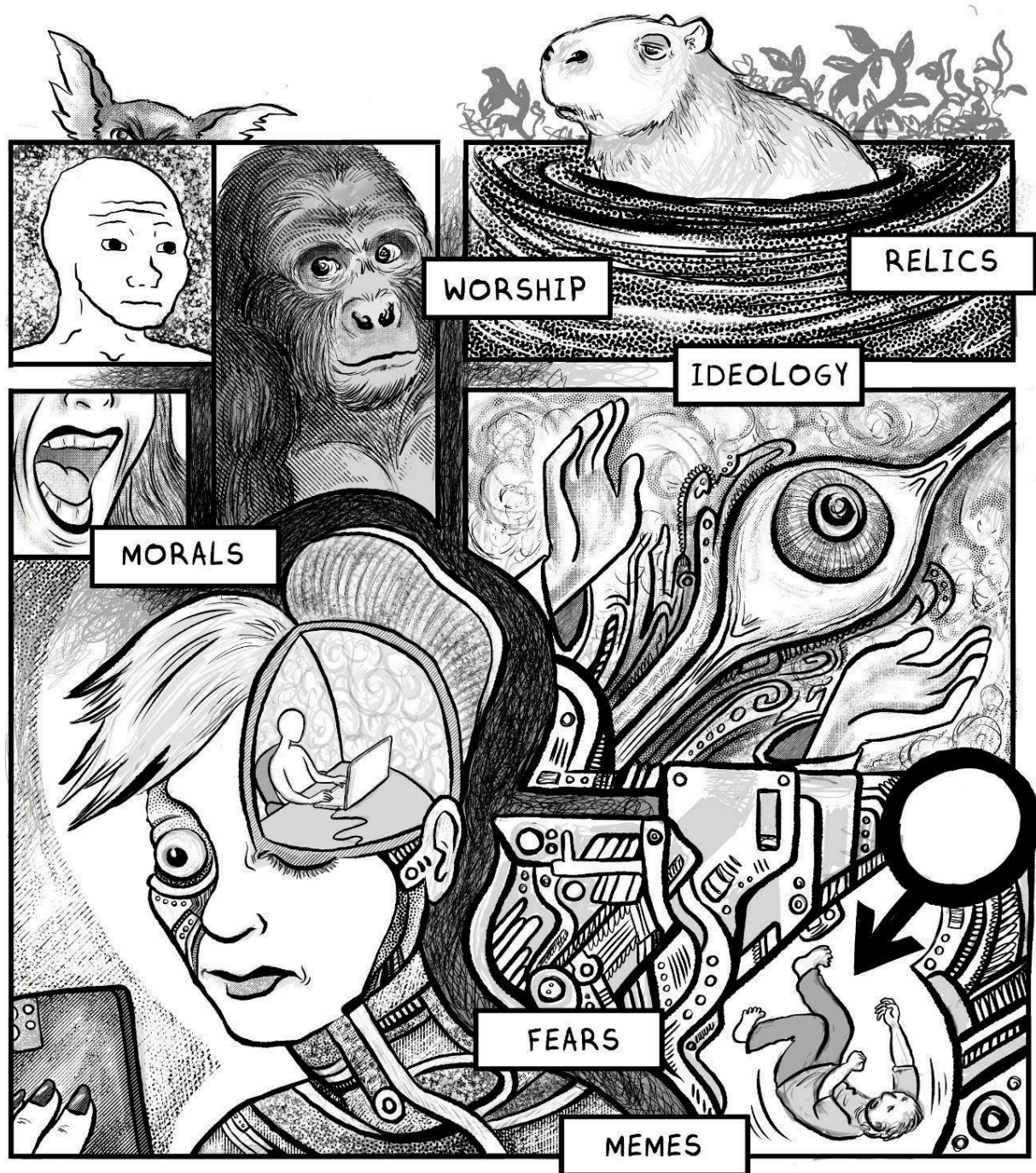
The **Mainstream Cultural Arrival** phase, where responses to an event become enduring fixtures in popular culture, is evident in how sardonic online reactions to the Queen's death were repurposed during King Charles III's coronation in May 2023. These responses had become traditions in and of themselves, with user interfaces on social media such as quote posts, replies, and video duets resurrecting the practice of providing an endless supply of deprecatory footnoting to royal proceedings. *The Business Standard* (2023) referred to the event as “a battle of wits, creating bizarre and hilarious memes on a centuries-old ceremony.” The affordances of multimodal, hyperconnected media networks mean that readers are not simply recipients of narrative, but “active participants in the co-construction of narrative” (Isabel et al., 2013). The variety of audiovisual interfaces supplied by digital communication systems creates a highly immersive experience for those absorbing a narrative, referred to as “narrative transportation,” as evidenced by Greter, Yadav and Gleason (2017, pp.5-6). The ability to flit between the livestream of a sacred, ceremonial practice and jokes blaming the ghost of Princess Diana for causing the bad weather denotes a defining trait of internet folklore: its ability to synergise a diverse span of cultural critiques and social commentary through memes (Crawford-Smith, 2023). Such moments highlight a defining feature of internet folklore: its ability to layer narratives of reverence and ridicule,

solemnity and satire, in real time. Blank (2018, p.50) writes that complex digital folk culture “follows folkloric form and function,” but what the SCE case study into the Queen’s death has shown is that digital folk culture can also critique folklore *itself* by deconstructing royal mourning traditions through online commentary and memes. The technological affordances of multimodal online spaces have been used to reshape Queen Elizabeth’s public image as an institutional figure, adding a new layer to cultural critique and engagement with folkloric traditions.

1.3. Concluding Statements

In response to the key research question of this thesis, which asks how folklore has adapted to contemporary digital platforms, this chapter has demonstrated that activities and practices of folklore evolve depending on the technological capabilities of the era. By applying the Seismic Cultural Event model to these case studies, each situated at points in history at which major technological advancements in media transmission were occurring, it has been shown that the folklore which naturally develops from these events has, in both form and content, been shaped by these advancements also. In each of these events, folkloric activities and practices such as community-oriented rituals, symbolic objects, conspiracy myths, artistic expression and engagement with tradition are profoundly influenced by their means of transmission. Due to the advancements in technology which increase accessibility to technology that instantly remixes, replicates, and disseminates media, folk narratives follow the general pattern of all information spreading progressively farther and faster. This has led to an increasing divide between officiated, corporation-based legacy media and the unfiltered, freethinking spaces of social media platforms. The introduction of the internet into this equation has also enabled the dissemination of folk narratives across vast communities, unburdened by geographical limitations, and has provided greater opportunities for experimentation and subversion of media artefacts.

In some cases, even if folklore is effective in amplifying a common voice to instigate social action, it is often not possible in public spaces dictated by governments that criminalise and prohibit dissenting voices. The SCE model operates on the functional principle of the media tools *available* to storytellers, and the suppression of these applications will alter the transportive framework of a folk narrative. Hence, an impactful event may reach its cultural zenith through alternative means which do not follow the typical pattern of stages as outlined. One such example is the utilisation of social media and encryption software by young Iranians following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Islamic Republic's "morality police," due to the regime's crackdown on access to global social media platforms (Kumar, 2022). It is, as a result, difficult to apply the SCE model to events where efforts to utilise media technologies for folk activities and practices repeatedly face obstacles, or where an event is prevented from achieving broad visibility and accessibility. A future area of exploration for research would be expanding the SCE model to incorporate variations that account for the impact of media restrictions, to gain a clearer insight into how folklore adapts in repressive environments. This would involve creating sub-formats of the model which follow the basic overarching structure but are tailored specifically for scenarios where folklore manifests in environments marked by media censorship and the suppression of public speech outlets.



CHAPTER 2
 DIGITISED FOLK CREATURES AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Figure 7: Chapter 2 Header

Chapter 2: Digitised Folk Creatures as Social Critique

2.0. Traditional Functions of the Folk Creature

Historically, non-human beings and animals appear cross-culturally in folk narratives, such as shamanic animal familiars, animal-headed gods, saints, demons, and fable collections (Sax, 2009; Ameisenowa, 1949; Pitts, 1974). As they form a significant component in digital culture, the study of animals in memes is a growing interest in internet studies (Dynel, 2016; Maddox, 2022). Contributing to these ongoing discussions, this chapter will examine how meme characters utilise traditional motifs of folk creatures to foster social critique,¹ I use the umbrella term *folk creature* instead of “folk animal” to acknowledge that not all non-human beings in folklore represent real species in the natural world; they also include mythical humanoids such as werewolves and fairies. As Wieneke (2024, p.133) observes, Toelken’s assessment of folklore as “culturally constructed communicative traditions informally exchanged in dynamic variation through space and time” can be applied to how internet memes comment on and elaborate upon tradition. To build a foundation for this analysis, I will begin by addressing the traditional functions these folk creatures have served in cultural narratives since before they were mediated by digital meme formats. This will offer clarity to understanding how said formats have elaborated on these traditions and adapted them to contemporary sociocultural contexts.

In *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, Sax (2017, pp.456-457) describes Aesop’s fables as the oldest and most influential genre of animal literature, which holds a core moral message designed to guide us towards ethical behaviour. He observes that folklore addresses “a longing for intimacy with animals and nature” by envisioning realities where

¹ Walzer offers a stipulative definition of social criticism, calling it an act of “speaking in public to other members who join in the speaking and whose speech constitutes a collective reflection upon the conditions of collective life” (1987, p30) This is a definition that I consider appropriate, and the term “social critique” will henceforth be used in this chapter in accordance with Walzer’s conceptualisation.

animals and humans are equal beings. This is explored by examining how we perceive ourselves in animals and vice versa through the rhetorical devices of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism. An example of an animal character that explores the human-animal boundary is Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, itself argued to be based on the pre-colonial, moralistic African folktales of Br'er Rabbit (Marshall, 2023). In the story, Peter loses his brass-buttoned jacket and shoes, items of human clothing that tie him to anthropomorphism, after he is caught stealing in Mr. McGregor's garden. This rediscovery of his status as an animal separated from dominant humans is illustrated in the following manner: he transitions from a human-like rabbit, walking and sitting upright on his hind legs, to an ordinary rabbit bounding on all fours. Aftandilian (2007, p. xiv) summarises the key paradoxical roles that animals play in our cultural expression: they serve as "stand-ins for human selves" but also use the distinction between the human and non-human to show the divide between "permissible and forbidden behaviour." Animal memes continue this semantic tradition, as seen in the *Advice Animals* format (*Know Your Meme*, 2025d). These memes feature animals accompanied by text that represents a character trait or an archetype that fits the role of a stock character. For instance, Confession Bear (*KYM* 2025e) illustrates our capacity for shame about our actions, with the accompanying text featuring confessions about taboo behaviours. Because anthropomorphism allows us to explore human behaviours and cultural norms, it can be a powerful tool for social critique.

By drawing on established traditions of folk creatures, contemporary meme characters enhance their symbolic resonance and extend their cultural impact. Take, for instance, the use of cats in meme culture. Traditionally, they possess a "twofold status" in folklore, appearing both "benevolent and evil." They are featured as deities in Ancient Egypt, demonic witches' familiars in Europe during the Middle Ages, and mysterious tricksters in literature, such as the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland* (Nikolajeva, 2009, pp.249-258). Online cat memes reflect these contradictions by portraying them as giving "personal love and affection" while also enacting defiance, bastardry, and disobedience (Wilson, 2020, p.10).

McNeill (2007, p. 14) also points out that the cat's "permanent liminal state" draws us closer to it due to our own "social liminality" and preoccupation with the mysterious and supernatural. This ambiguity gives the cat a "blank slate" element, where internet users can project their human experiences and identities onto it. The Instagram meme pages "sad_catto_hours" and "sadasscats" are examples of how cat images have become vessels for social commentary, with superimposed text referencing a specific emotional situation or relatable experience. One meme posted on @sadasscats shows a cat with watery eyes sitting precariously on a plug outlet, with the caption, "God, please choose another soldier." Comments on the post show several users confiding their struggles with breakups and chronic illness (@sadasscats, 2025). Animal memes used to channel and validate the most vulnerable of human emotions are the exemplar of what de Seta (2020, p.177) describes as a continuation of enduring practices and genres yet also a "stark break with the past, a new form of vernacular creativity and self-reflexive aesthetic of user-driven folk art." These memes are not just continuing a time-honoured tradition of using animals to explore and critique our humanity; they are finding a new generative method of proliferating these traditions through the medium of highly reproducible image macros. As the SCE has shown, new configurations of media transmission influence how we engage with folklore, particularly in terms of our ability to interact and experiment directly with media artefacts. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, this is the case in how internet-mediated meme culture has created new ways of expressing creature folklore to stimulate social critique.

For the purposes of a comprehensive analysis, I have created two distinct categories of the folk creature. Both are used to initiate social critique, but their cultural function and the behaviours they reflect differ:

- **Monstrous creatures**, grotesque and frightening, function as warnings of societal and existential threats by reflecting collective fears, anxieties, and prejudices. They

symbolically condemn behaviours perceived as socially deviant or harmful. *Case studies: the Karen and the Wojak.*

- **Benign creatures**, revered and appealing, function as moral instruction by reflecting values of empathy, responsibility, and altruism. How we treat these figures reflects our ethical principles, positioning them as symbolic tests of our morality. *Case studies: the Capybara and Harambe the Gorilla*

Some of the chosen case studies may not be described as monstrous or benign creatures in a conventional sense; however, the point is to interrogate how and why these meme characters *adopt* the functions and characteristics of folk creatures to initiate effective social critique. This principle builds upon Dundes' consideration of folklore as highly adaptable rather than restricted, occurring across a variety of genres and formats (Bronner, 2007a, p.xii). Essentially, meme characters deliver the functions of *moral instruction* (benign creatures) and *warning* (monstrous creatures) by incorporating the core principles of folk creatures that have historically served the same purpose with success. Imbuing these characters with tried-and-tested folkloric traditions makes them a viable conduit for critiquing and addressing sociocultural issues directly as a community. Before examining these case studies, the functions of the two categories will be explored thoroughly. This will help to illustrate how these functions have evolved in response to technological innovations and how such adaptations are reflected in contemporary online communities.

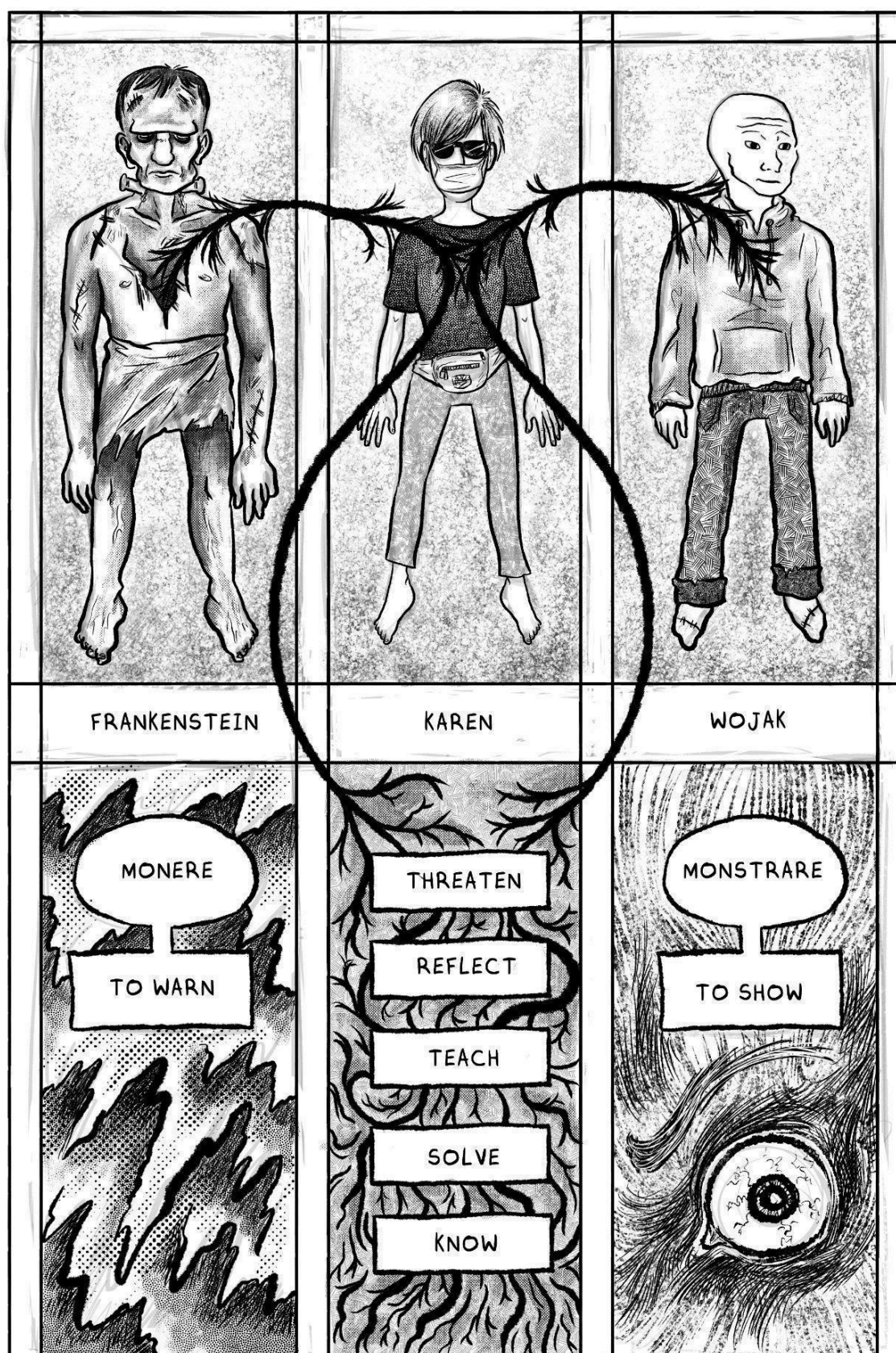


Figure 8: The Monstrous Creature

2.1. The Warning Function of the Monstrous Creature

Monstrous creature folklore initiates social critique by functioning as a warning of threats to society, personifying these societal fears and anxieties through grotesque and frightening figures. The first key indicator of this function can be found in the etymology of the word itself. The term *monster* is derived from two Latin terms: *mostrare*, meaning “to show,” and *monere*, meaning “to warn,” which together form “embodied omens and portents” (Musharbash and Presterudstuen, 2020, p. 3). Monsters are, as Musharbash (2021) phrases it, deeply involved with those they haunt by knowing “their systems, rules, orders, their problems and crises.” This was previously evidenced in the SCE Spring-Heeled Jack case study, a fearsome, supernatural being that embodied the tensions between spiritualist and secularist philosophies of the era. Another notable example of this is the 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, wherein a scientist creates a grotesque, synthetic imitation of a human being. Smith (2019, p.303) writes that the book reflects the tensions emerging from an increasingly industrialised society between “biology and technology, physiology and mechanics,” a tension that remains unresolved today. Indeed, our anxieties towards technological advancement have become a cultural mainstay in monstrous creature folklore; as Levina and Bui (2013, p.1) observe, monster narratives dominated the turn of the 21st century, a period defined by “profound acceleration in changing symbolic, economic, and technological systems,” leaving us “terrorized by change.” While they specifically refer to the resurgence of monsters in popular films and television shows, this phenomenon was also evident on social media platforms, where urban legends and monstrous characters, such as Slender Man, Jeff the Killer, and The Rake, gained prominence online (Thapa, 2022). Importantly, this acceleration of technological systems is not only reflected in the monsters themselves, but they also facilitate the amplification of their cultural spread. As the SCE model demonstrates, the backdrop of technological advancements in print culture during the Industrial Revolution transformed the Spring-Heeled Jack character into an omnipresent legend, primarily through

the mass production of penny dreadful serials. This suggests that monstrous creature folklore adapts to new technologies, generating characters that both critique these advancements and harness their capacities for cultural dissemination.

The ability of monstrous creatures to adapt to and be inspired by technological advancements underscores their enduring relevance as social critics, consistently addressing contemporary and evolving societal fears. As McGuinness (2019, p.133) notes, monsters, specifically the bogeyman, are an “organic entity, adapting according to environmental demands to articulate the fears of a particular group during a specific period.” In modern online folklore, this is best exemplified by Slender Man, a forest-dwelling, child-snatching monster that embodies anxieties surrounding the internet while simultaneously relying on it for circulation. Slender Man resembles the classic bogeyman archetype, which reinforces “hegemonic values through the harsh reproach of transgressors” (McGuinness, 2019, p. 133) and serves to “frighten children ... as an admonition” (Shimabukuro, 2014, p. 48). In the digital age, this archetype has been adapted to address growing concerns about internet safety, warning of the dangers of “unsupervised tween media use and the corrupting allure of the Internet's dark corners” (Peck, 2015, p. 346). These concerns intensified following a 2014 incident in which two 12-year-old girls stabbed their friend in order to become “proxies” of Slender Man (Beyerstein, 2014). The film *Slender Man* (2018) builds on this theme by depicting characters who summon the monster using an online video, describing him as “getting into your head ... like a computer virus that infects your hard drive, but instead of your hard drive, it's your brain.” Yet, however contemporary and adaptable monsters are, some fears remain perennial, and thus familiar motifs persist. Indeed, Slender Man echoes the *yamauba*, a mountain-dwelling woman in Japanese folklore who devours men and children, functioning as a warning of how feminine empowerment can threaten patriarchal norms (Komatsu, 1987, p.327; Ekmekçi, 2022, p.103; Sebastian-Jones, 2013, p.175). There are also parallels with Krampus, a monster in Germanic tradition who beats and drags naughty children into the underworld (Beau, 2018). Despite its relevance to

contemporary anxieties, these enduring motifs demonstrate how Slender Man invokes the continuity of folkloric tradition by drawing upon timeless, dependable strategies of inducing fear.

The warning function of the monstrous creature indicates a pedagogical dimension. There is value in using monsters as a teaching tool to warn against transgressive human behaviour that can pose an existential threat. For instance, there is the cautionary tale of the greed-driven wendigo, a monster from the oral folktales of Algonquian communities, used to uphold survival philosophies in nomadic hunting societies, namely “mobility and sociability” and “cooperative values,” which prevent members from endangering themselves and others (Ferrara and Lanoue, 2004, p.79; Hunchman, 2020, p.105). In contemporary online communities, forming monsters based on mutually shared community values is enhanced by what Itō et al. (2019a, p.291) define as “online affinity networks.” These networks are oriented around participative “connected learning,” characterised by “shared values and cultures that are a magnet for affiliation.” In the case of Slender Man, the character developed from a photo-editing contest in the online forum *Something Awful*, which inserted supernatural horrors into ordinary photos. This snowballed into an “open-sourcing of storytelling” in which users with a shared interest in these images collectively developed the character (Chess, 2012, p. 383). These affinity networks extend beyond forums and into gaming communities, which have “led an innovation of networked learning practices and peer production” (Itō et al, 2019b, p.15). Such practices have enhanced the cultural relevance and interest in Slender Man by translating the character into the interactive, participatory genre of “Let’s Play” videos. As Cohn (2018) writes, once YouTuber PewDiePie posted a video of himself playing the game *Slender: The Eight Pages*, a deluge of similar videos featuring other YouTubers playing the game followed. In an exploration of what makes an effective Let’s Play video, Schmidt and Marx (2020, p.147-148) argued that the way gamers communicate the “self-organising control loop of playing a video game” by verbalising their reactions and problem-solving simulates the “core processes of multimodal

interaction.” Horror video games don’t pose any real threat; however, the Let’s Play format of verbalising strategies to defeat an in-game monster parallels how the warning function of monsters possesses a pedagogical dynamic, teaching audiences how to recognise and respond to threats. Thus, the interactive learning and collective participation of online platforms play a crucial role in sustaining and amplifying the monster’s traditional warning function in contemporary online communities.

Slender Man is typically referred to as an example of a *creepypasta*, a horror story or character which is distributed across online platforms. The term is derived from “copy-pasta,” referencing the copy and paste user interface design; this process, in which users reproduce the story and add their elaborations, illustrates how an online character is “collectively negotiated through social action and exigency” (Chess, 2012, p. 390). The internet has provided viable spaces and interfaces for folkloric creation and dissemination with a scale and fluidity not possible in traditional, oral, or print-based media. This has amplified the multimodality of the monster’s warning function, integrating community-based learning networks, participatory storytelling practices, and user-driven content creation. With the digital mediation of the monster’s pedagogical warning function established, the following case studies will examine how traits of monstrous creature folklore are encoded in meme character figures, such as the Karen and the Wojak. Although these characters are not traditionally considered monsters in the same way as Slender Man, they inherit the monster’s warning function, delivering potent forms of social critique within contemporary online communities. Understanding the sociocultural impact of internet folklore requires recognising how traditional folkloric motifs, such as monstrous creatures, are culturally embedded into the broader vernacular practices of meme culture, even in characters not explicitly considered to be conventional monsters. As Petrova (2021, p. 7) notes, folklore shapes not only “language and culture but also the thinking of modern society,” making its imprint on meme characters ideologically significant.

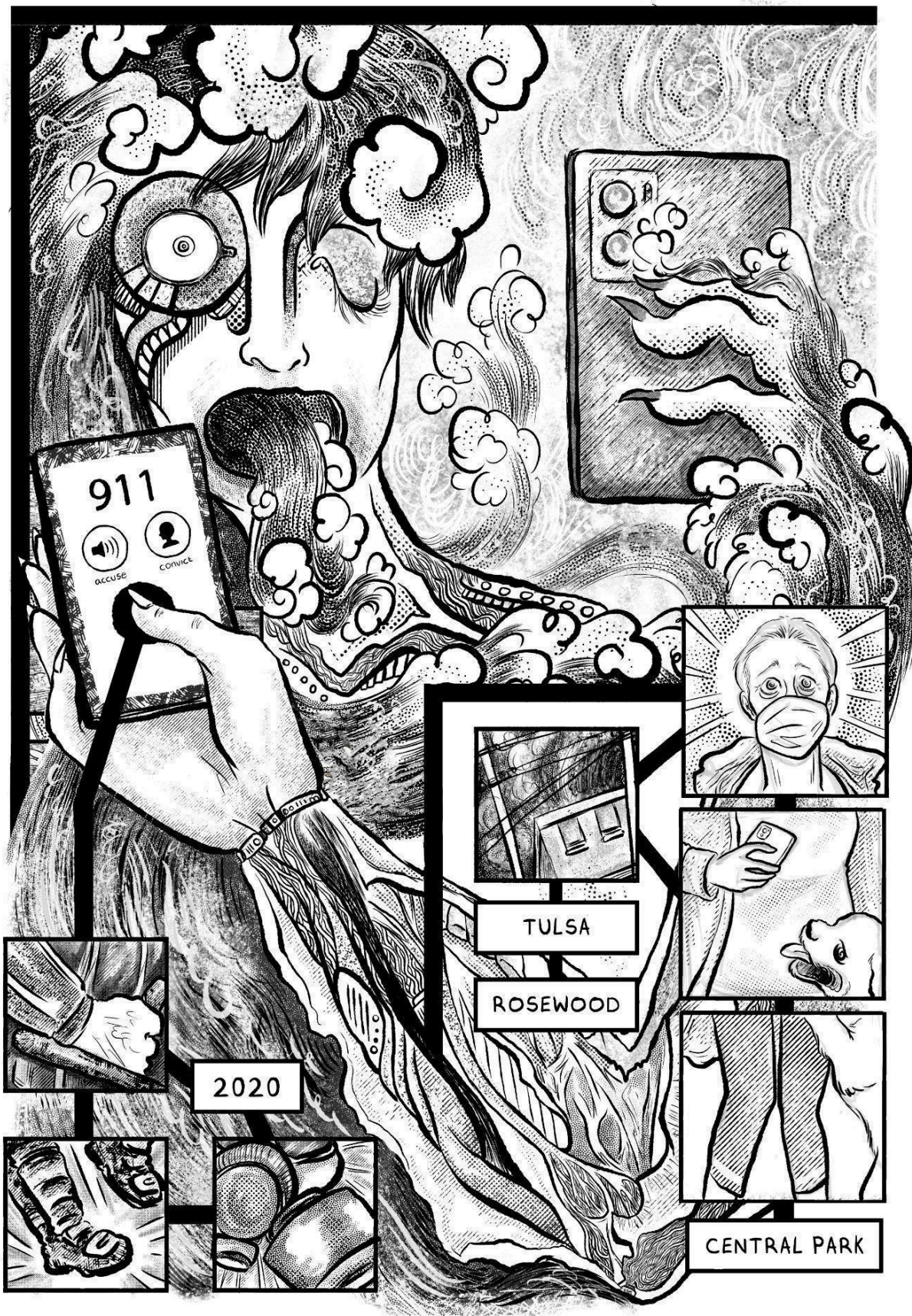


Figure 9: The Karen Case Study

2.2. Case Study: The Karen

Having studied many iterations of the “Karen” meme, I have found its most succinct description to be provided by sociolinguist Robin Queen (2020), who describes “an entitled, older, white woman who causes scenes in public and is usually engaging in racist or bigoted behavior while doing so.” Queen’s assessment in June 2020 arrived at the zenith of the Karen’s popularity as a meme, following a widely publicised incident the previous month in which birdwatcher Christian Cooper asked a woman in Central Park to leash her dog, prompting her to call the police and declare, “I’m going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life.” This statement was regarded by some as a direct threat of harm to Cooper, given the “disproportionately aggressive policing” against Black people in the US (Norris, 2020). Others related the case to that of George Floyd’s murder at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis, which happened just hours later, noting that his death exemplified the worst possible outcome from calling the police on those who are most likely to be victims of brutality (Cobb, 2020). This case study interrogates how the Karen incorporates the warning function of the monstrous creature by reflecting the fears and consequences of racist behaviour, enacting social critique by using a character that lampoons “white women in the United States weaponizing their victimhood” (Lang, 2020). There is a lack of research available that places the Karen squarely in the context of folklore analysis. However, addressing this knowledge gap will engender a clearer understanding of how such meme characters deliver social critique effectively and impactfully by repurposing folkloric traditions and motifs in contemporary online communities.

A useful starting point for identifying how the Karen meme functions as a warning is examining the character’s quintessential appearance. Physical attributes of monsters constitute the “show” aspect of their etymology, and the “warn” lies in what these attributes represent. The construction of the Karen, Blitvich (2022, p.16) writes, is epitomised by an

“identity kit,” which is used to identify traits of entitlement, racism, mistreatment of service workers and impoliteness. These traits are emphasised through “starter pack” memes, which attach a visual language to the character that denotes her social and financial status: a “middle-class aesthetic” (Maragh-Lloyd, 2024, p.36), with a distinctive bob haircut (*r/starterpacks*, 2019) a *Trump for President* sticker, and a large suburban house (*r/FuckYouKaren*, 2020). These memes are facilitated by the principle of Itō et al.’s aforementioned “online affinity networks,” which collectively determine the appearance of the Karen by consolidating shared values and knowledge. In traditional folklore, a monster’s physical traits are emphasised as fundamental for warning, as they facilitate recognising and avoiding them. Gilmour (2003, p.73) deems the monster’s mouth, “always lined with fearsome teeth and fangs,” to be present in monster lore since antiquity. “Universal images of evil,” such as beasts with sharp teeth and claws, are rooted in real-life evolutionary threats and have become a staple in monster literature (Clasen, 2014, p.47). In *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson, 1999), for example, the monster’s terrifying features are reinforced through lexical repetition, which adds a new feature each time, such as “terrible tusks, terrible claws, and terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.” Whilst the Karen lacks literal sharp talons and teeth, her body is no less threatening in what it represents. Her middle-class status and displays of wealth are indicative of her social standing, power, and capacity to oppress others. She is portrayed wielding a phone as a weapon, either to record someone she perceives has slighted her or to report them to the police. Her appearance appears mundane, but as Widdowson (1971, p.104) explains, “anything can be made to appear frightening, but frightening figures of all kinds share a characteristic abnormality.” This abnormality can be distinguished by a sense of “authority,” or abnormal “mental characteristics,” which the Karen, an abrasive, bigoted woman, undoubtedly possesses. This is expressed through the signature “*Speak to the Manager*” Haircut (Know Your Meme 2025f), symbols of middle-class suburban affluence such as large houses and SUVs, and a demanding personality, all of which signal entitlement and a desire to assert authority.

As previously noted, monstrous creatures are relevant to contemporary anxieties, yet still draw from historical context and folkloric tradition with continuing cultural resonance. As Blitvich (2022, p. 5) notes, much academic literature on the Karen meme focuses on how it symbolises racism and “casual acts of white supremacy”; these factors are inherently shaped by historical context, which some Karen memes have explicitly addressed. On the subreddit entitled “FuckYouKaren,” a post garnering 11k upvotes refers to Carolyn Bryant (the woman who falsely accused 14-year-old Emmett Till of assaulting her, which led to his abduction and lynching) as the “original Karen” (*r/FuckYouKaren*, 2021). News outlets have also described Bryant as such, using the case to highlight the deadly consequences of false accusations from white women against Black men (Higgins, 2023; BET, 2021). If the monstrous creature reflects collective fears and anxieties, the Karen meme symbolises the endurance of racial violence and structural inequalities. Cases throughout US history, such as the Tulsa massacre in 1921, the Rosewood massacre in 1923, and the murder of Till in 1955, are embedded in the Karen’s symbolism; she represents the power of a false accusation that prompts such attacks (Russell-Brown, 2021). Further references to this history can be found in the naming of specific Karens. Moody-Ramirez, Cole, and Bland (2023, p. 27) connect the unique descriptive monikers used to label individuals labeled as Karens such as “Cornerstone Caroline,” “Key Fob Kelly,” and “BBQ Becky” to the term “Miss Ann,” used in Black communities during the era of enslavement to describe a white woman who exploited her privilege to assert control and get her way. I would add that the descriptiveness of these monikers echoes the naming conventions of monsters in American folklore, which are defined based on their appearance, location or behaviour, such as the Fresno Nightcrawlers, Huggin’ Molly, and Melon Heads (Copelan, 2018). Furthermore, viral Karen videos employ language reminiscent of cryptid sightings, using phrases such as “wild Karen spotted,” (@insanebikerz, 2024) and “caught on camera,” (SSSniperWolf, 2021) which evoke terminology used in news articles on the purported existence of Bigfoot (Flynn, 2023, Mulka, 2021). The reason for connecting the history of white women weaponising their privilege to folkloric traditions of cryptids is that monsters

can be receptacles for trauma, conveying horrific experiences by presenting “initial, symbolic representations of this trauma into our cultural awareness” (Hamilton 2020, p.2). Drawing from monstrous creature folklore and historical context builds a character with contemporary, adaptable relevance; one that builds upon enduring symbols of fear that have endured across generations.

Humour is central to the online popularity and shareability of the Karen meme. It seems perplexing to square the humorous use of the Karen meme with the horrific and disturbing racial history it represents. Maragh-Lloyd (2021, p.255), analysing the Karen through play scholarship, argues that it represents a form of play in which Black/African American communities utilise humour to “build and maintain community against ever-present threats of domination.” Reducing the Karen to “child’s play” through meme creation can be a form of resistance. Mocking and demeaning the Karen through memes is also a tactic of removing power from a fearsome entity, and mirrors what Weaver (2010, p.44) refers to as the “reverse discourses” of African-American and Afro-Caribbean comedians who critique and resist racism through their humour. Humour present in monstrous creature folklore to provide relief from pervasive fears, as Vlahovici-Jones (2014, pp. 294-295) observes in Romanian folklore, where characters playfully trick the personification of death using verbal subterfuge. There are also echoes of this occurring in the Mainstream Cultural Arrival phase of the SCE model, such as Punch and Judy puppet shows using Spring-heeled Jack panic as the comic villain in their performances, and 9/11 memes acting as catharsis to cope with the trauma of the event. Crucially, juxtaposing humour with monsters facilitates the proliferation of critique; they become “rhetorical tools addressing human cognitive limits and the limits of humanity itself” (Borysławski, 2020, p.239). Applying this combination to the meme format, which itself plays a crucial role in cultural discourse, makes the Karen a highly effective tool for enacting resistance to and awareness of the societal conditions and behaviours that perpetuate racial violence.

The Karen's sociocultural influence is apparent in how the meme and the subject it represented became a pervasive point of cultural discourse in 2020. The internet's "interactivity and hypertextuality," which helps memes proliferate, is essential for facilitating spaces for sharing and discussing political issues (Dwivedi 2023, p.61310), and they foster "social connection, self-expression, and cultural commentary within online communities" (Mukhtar et al, 2024, p.1454). Jenkins (2001) argued that the digitisation of media content would ultimately expand the potential relationships between them and enable them to flow across platforms, and that new expressions of creativity through new media technologies foster a new participatory folk culture. We can see from the online meme culture that led to the Karen's popularisation that Jenkins' assessment was prescient. The Karen was spawned from the same participatory networking tools and sophisticated multimodal platforms that made Slender Man a ubiquitous cultural figure. These platforms, which allow for vast numbers of people to pool resources from preexisting templates and image macros stored in various software environments, have resulted in a character sourced by an interactive online community. This cycle of reproducing, adapting and sharing contributed to the virality of the Karen meme, particularly as it interlaced with the sociopolitical climate of the George Floyd protests. Critics of the meme argued that it carried inherently sexist and ageist undertones (Khorsandi, 2021; Freeman, 2020; Bindel, 2021). Feminist author Victoria Smith highlighted these factors as a perpetuation of tropes in folk tales of monstrous women: "hags, shrews, witches" (Smith, 2023). Similar imagery to the Karen can be found in female monsters, such as the Baba Yaga, the Gorgon, and the medieval witch, the latter "a manifestation of the demonisation of women in medieval Christian culture" (Morris, 1986, p. 285). Hamad (2024, p.24) however, counters the notion that the Karen is inherently misogynistic; the character is read as female because she is meant to typify "the traditional role of white women in a white society: a lesser member of the dominant class who appeals to those above her by sacrificing those below her." Disagreement over the true meaning of the Karen arises from the democratised nature of internet culture. Although meme templates and formats exhibit some consistency, users can constantly reinterpret them to fit different contexts, allowing

their meaning to vary. To quote Shifman's (2013, p. 2) examination of memes, they thrive on "intertextuality" and the ability to "relate to each other in complex, creative, and surprising ways." The contradictory subtexts of the Karen have also contributed to its longevity as a meme; different interpretations for various purposes make it a widely adaptable cultural unit. Monsters, like memes, "adapt while others are appropriated, and so their contingency on hauntees becomes more flexible" (Musharbash and Presterudstuen, 2020, p.4). Regardless of its interpretation, the Karen integrates traits of monstrous creature folklore as expressed through interactive, participatory online communication, making it a high-yielding site for public dialogues on the intersections of race, gender, and power.

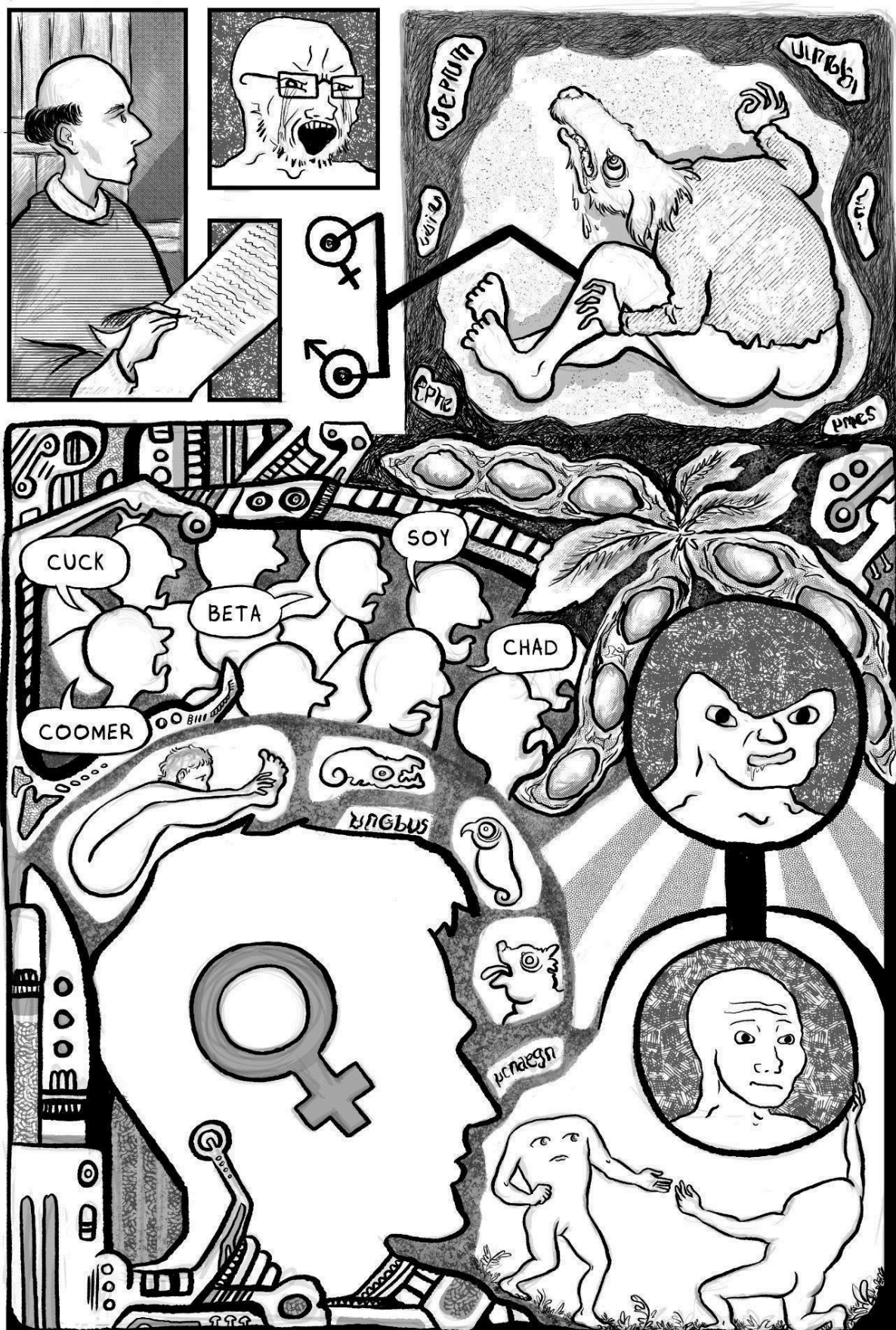


Figure 10: The Wojak Case Study

2.3. Case Study: The Wojak

In its original form, the Wojak is a generic black outline drawing of a bald man with few defining features and an emotionally neutral expression. Its simplicity has made it highly adaptable, allowing users to modify and remix the image into dozens of variants. This is evidenced by the vast index of Wojaks provided by *Know Your Meme* (2025g), which contains formats ranging from direct edits of the original drawing to entirely new figures, all rendered using the MS Paint method for stylistic continuity. Adaptability has equipped the Wojak to embody a diverse range of arguments and perspectives characteristic of various online subcultures; however, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the subset of Wojaks that incorporate monstrous creature folklore to promote ideologies associated with the “manosphere.” As defined by the *Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, the manosphere refers to a variety of men’s groups that extoll a narrow idea of masculinity “that puts harmful limits on what it means to be a man” and denies rights to women, trans, and nonbinary people (CMHR, 2023). Some Wojak templates and variants originated from “chan” imageboards with large and active communities, such as Vichan, 4chan, and 8chan (Patston, 2021; Thalen, 2024). These sites have been identified as vital breeding grounds for ideologies and movements related to the manosphere, making the Wojak a useful reference point for analysing such communities (Maloney, Roberts, and Jones, 2024; Henshaw, 2023). This case study argues that manosphere-aligned Wojaks draw from the conventions of monstrous creature folklore to criticise and warn against the perceived societal erosion of traditional gender norms by depicting those who fail to uphold these norms as grotesque and frightening.

As with the Karen, the physical traits of manosphere-aligned Wojaks offer insight into how they function as a warning. Crawford et al (2021, p.990) collected a dataset of Wojak variants as part of a study into the promotion of violence through online “chan” sites, finding

that while not all images directly incite violence, “their presence within chan culture may serve to dehumanise and ‘other’ whilst contributing to gradual desensitisation to the concept of violence” This process of othering is achieved by presenting Wojak variants with exaggerated or distorted physical features, designed to elicit a sense of discomfort or revulsion. One such variant is the “Coomer,” which represents “a person with a severe masturbation addiction.” Originally posted to 4chan, the Coomer is depicted with an unkempt beard, bloodshot eyes, a receding hairline, and an abnormally large right arm muscle (*Know Your Meme* 2025g). This is associated with the NoFap subculture within the manosphere, centred around men abstaining from masturbation “as a way to realize and strengthen their own manhood” (Han and Yin, 2023, p.1933). Another variant, the “Brainlet,” visualises limited intelligence through Wojaks with deformed, concave skulls, vacant expressions and drooling mouths (*MemeAtlas*, 2025). Online groups that espouse misogynist ideologies use the term to demonise perceived enemies who oppose their views (Moreno-Almeida and Gerbaudo, 2021, p.893; Cunningham Rogers, 2024, p.30). Both the Coomer and the Brainlet serve as cautionary figures for those within manosphere-aligned communities, providing grim examples of what happens when a man fails to meet conventional masculine standards. If they do not exhibit self-discipline and intellectual rigour, others within the community will view them as less masculine.

Undesirable behaviours are depicted through Wojaks with physically abnormal and exaggerated features, reflecting the trope in traditional monstrous creature folklore of using “ugliness” as a form of dehumanisation. Ellis (2018, p.294) observes that monsters in mythology, fairy tales, and literature are “indexed as morally corrupt through visual markers including old age, warts, poverty and physical deformity.” The Wojak borrows from this method by coding physical abnormalities as signs of psychological or emotional weakness. The concave skull of the “Brainlet” variant closely resembles that of the *Blemmyes* on the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, a 14th-century map of the world. According to Hereford Cathedral’s official interactive map, monstrous figures in the *Mappa Mundi* are attributed to “travellers’

tales” and circulated myths during the Middle Ages of humanoids inhabiting the edge of the world, hence their placement at the outward margins of the map (*Mappa Mundi Exploration*, 2025). The *Blemmyes*, characterised by facial features on their torsos and lack of heads, were likened by a medieval writer to “lawyers, who speak through their bellies,” further attributing their physical difference to their moral character. Another trait that Wojak memes borrow from traditional monsters is the use of visual contrast, achieved by juxtaposing an “ugly” Wojak with a more flattering one. This was termed by Mitchell and Snyder (2001, p.54) as “narrative prosthesis,” in which

Visible degeneracy, impotency, congenital deformity, festering ulcerations, and bleeding wounds (...) provide the contrastive bodily coordinates to the muscular, aesthetic, and symmetrical bodies of the healthy citizenry.

An example of this in manosphere-aligned Wojak memes is the *Soykak vs. Chad* template, which contrasts a wide-mouthed, weeping, belligerent figure with an idealised, ultra-masculine counterpart (*Know Your Meme* 2025i). The Soyjak borrows from the pejorative “soyboy,” which describes men perceived as weak or overly feminine (Hosie, 2020). The choice of the word “soy” is linked to the unproven belief that products with high levels of soy increase oestrogen levels in men, a hormone that develops female reproductive characteristics (Millstein, 2024). Within manosphere communities, “chad” and “soy” signify the “new realities, norms, and values” that revolve around an opposition to feminism and a crisis of masculinity (Farrell et al., 2020, p.221). The Chad, coded as the ideal male and superior in both physicality and worldview, is theatrically juxtaposed with the Soyjak to underline traditional societal norms of masculinity.

The perception of those who refuse to adhere to the conventions of masculinity and femininity as monstrous has roots in ancient mythology and folklore. Cohen (1996, p.6) describes monsters as representing a “category crisis,” with “externally incoherent bodies

(...) a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions,” such as the Gorgon, Lilith, and Scylla, women in ancient mythology who become monsters by transgressing gender roles (1996, p.9). To be considered a hybrid of masculine and feminine traits risks being subjected to monsterisation and deemed inhuman. The Old English text *Wonders of the East* bears early renditions of the concept that monsters are composed of human parts that “deviate from normative standards in their arrangements” (Mittman and Kim, 2009, p.339) depicting “human genealogy originating at a point of transgressive sexual behaviour” (Monk, 2013, p.79). Nirta (2022, p.339) further points to the use of analogies between “the monster and the trans body,” a concept that has existed throughout history in Greek myths, medieval folk tales, and even medical theory. For example, Cohen (1996, p.9) refers to a description given by mediaeval encyclopedist Vincent of Beauvais of a supposed “dog-headed monster,” with ambiguous sexual traits, making it “a composite of the supposedly discrete categories ‘male’ and ‘female’.”² These historical depictions point to an enduring cultural fear towards those deemed not to fit into binarised categorisations of gender appropriately.

Manosphere-aligned Wojak memes have continued this tradition of reinforcing gender norms by portraying those who defy them as monstrous or inhuman. Soyjaks, associated with “nu-males” and “soy boys,” who do not conform to traditional norms of masculinity, are typically depicted with emotional, expressive features that contrast sharply with the Chad’s stoical, controlled manner (Know Your Meme, 2025j). Manosphere communities promote the idea that emotionality is an exclusively feminine trait at odds with idealised masculinity, clearly defining the boundaries between what is considered acceptable gendered behaviours (Krendel, 2020). Soyjaks not only mock perceived deviance from conventional masculinities, however, but are also used to target and dehumanise trans and non-binary individuals. A page on the *Soyjak Wiki* (2025) created to ridicule the transgender community claims that

² These monsters, also known as Cynocephali, also appear in the Hereford Mappa Mundi, described on the interactive map as having been characterised by mediaeval writers as “barbarians ... tender one minute, but aggressive and uncontrolled the next.”

certain facial features, such as “visible nasal folds” and “soulless cheekbones,” are signs of untrustworthiness. These descriptions are accompanied by image macros that use Wojak templates to create derogatory, deeply offensive depictions of trans people. Such portrayals recall what Foucault (2003, p.25) describes as the “power of normalisation,” where the boundaries of normal and abnormal are established using degradation and mockery to demand conformity. As Nirta (2022, p.340) argues, similar to monsters, the dehumanisation of trans bodies is determined by an “irregular presence (...) its otherness in the organisation of the self.” Through updating folkloric strategies of monsterisation into the language of a contemporary meme format, Soyjak memes act as online agents of social control, translating long-held cultural anxieties surrounding gender into a transphobic meme format.

As the SCE model demonstrates, the affordances of media technologies have amplified folkloric activities and practices through the provision of sophisticated media-altering tools and the fostering of collaborative online communities. The Wojak originated in chan imageboards, which have a significant impact on internet culture through their “anonymous, ephemeral community design,” encouraging community members to contribute and experiment with new ideas and memes (Bernstein et al., 2011, pp. 55-56). These online interactions are also fueled by hypertextuality, which Wagener (2020, pp. 156-157) defines as “infinite networks of narratives, where forms, meaning, and perspectives differ,” creating intense competition for “attention, sharing, bonding, and narratives.” This facilitated and incentivised the Wojak’s continuous adaptation, making it easily customisable for various contexts and allowing manosphere-aligned communities to project their ideologies onto them without difficulty. These meme formats and communities comfortably subsume monstrous creature folklore, as they also depend on adaptability and participatory cultures to endure. As Musharbash and Presterudstuen (2020, p.12) found, monsters are “as adaptable as the humans with which they coexist.” In this way, the convergence of meme culture, digital media affordances, and folkloric tradition allows for the integration of monstrous creature

motifs into manosphere-aligned Wojaks, which carry distinct societal aspirations and behavioural critiques that proselytise misogynistic, regressive ideologies.

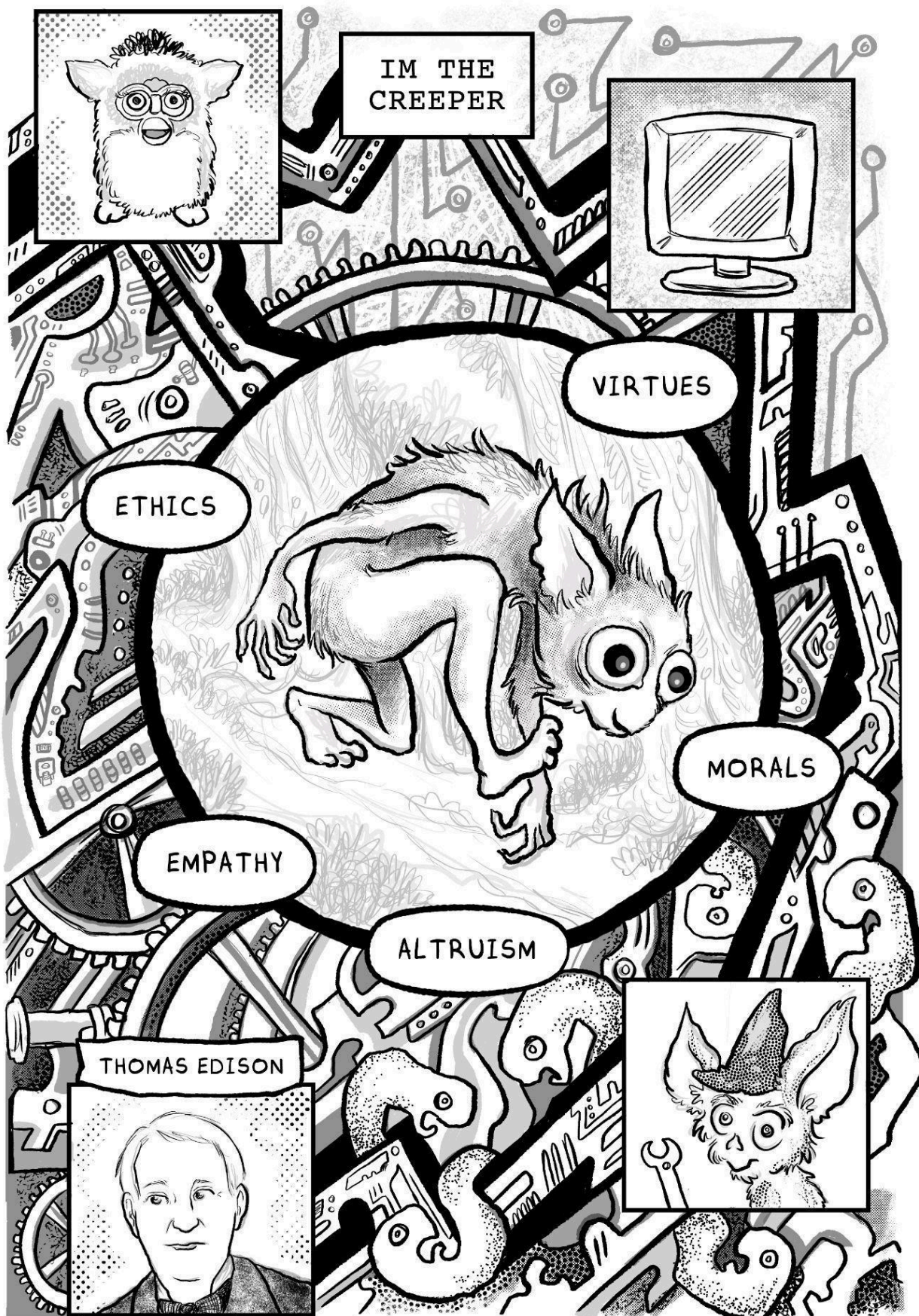


Figure 11: The Benign Creature

2.4. The Moral Instruction Function of the Benign Creature

The defining function of the benign creature is moral instruction, achieved by personifying altruistic and empathetic values through appealing and revered characters. Our treatment of them serves as a measurement of our morality. As previously noted, exploring morality through animal tales is a cross-cultural practice in folklore, observable in Aesop's animal fables, Brownies in Scottish folklore, and Anansi the Spider in West African folktales. Anansi transmitted "contemporary morals of social adaptability and mutual respect," acting as a positive role model due to his survival instincts and serving as an example of what constitutes poor behaviour (Meder and Illes, 2010, pp.28-33). Some benign creatures are not necessarily "good" characters; like the monster, they can exhibit mischievous traits, showing us how not to behave. However, the key distinction is that benign creatures are an affirming and encouraging force; they do not use fear and othering to motivate ethical conscience, and are deeply respected despite their flaws. They impart moral lessons not only through the virtues they reflect in appearance and behaviour, but also through how we treat them. Koopmans-de Bruijn (2007, p.42) interprets the "grateful animal" motif in folklore as an expression of good karma: "an illustration of the moral that goodness can save one from evil." Brownies, a tutelary spirit in Scottish folklore, are "friendly household helpers" who encourage gratitude and reciprocity by expecting household members to leave offerings as a thanks for their assistance (Campbell, 2021). Although the Brownie can turn mischievous, even malevolent, if offended, this transformation is framed as a result of our ingratitude and lack of ethical principles. In reminding us of the behaviours we should value and prioritise, benign creatures offer a powerful social critique of our failure to value moral responsibilities.

Referring back to the SCE model, folklore evolves alongside and is shaped by technological advances. In the case of the benign creature, modern developments in their characterisation and narratives have been directly influenced by our growing reliance on complex, automated

machinery. In 1878, Thomas Edison used the term “bug” to describe sudden difficulties in his inventions, writing, “bugs (...) show themselves and months of anxious watching, study and labor are requisite before commercial success—or failure—is certainly reached” (Wills, 2022). Using “themselves” gives these machine failures a sentient quality and implies that the machine acts on the principle of human rationality and thinking. Sixty years later, during World War II, this motif had evolved into a fully fledged folkloric legend in the form of “gremlins,” small, mischievous creatures that were said to be responsible for inexplicable faults in advanced aircraft machinery. They provided comfort for pilots who desired a scapegoat for the unpredictability of aircraft and “the myriad disasters that could befall a pilot, especially during wartime” (Meares, 2023). The gremlins, despite their destructive actions, did not inspire fear and were instead used in morale-boosting propaganda, such as a series of 1942 posters commissioned by the Office for Emergency Management, which show impish little men with pointy ears, brass-buttoned jackets, and stockings. Such was the strength of the connection pilots felt with the gremlins that they would even carry aboard handmade toys known as “lucky gremlins,” said to be virtuous and capable of combating their devilish counterparts (*RAF Museum*, 2021). Other wartime propaganda artworks, such as the 1944 Merrie Melodies cartoon *Russian Rhapsody* and Roald Dahl’s best-selling 1943 novel *Gremlins*, depict them joining the Allied war effort. By personifying sudden and unpredictable mechanical failures as mischievous yet endearing figures, gremlins offered airmen moral lessons in resilience and courage, and that the challenges of the job were part of a greater cause worth enduring.

In an article written for *JSTOR Daily* profiling the gremlin, I observed that inserting “critter lore” into tech has made it easier to coexist with “these ever-advancing, bewildering machines,” reminding us of our human fallibility and hubris. In early internet folklore, this is apparent in the terminology used to describe malware, such as “computer worms,” that infect computers and share the playful message: “I’m the Creeper; catch me if you can.” Personified computer bugs and viruses are spiritual descendants of gremlins, deployed to

cope with “the widening gulf between human autonomy and machine automata” (Walker, 2024). Imbuing machines with mischievous characters is a way of insisting that our humanity, and therefore, our morals, should not be diminished in the wake of increasing overreliance on technology. This theme is incorporated into the film *Gremlins* (1984), inspired by the World War II folktale. Like the Brownies, the gremlins’ behaviour depends on how they are treated. Initially harmless and adorable, they become violent if their human owners feed them after midnight, expose them to the sun, or get them wet. Once unleashed on a suburban American town, the gremlins subvert our dependence on technology by turning everyday electrical appliances and vehicles into instruments of chaos and destruction. In perhaps the most famous scene, the gremlins tamper with a woman’s stair lift, causing it to send her crashing through a window to her death. Albeit darkly comedic, the scene is tinged with a moral lesson; Miss Deagle is portrayed as vindictive and cruel in the first act of the film, and upon seeing the gremlins coming for her, she cries, “they’ve come for me! I’m not ready!” implying a fear of divine retribution for her actions. The gremlins punish us not just for how dependent we have become on machines but also for our moral failings through a lack of compassion and empathy for others. Rather than inherently monstrous, gremlins reflect a dual moral structure: they can be friendly and lovable, but destructive when treated poorly. This message is solidified at the end of the film, as the shopkeeper who sold the first gremlin returns to collect it, he expresses his disappointment with the lack of care shown by the creature’s owners: “You do with *mogwai* what your society has done with all of nature’s gifts. You do not understand. You are not ready,” (*Gremlins*, 1984). The framing of the benign creature as a gift deserving of the utmost respect expresses a sense of culpability; the onus is not on their behaviour, but our own.

By the dawn of the 21st century, benign creatures that thematically and practically intersected with technology had become widespread, notably as the surge in virtual pets such as the Furby, Tamagotchi, and Digimon in the late 90s (Quinn, 2024). This later expanded into software-based interactive companions, such as Nintendogs, the focus of a

study conducted by Tsai (2008, p.143). It found that caring for a virtual pet could “enhance children's humane attitude and development of empathy.” This is supported by Zhou, Lin and Mou (2024), who found that “virtual pet cuteness has a significant positive influence on individual internet helping behaviour.” This principle extends to the relationship with memes informed by traditions of benign creature folklore, such as the 2023 “To Be Loved Is To Be Changed” trend. It involved users posting before-and-after photos of stuffed animals, which had become worn down and withered from years of being well-loved, championing the message that love shapes who we become. TikTokers used the meme as a moral message to advocate for animal rescue, showcasing the upward progress of rescued and adopted pets (*Know Your Meme*, 2025k). Further evidence of this parasocial connection is evident in the framing of allegorical animals in online political critique, as Charteris-Black (2019, p.301) described as a form of “moral reasoning.” The #catsagainstbrexit and #CatsForBrexit hashtags saw pets enlisted to take a stance on the referendum. Animals serve as proxies in human-to-human interactions, establishing an “empathetic frame” through shared feelings of empathy towards them. To support the core argument of this thesis, that internet folklore can exert tangible sociocultural influence, the following case studies will analyse the meme characters of Capybara and Harambe the Gorilla. They will demonstrate that by adapting the traditional characteristics and functions of benign creature folklore, meme characters can make meaningful contributions to critical discourse on our moral and ethical values, instigating activist movements and fostering social cohesion.

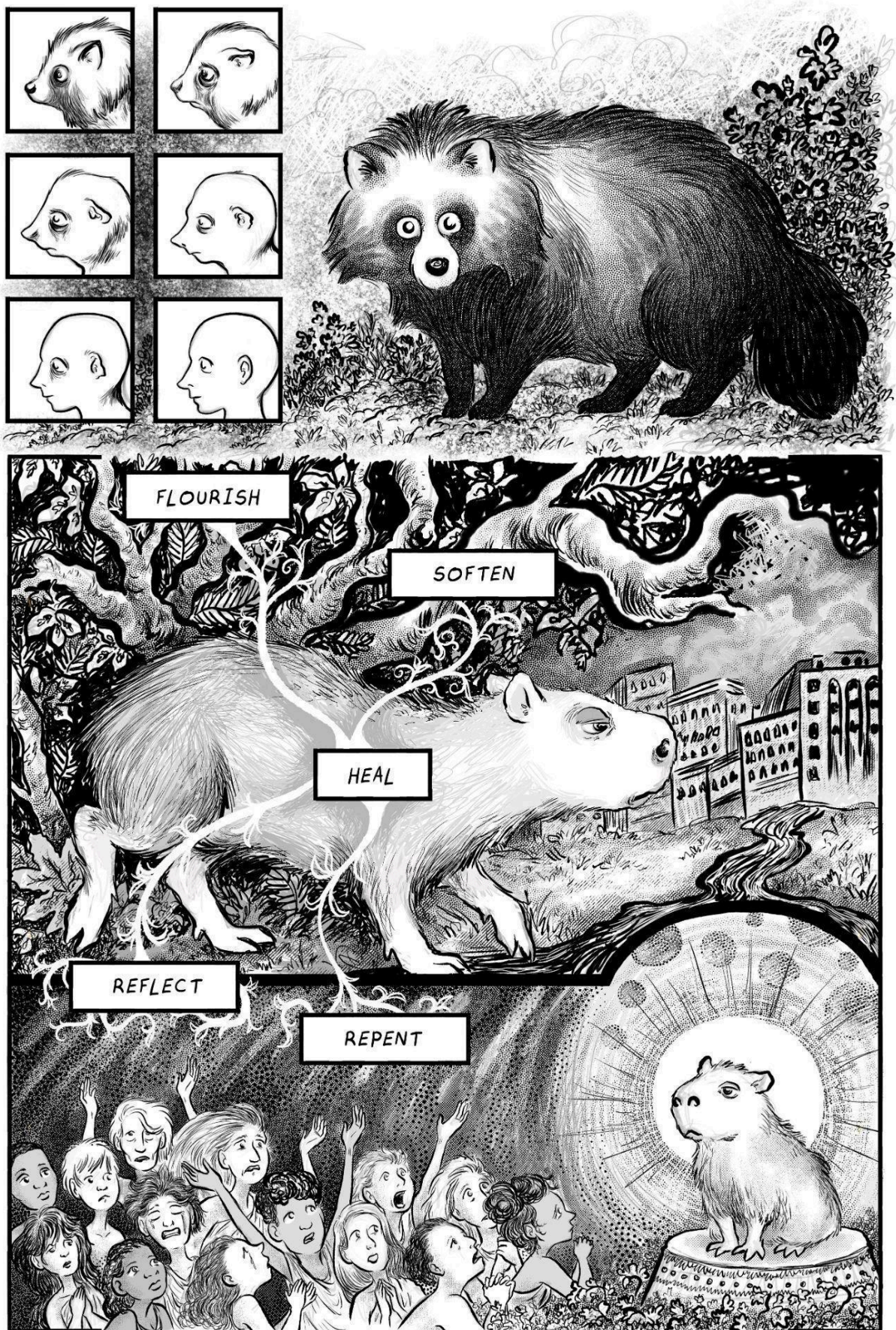


Figure 12: The Capybara Case Study

2.5. Case Study: The Capybara

Native to South America, the capybara is a semi-aquatic rodent, the largest of its kind, closely resembling its *Caviidae* relatives, the cavy and the domestic guinea pig. The capybara was circulated in niche memes beginning in 2013, before achieving “major virality” in meme culture in 2021 (*Know Your Meme*, 2025l). Central to the capybara’s virality is the focus on their playfulness, friendly behaviour towards other animal species, and adorably soft, round bodies (Ewe, 2021; Reed, 2023). In a series of memes curated by *Cheezburger.com*, the capybara is shown with captions highlighting themes of tranquillity, peace and reflectiveness, such as “unbothered. moisturized. happy. in my lane. focused. flourishing.” One popular offshoot of the meme is *OK I Pull Up*, depicting a capybara sitting comfortably in the passenger seat of a car. The meme quotes a lyric from Don Toliver’s song “After Party” (*Know Your Meme* 2025m). YouTuber *Lessons in Meme Culture* (2021) tracks the meme’s popularity and notes the ironic juxtaposition of the capybara’s “non-offensive bliss” with a song that portrays the cute, round animal as having a “sextrillionaire grindset.” It could be interpreted, given the capybara’s sociable nature, that *Ok I Pull Up* denotes a sense of dependable loyalty, in that the capybara will arrive without hesitation. The capybara incorporates the moral instruction function of the benign creature by portraying the animal as friendly and compassionate, behaviours we are encouraged to follow. Our treatment of the capybara is where the social critique comes in; since the capybara embodies goodness, our ability or inability to care for it reflects the quality of our moral responsibility towards others and the natural world.

The surge in popularity of the capybara meme in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, aligns with studies that found sharing humorous, relatable, and cute memes to be a stress reliever (Akram et al., 2021; Santos, 2021). As capybaras symbolised harmony, community and calmness, they became increasingly idolised during a time when human interaction was

severely limited. By subjecting the capybara to unconditional veneration, internet users were recentring their prosocial, empathetic instincts despite the overwhelming state they found themselves in. This shift is evident in the popular phrase “I believe in capybara supremacy,” which has appeared in various image macros showing a figure prostrating to a capybara (*r/capybara*, 2021). It was also adopted as the title of an indie video game released in 2023 on *Steam*. In it, the player, referred to as the “chosen one,” is tasked with caring for the capybara and attending to its needs through ritualistic food offerings, thereby preventing it from becoming angry and destroying the world. The game satirises the online trope of the capybara as a cute yet powerful entity whose amiable behaviour depends on how we treat them. This act of genuflecting and bestowing offerings upon the capybara is linked to a cross-cultural history of folklore and religious belief viewing animals as closely associated with deities and the ritual of worship (Eason, 2007, p. 1).

In return for our symbolic devotion, the capybara offers much-needed levity and emotional relief during a time of social or political trauma. For example, one meme shows a capybara making a statement outside 10 Downing Street, the residence of the UK Prime Minister, with the caption reading, “I’m sorry for the war crimes; I didn’t know they were illegal” (*r/capybara*, 2023). Using the capybara to play the role of a UK Prime Minister works as a relieving counterbalance to the slew of “national reckonings and public enquiries” from the government during the pandemic (Booth et al., 2024). Yet the capybara’s crimes are still readily accepted, with comments adamantly rejecting the notion of holding it accountable, stating, “still voting for him,” “Gort for dictator,” and “Vote gort for 2024.” The depiction of unconditional and fanatical reverence for capybaras means they are helpful as vessels for conveying values that merit absolute reverence, such as environmental consciousness. In August 2021, a news story went viral about capybaras invading a gated living community in Argentina, which had once been their wetland habitat. This made them a notable figure in Argentine meme culture as a bespoke political symbol of “anti-capitalism in Buenos Aires” (Mouriquand, 2023) and a “vanguard of class struggle” (Goñi, 2021). One meme shows the

capibara reading Karl Marx whilst drinking *Mate*, the national drink of Argentina (*Montevideo Portal*, 2021). UNICEF leveraged the capibara's power as a symbol of ecological balance through the #VidaDeCarpinchos campaign, capitalising on the capibara's online popularity and growing association with socio-environmental causes by making it the face of the movement (Kosloff, 2024). A series of campaign videos shows an anthropomorphised family of three capibaras explaining that they are not invaders but victims of environmental destruction, forced to migrate from their burned wetlands (UNICEF Argentina, 2021). In appearance, capibaras are essentially human-like creatures with animal heads, bearing a strong visual resemblance to the animal-headed gods of Ancient Egypt. Whether intentional or not, this amplifies the capibara's quasi-divine status. Here, the capibara serves as a moral instruction, reminding us to uphold our capacity for empathy during social isolation and take responsibility for socio-environmental reform. In worshipping the capibara, we also venerate the values it has come to represent.

Another way the capibara incorporates traits of the benign creature is through humour; there is something intrinsically comical about an unassuming, peaceful animal disregarding human concepts of class and wealth by upsetting an affluent gated community. This scene, absurd yet poignant, adds to the capibara's appeal, and by extension, the appeal of the moral cause they represent. It also situates the capibara within a broader folkloric tradition of benign creatures using humour to impart moral lessons, notably through the "trickster" folkloric archetype. Kononenko and Kukharenko (2008, p.9) note that the trickster deals with "the body and its functions, the physical world and its rules," by comically deceiving others, which exposes human weaknesses and thereby critiques our nature. In Japanese folklore, the *kitsune* (foxes) and the *tanuki* (raccoon dogs) are tricksters capable of shapeshifting and bewitching humans; yet, beyond mischief, they teach us the value of gratitude and reciprocating kindness. In one such tale, the moral message is, "if foxes are capable of genuine demonstrations of gratitude, then surely human beings can do the same" (Bathgate, 2004, p.42). The *tanuki* also shapeshifts to play tricks on hunters and fishermen (Vrataner

2011, p.159). Like capybaras, raccoon dogs in the natural world are known for their sociability. They are observed to live in close-knit groups and display monogamous mating behaviour, akin to familial human bonds (Sugiura et al., 2020; Carr, 2004). In *tanuki* folktales, they are shown protecting their families against humans using magical powers, and it was feared during the Edo period that they would seek revenge due to the “hunting of tanuki for their furs and meats” (Taniyama, 2023, p.1065). This theme of the tanuki enacting revenge on humans for harming them and their habitat is explored in Isao Takahata’s animated film *Pom Poko* (1994), where they use eco-terrorism to subdue the expansion of housing developments in their forest. The capybara has become a spiritual successor to the kitsune and the tanuki as an eco-conscious trickster in Argentinian meme culture (Dunn, 2021). These portrayals echo the trickster’s role in using humour to deliver moral lessons regarding care for the environment and local wildlife. In doing so, they provide social critique of urbanisation, prompting us to rethink cities as “multi-species communities” (Nugent, 2022). By using humour to challenge our perspective as the supposed dominant species, the capybara, like its folkloric predecessors, forces us to consider our ethical obligations toward the environment and its inhabitants.

Besides the capybara, other internet memes have emerged as valuable tools for adapting the themes of benign creature folklore to critique humanity’s treatment of the animal kingdom and advocate for environmental consciousness, such as the “nature is healing” trend. This meme gained popularity during the pandemic following erroneous reports of animals invading cities as humans retreated into their homes (Yolder, 2020). The trend, however, was criticised by environmentalists, who argued that the simplicity of the meme rejected the complexities of humanity’s relationship with nature and scapegoated high-density populations, usually the poorest and most vulnerable people, as the culprits of ecological damage (Mercado, 2021). However, Bosworth (2022, p.21) argues that employing humour in memes can be a positive force, reshaping our interpretation of the environment, climate, science, and other political-ecological themes, especially among young people. This

potential is illustrated in the *Orca Wars* meme, which celebrates the efforts of orcas to “attack” yachts (*Know Your Meme*, 2025n). In meme culture, orcas are revered as benevolent beings whose perceived aggression serves as a moral indictment of human exploitation of the environment. One viral tweet amassing over 270k likes features close-up shots of an orca’s eye, with the caption: “i feel that as a human i was never meant to see this and god will punish me for my intrusion” (@myfriendcallie, 2025). This evokes a theme in religious folklore that holy objects, such as the ark of the covenant, cannot be viewed directly under punishment from God (1 Samuel 6:19). A reply to the post, “maybe we went wrong killing the whales,” is accompanied by a screenshot of another tweet reading, “cetacean worship could go a lot further” (@SkippyJones18). Deifying the orca through online practices of participatory, multimodal dialogue and meme-sharing does more than entertain; it plays a role in “enhancing communication and proselytism,” coordinating and articulating contemporary social movements and campaigns (San Cornelio, Martorell and Ardévol, 2024, p.377). The act of deifying an animal, informed by traditions of benign creature folklore, will be explored in greater depth in the following case study on the satirical cult of worship surrounding Harambe the Gorilla. This case study into the capybara meme further supports the argument that internet folklore can exert tangible sociocultural influence by generating public discourse around moral and ethical values. By offering a space to challenge anthropocentrism and reimagine the human–animal ecological relationship, the capybara played a vital role in mobilising socio-environmentalist narratives and movements.

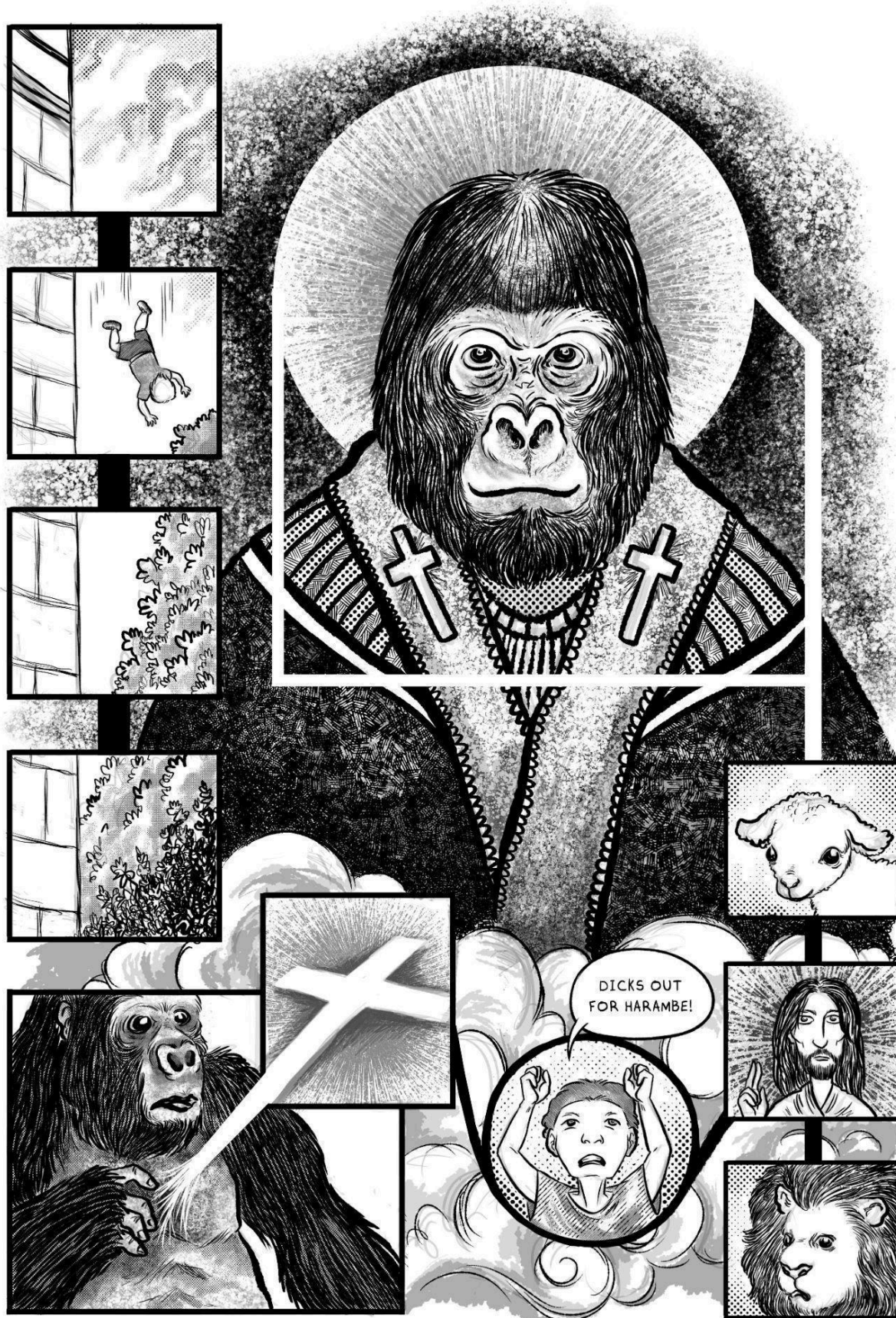


Figure 13: Harambe the Gorilla Case Study

2.6. Case Study: Harambe the Gorilla

Harambe, a 17-year-old male gorilla, was transferred to the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden in 2014 as part of a breeding program for the critically endangered western lowland gorilla (Olson, 2016). In May 2016, a three-year-old boy fell into Harambe's enclosure, prompting zoo officials to shoot and kill the gorilla out of concern for the boy's safety. This incident sparked online backlash, with users blaming the boy's parents and the zoo. A *Change.org* petition "Justice for Harambe," called for the prosecution of the child's mother, amassed over 500,000 signatures (Hurt, 2016), while the Cincinnati Zoo received a deluge of criticism, ultimately leading to the deletion of its Twitter account (*BBC Trending*, 2016). Candlelight vigils were held, and the internet was awash with memes, trending hashtags and the slogan "dicks out for Harambe" expressing solidarity with the gorilla (Hanson, 2019). Harambe's symbolic status has since proven difficult to pin down: he has been invoked both as a serious emblem of moral outrage over animal cruelty and as an ironic icon of absurdist meme culture. Nevertheless, a recurring theme across his representations is the construction of Harambe as a quasi-religious, moral figure. This case study argues that this key feature corresponds with benign creature folklore and has contributed to Harambe's enduring symbolic flexibility, allowing the meme's use as a social critique to vary according to progressing cultural contexts.

In the immediate aftermath of Harambe's death, online reactions expressed genuine sorrow and condemnation. Early memes communicated both "sadness at the gorilla's demise and critique of the situation that led to it" (Storlie, 2021, p. 4). As a victim of human carelessness, Harambe exemplifies the benign creature, a being whose poor treatment stands as an indictment of our moral failings. This widespread outrage was in many ways a repeat of the online response a year earlier to the death of Cecil the Lion at the hands of a big-game hunter. In analysing online responses to Cecil's death, Pitchford (2020, p.162) cites Jasper

and Paulson (1995) who argue that cruelty towards animals creates “moral shock” that leads to people becoming “inclined toward political action.” Both Cecil and Harambe’s deaths became vehicles for expressing broader critiques and concerns about the ethical treatment of animals; however, this role did not remain static. Over time, Harambe’s image was co-opted and exaggerated, drifting into the realm of hyperbole and becoming “an all-purpose element of Internet absurdity” (Storlie, 2021, p. 3). This was achieved through embellishing Harambe’s story with religious iconography and metaphor, such as depicting him nailed to a cross with the caption, “he died for our memes” (Carroll, 2016). Subjected to a “canonisation” Harambe was upheld as a martyr of Messianic proportions (*BBC Trending*, 2017). This is epitomised in the cospypasta “Our Lord Harambe’s Prayer,” which rewrites the Lord’s Prayer as: “give us this day our daily banana, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive little kids that trespass our enclosures” (*r/cospypasta*, 2016). Such absurdity added a different layer of critique to the meme; as Ohlheiser (2016) wrote in *The Washington Post*, the meme’s persistence in online culture was due to its “criticism of the online cultural environment that creates a phenomenon like the outrage at Harambe’s death.” Thus, while Harambe, as a benign creature, initially conveyed the moral values of animal rights, his increasingly absurdist usage in meme culture eclipsed this, becoming instead a vessel through which to critique the farcicality and performative nature of online moralistic outrage.

Nevertheless, within the excessive religiosity of the Harambe meme lies an undercurrent of sincerity. The act of collectively participating in the joke worship of a gorilla created a genuine sense of social cohesion. This can be interpreted through a study by Brown et al. (2022, p. 3), which found that synchronous movements and activities in church foster social bonding and are related to the degree to which participants adhere to the moral values of their congregation. In this light, the digital veneration of Harambe, while fundamentally a hyperbolic joke, acquired symbolic weight through participatory, ritualistic repetition. As a result, Harambe would attain a level of unironic cultural sanctity in meme culture. Early signs of this transition can be traced back to February 2017, when a Cheeto resembling Harambe

climbing a tree was sold on eBay for \$99,900 in a single day (Juang, 2017). This is consistent with Hooper's (2014, p.194) concept of an *Image relic*, an object that "substitutes for the body of the special personage." Though not physically touched by the personage, such relics are seen as vehicles of their essence and power. Hooper (p. 199) cites how the Māori use artistic creations to "transfer the essence" of the beloved figure into the object, which is then carried forward to influence human affairs. Within this framework, the Harambe Cheeto functions not merely as a novelty but as a relic imbued with symbolic power. It is also a semantic callback to creatures treated as divine in folkloric traditions. Krappe (1942, p. 232) observes folk tales that regard "the guiding animal as a divinity, the incarnation of a god or goddess in animal form." The "guiding animal" refers to a classical tradition in mythology where animals guide heroes to their destiny, such as a cow indicating the site on which Troy should be built. In the case of the Harambe meme, persistent use of religious imagery and metaphor had transformed the gorilla into a similar figure: guiding animal that imparts moral lessons through the projection of divine judgment, transcending the original absurdity of his meme status.

This newfound role for Harambe is most prominently exhibited in the exploitable image *Meme Heaven*. In it, Harambe dons angel wings and is tasked with guiding deceased celebrities and internet icons into heaven. The caption "join us" hovers above him, positioning Harambe as the internet's moral gatekeeper, determining who is worthy enough to join him in eternal remembrance (*Know Your Meme*, 2025o). In most *Meme Heaven* variants, Harambe is fixed at the apex of the image, forming a visual structure that parallels the compositional techniques of Renaissance religious art. Zorach (2010, p.67) describes how the structure of triads and triangles in religious art connects "beings from the lowly snail through the human to the divine," constructing a spiritual hierarchy. *Meme Heaven* emulates this structure by placing Harambe at the top of a visual triangle formed by the staircase, which leads the viewer's gaze upward, from the earthly to the divine. He constitutes the structural focal point of the image, much as Christ does in various artistic interpretations of

the Ascension (Shore, 2021). Here, Harambe is fashioned as the approved moral arbiter of the internet, evolving into a figure that represents divine judgement, endowed with the power to bestow eternal recognition upon those deemed by the collective consensus in meme to be deserving of a permanent spot in the pantheon of all-time beloved icons. *Meme Heaven's* casting of Harambe in this role underscores the iconographic flexibility inherent in benign creature folklore, which is central to its enduring longevity. A creature that centralises moral instruction and invites reverence can be readily adapted to contribute to the changing zeitgeist; Harambe went from critiquing online moral hysteria to elevating beloved deceased celebrities as aspirational symbols of virtue.

Harambe not only welcomes departed celebrities to Meme Heaven but also other animals whose online fame has elevated them to cultural relevance. In some versions, Cecil the Lion is visible in the sky behind Harambe, suggesting a spiritual hierarchy in which Cecil holds a superior position. This is likely due to Cecil's online martyrdom predating Harambe's, but is also influenced by the lion's symbolic resonance as a figure of divinity and authority, which spans across Eastern and Western traditions (Williams and Kinoshita, 2015, p. 36).

Returning to Pitchford (2020, p.162), intrinsic to the outrage regarding Cecil's death was the "projection of cultural values about anthropomorphic lions." This is a core element of benign creature folklore; treating them poorly is a symbolic affront to the values they represent.

Moreover, in a Biblical context, Jesus is referred to as the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5) and the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) to convey both his authoritative strength and status as a sacrificial offering for our sins. Presented in a theological light through the composition of Meme Heaven, Cecil's status as a central figure alongside Harambe may be interpreted as a form of cultural penance for their unjust deaths, paralleling the veneration of Christ for his crucifixion. In another variant, beloved viral pets Thurston Waffles, Grumpy Cat and Gabe the Dog are placed close to Harambe (*r/dankmemes*, 2022). This further resonates with the structural logic of religious art. In Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement*, for example, St. John the Baptist and St. Peter flank Christ in a configuration that Greenstein

(1989, p.35) interprets as a “figural fulfilment” of Elijah and Moses at the Transfiguration. This “symmetrical triad” positions significant figures beside a central divine presence, a structure mirrored in this Meme Heaven variant with Harambe flanked by fellow beloved animals. Such symbolic arrangement elevates these internet animals to the status of digital saints. Sainthood is marked by “moral perfection” and “real or alleged deeds and qualities that became apparent during their lifetimes and continue to exert influence after their deaths” (Mensching, 2025). The animals of Meme Heaven fit this description, having united global audiences through shared laughter and emotional connection and continuing to exert influence through repeated appearances in viral videos and meme templates.

Online users have since recontextualised Harambe’s role as the internet’s Messiah, who “died for our memes” , as a conduit for coping with traumatic world events (Storlie, 2021, p.6). Within the past four years, Harambe has reappeared in the zeitgeist of post-COVID meme culture, where his death is considered to have marked the beginning of a split timeline or butterfly effect that ultimately led to the pandemic. A popular Reddit meme from 2020, for instance, shows a scientist exiting a time machine proclaiming, “I went back in time and saved Harambe! Now lets (sic) go back and prevent the pandemic.” A fellow scientist replies, “What pandemic?” Comments on the post cite Harambe’s death as “the exact point that things started to go wrong” and use the term “post-Harambe” to describe the world we live in today (*r/memes*, 2020). This imagining of Harambe entrenches the meme further into religious symbolism by viewing his death as analogous to original sin, wherein a single, immoral act can spell suffering to their descendants. It is also characteristic of benign creature folklore, in which the poor treatment of a creature leads to chaos and destruction due to our moral shortcomings. As Aftandillian (2007, p.xvi) contends, viewing animals as not just objects of God’s care but also “active participants in communion with the sacred” alters the way we treat them in “both sacred contexts and our daily lives.” Extending this logic to Harambe, his sacredness lies in how he embodies the internet’s highest virtues: not chaos or division, but collective joy and emotional connection through participating in a joke

shared by millions. Although the genuine outrage at Harambe's death was eclipsed by hyperbolic religious satire, within this lay an earnest connection and a nostalgia for the sense of unity it once fostered. This is especially significant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which internet memes served as vital tools for psychological connection in a time of physical separation. Research conducted by Myrick et al. (2022, p. 322) concurs that far from being simply frivolous jokes, memes were helpful during the pandemic in "connecting us psychologically while remaining physically apart." The revival of the Harambe meme during the pandemic served to explain the inexplicable events and restore the social cohesion and collective joy it once cultivated, not dissimilar to the revival of Spiritualism following the First World War, which "gave the war meaning and had the potential to redeem the bloodshed" (Falcon, 2019). The Harambe meme reveals how benign creature folklore can advance altruistic community behaviour and social cohesion in times of great distress, which has a redemptive quality by providing moral instruction.

2.7. Concluding Statements

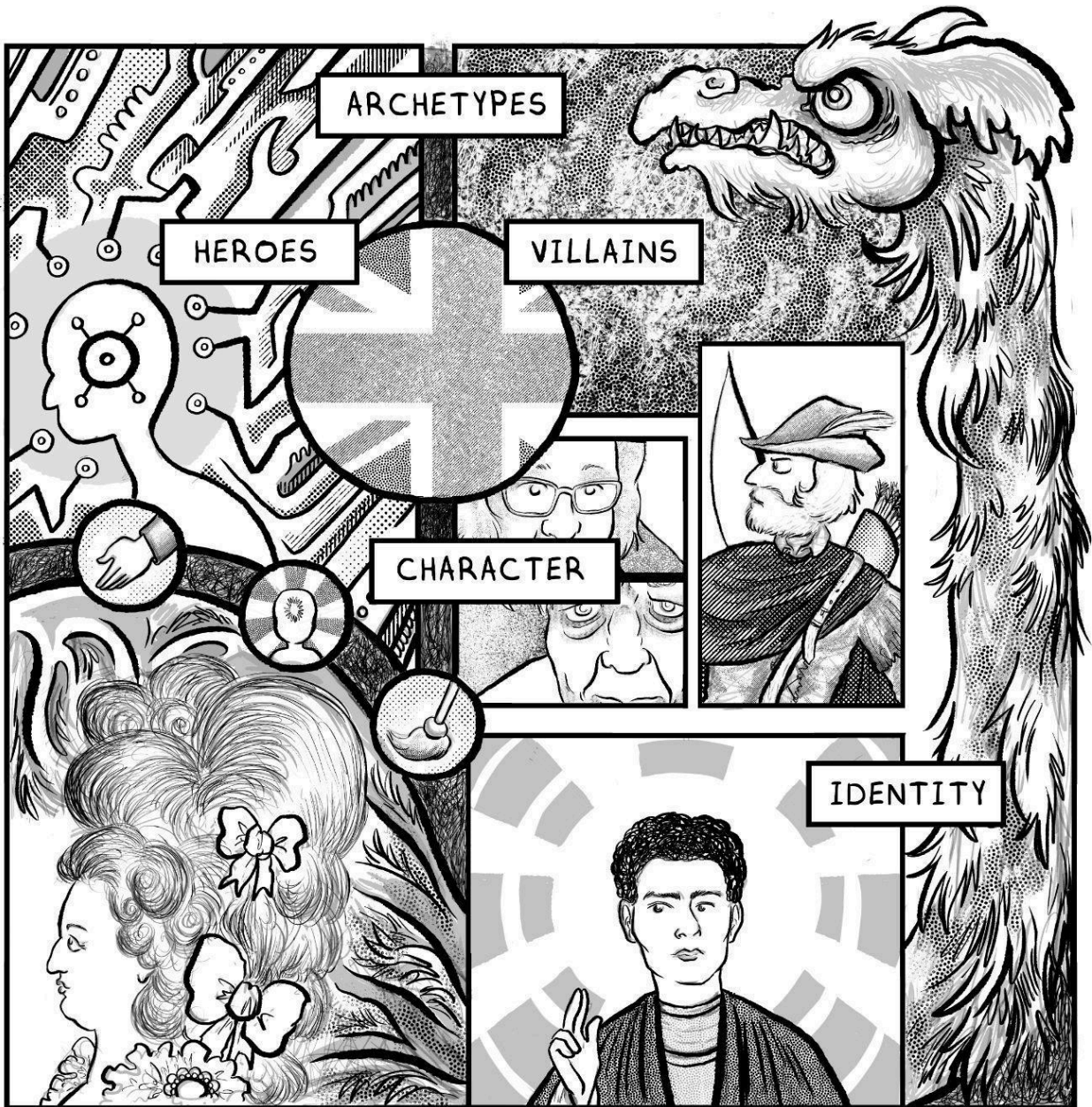
Using the character to critique technoscientific hubris, Professor Stephen Asma has described our generation as akin to "Dr Frankenstein standing over a table of miscellaneous limbs and organs, only we're on the table, too" (King, 2023). This captures the paradox of our relationship with technological advancements: we believe we are in control of them, yet they reshape us in return by absorbing and reconfiguring folk creature traditions, which influences how we express and interpret social critique. Like Frankenstein's monster, meme characters are composites; an amalgamation of cultural symbols pulling from a breadth of folkloric traditions that extol or confront human virtues and flaws. This layering of meaning enables online communities to navigate complex moral questions and shared anxieties through newly participative and interactive media platforms, engendering a modern form of folkloric storytelling. There are overlaps between monstrous and benign folk creatures, but

their distinctions in function, tone and cultural impact are important. Both rely heavily on humour as a key communicative device, yet the intent behind the humour diverges significantly. In representations of monstrous figures, humour aids in mocking or vanquishing them and the behaviours they represent, diminishing their threat. Conversely, benign creatures use humour not to undermine, but to convey and champion their behavioural virtues. Understanding these distinctions is key to appreciating how online communities preserve, reinterpret, and transmit the tonal nuances and ideological functions embedded in folkloric traditions.

As the SCE model suggests, the internet has extended the reach of folk narratives beyond geographical restrictions while expanding opportunities to subvert and rework cultural artefacts through instant image editing and sharing. The analysis of folk creature traditions as they manifest in meme culture demonstrates how folklore's capacity for sociocultural influence has been amplified through these online formats. Folklorists have previously characterised memes as leveraging tradition and, by extension, core ideological values (Wagener, 2024, p.113; Shifman, 2019, p.52). By the same token, anthropomorphic creatures and animal symbolism are used as rhetorical devices for characterising human identity and behaviours (Löfgren, 1985; Baker, 2001). It is therefore unsurprising that the traditions of folk creatures have adapted and shaped the dynamics of meme culture, serving as a vehicle for social critique. Blanchard (2022) defines social criticism as a focus on "the social issues of modern society, especially with regard to perceived injustices and power relations in general." All four meme characters explored in this chapter prompt us to contemplate social issues by warning of existential threats (monstrous creatures) and offering moral instruction (benign creatures). Blanchard further states that social criticism can propose solutions through "specific steps, radical change, or even revolutionary change." Indeed, these characters have each had an impact through their association with prominent social movements across the political spectrum: racial justice and awareness through the Karen, manosphere-aligned pushback against gender equality through the

Wojak, and environmentalist/animal rights activism through the capybara and, to a lesser extent, Harambe the gorilla. This supports the central argument of this thesis: that contemporary online communities and platforms grounded in folkloric tradition and practice carry significant sociocultural implications.

This chapter has also demonstrated that meme analysis, as a field of research, benefits from utilising folkloric tradition and archetypes as a critical framework for analysis. By viewing meme characters through the lens of folk creatures, such as the trickster, the bogeyman, or the grateful animal, we can uncover the deeper sociocultural functions memes perform, namely the articulation of social cohesion and unity, reinforcement of ideological norms, and interpretation of the past. This is supported by Artamonov (2021, p.213), who notes that the use of caricatures and memes in online media has the effect of setting “evaluative frameworks of historical and political events,” thereby having a deciding impact on collective historical understanding. Among the four case studies, Harambe the Gorilla stands out due to his unique position as a real-life being, as opposed to the more abstracted or fictionalised figures represented by other memes. His memetic legacy reveals how folkloric tropes can be mapped onto real beings, not just symbolic characters. This insight sets the stage for Chapter 3, which will examine how the public image of real human individuals can be transformed into meme characters through the imposition of traditional folkloric archetypes by digital communities.



CHAPTER 3
THE FOLKLORIC HUMAN OBJECT

Figure 14: Chapter 3 Header

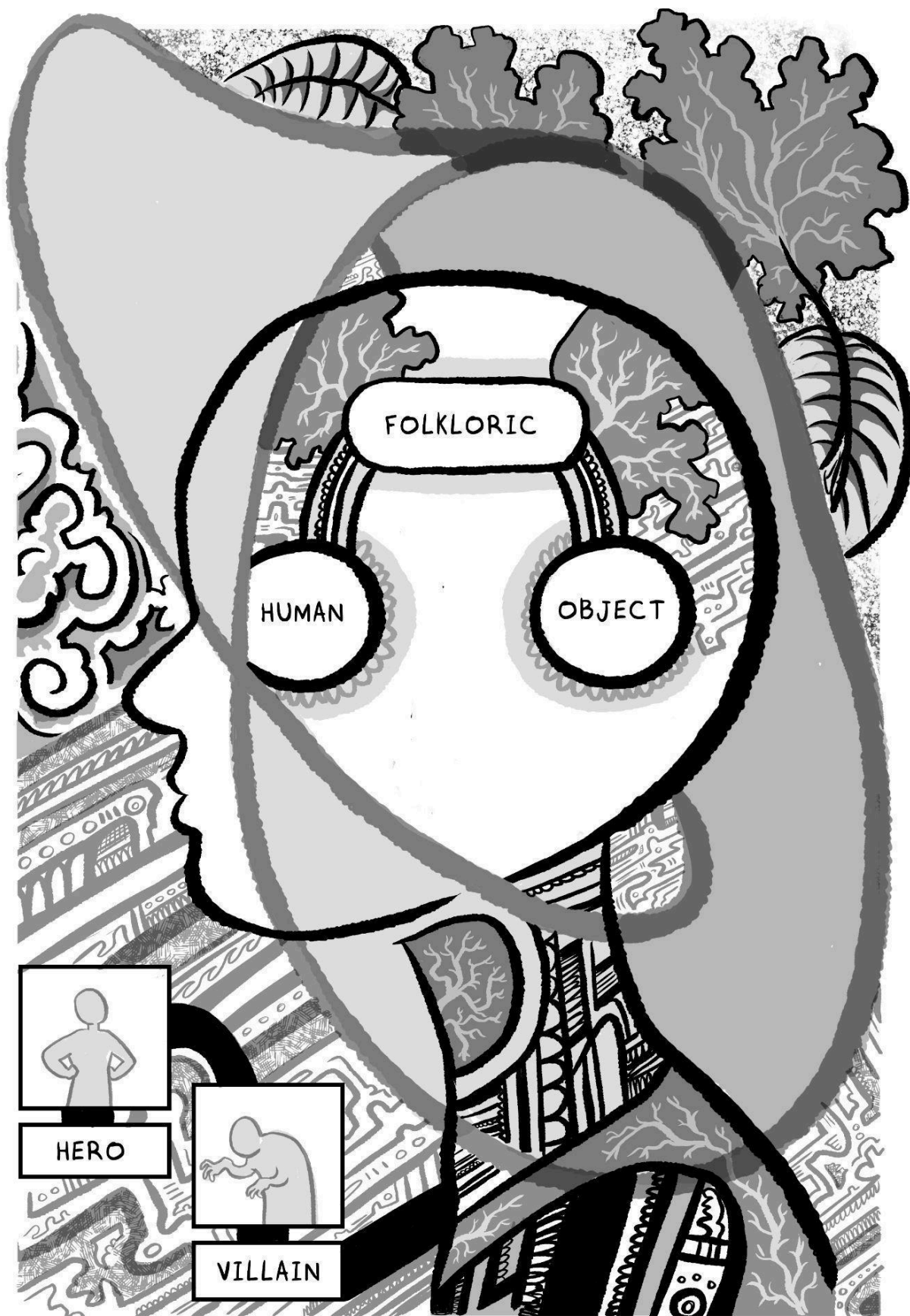


Figure 15: The Folkloric Human Object

Chapter 3: The Folkloric Human Object

3.0. How Humans Become Folkloric Human Objects

In *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*, Foster (2015, p.26) likens the relationship between folklore and the “folkloresque” to a Möbius strip, in which both exist as two sides of the same surface, “never intersecting as they are always already intersecting.” This was evidenced in the previous chapter, which demonstrated how internet meme characters take on a “folkloresque” quality by drawing from traditional folk creature motifs to express social critique. Building on this, I propose that real-life individuals become folkloresque when contemporary online communities attribute simplistic folk character archetypes, namely the “hero” and “villain,” to their public image.³ The process of projecting folkloresque archetypes onto living individuals creates what I have termed *folkloric human objects*. This chapter argues that the affordances of digital media platforms have significantly enhanced the creation and sociocultural impact of folkloric human objects. While *subject* might seem a more conventional description, *object* is more suitable in this case, as an object’s meaning is “assigned to it and may or may not have anything to do with the physical characteristics of the material object”; therefore, “not only is the meaning socially assigned, there is a consensus in the group about this meaning” (Taborsky, 1990, p. 53). When a community reaches a consensus that an individual is a hero or villain, that person becomes objectified, as it forces them into a simplistic binary framework that ignores the complexity and nuance of their humanity. This concept can be further understood through Walter Benjamin’s conception of the *aura*, a term used to describe how mechanical reproduction separates an artwork from its unique “presence in time and space” (Conty, 2013, p. 473). In the same vein, when a simplistic archetype is attributed to a person’s public image and it is reproduced excessively across mass media platforms, this public image becomes virtually

³ It is important to note that the focus is not on their personal identity or self-image but on how they are publicly perceived by others and what this culturally signifies.

detached from its authentic, embodied self. What remains is a mythologised version of the individual, a folkloric human object which serves a broader cultural function.

Similar to the folk creature, the function of the folkloric human object is to mediate the norms and values embedded in society. Whether they affirm or challenge these norms and values depends on how the individual adheres to the archetype originally assigned to them. As Dundes (1969, p.476) argues, while folklore reflects and reinforces “the value configurations of the folk,” it also provides “a sanctioned form of escape from these very same values.” He describes, as an example, a narrative where a hero disobeys an order and is punished. Applying this to folkloric human objects, when an individual labelled as a hero or villain falls short of the archetype due to their human fallibility or external factors that devalue their relevancy, this in turn forces a reexamination and subversion of the norms and values they espouse. McEvoy and Erickson (1981, p.114), referring to heroes and villains as “reference idols,” further theorise that,

[t]he "spirit of the times" may be reflected by the cultural heroes and villains that are invoked by actors who wish to uphold or change existing patterns in society. Indeed, the reference idol may help us individually and collectively to clarify values and give direction to our actions and interactions, as well as help us to promote social change and social integration.

Because archetypes are defined by a clear set of predetermined characteristics that influence “our actions, decisions, and judgements” (Sas, 2023, p.46), and are valuable tools for “any issue involving culture or human understanding,” (Snowden, 2002, p.211) folkloric human objects act as a clear lens through which societies can evaluate the cultural norms and values that underpin them. Since social change is closely tied to shifts in norms and values, (González, 2024) the folkloric human object case studies in this chapter were chosen as they emerged during periods of significant social upheaval, namely the COVID-19

pandemic (The Handforth Parish Council Zoom and Captain Tom) and the post-pandemic strain on the US healthcare system (Luigi Mangione). As Reich (1971, p.234) theorised, “in periods of rapid social change, folklore operates instrumentally to help members of the society adapt to the changing circumstances.” These case studies will demonstrate how folkloric human objects shape and adapt to social change by affirming and challenging norms and values.

This chapter also builds upon the SCE model's findings by demonstrating that folkloric human objects are deeply influenced by the media technology affordances that instrumentalise them. To provide a pre-internet example, the growing pamphlet industry during the 18th century reproduced images of Marie Antoinette which placed her among an assemblage of “monsters, hybrid creatures, and a whole procession of deformed beings” (Saint-Armand 1994, p.393), painting a picture of an “arrogant queen who danced while the people starved” (Barker 1993, p.713). The widespread propagation of Antoinette's image as a villainous archetype transformed her into a folkloric human symbol that served to condemn decadence, greed, and privilege. Likewise, in the 19th century, Davy Crockett became a folkloric human object through exaggerated stories of his heroic exploits reproduced in newspaper articles, almanacs, stage plays, and word-of-mouth fables (Falzone, 2012). Drawing again from Landsberg's (2003, p.149) theory of prosthetic memory, I regard folkloric human objects as analogous to this phenomenon. Prosthetic memory refers to memories not directly experienced by individuals but mediated through “mass cultural reproductions,” which are commodified through widely accessible images and narratives. Like prosthetic memories, engaging with folkloric human objects does not involve direct experience with the individual in question; instead, it consists of viewing them through mass-mediated representations. Prosthetic memories also hold “political potential” (2003, p.158), a factor present in how mass-mediated pamphlet representations of Marie Antoinette sowed a public hatred that became a “motivating factor in the radicalization of the Revolution” (Barker, 1993, p.718). Landsberg (2003, p.157) further asserts that the internet's visually and aurally

complex mode of address and interactivity makes it an ideal space for generating prosthetic memory to have a political impact. This aligns with my argument regarding folkloric human objects: the internet's capacity for instant networking and multi-platform dissemination has not only enhanced the speed at which folkloric human objects can be created but also allowed a broader scale of people to interact with them, broadening their sociocultural impact. To provide a brief example of a folkloric human object that benefited from digital reproduction, there is the effortlessly quotable viral video "Democracy Manifest," which shows a man being arrested by Queensland police outside a Chinese restaurant. Despite being filmed in 1991, the video was not uploaded to the internet until 2009, when it was widely shared, turning the man, later identified as Jack Karlson, into a "cult hero" (Rahman, 2024). The increased velocity of digital reproduction allowed Karlson to be permanently enshrined in popular culture as a hero.

The internet's means of disseminating folkloric human objects across various platforms is reminiscent of what Hayles (1999, p.290) describes in *How We Became Posthuman* as the "distributed cognition of the emergent human subject (...) in which 'thinking' is done by both human and non-human actors." In this context, folkloric human objects are co-authored by human thinking and technological affordances: humans draw from traditional folk archetypes to mythologise an individual, whilst technological systems distribute and amplify them through continuous reproduction. Folkloric human objects, particularly in their online context, should thus be considered posthuman. As Haraway (2016, p.11) writes in *The Cyborg Manifesto*, 20th-century technologies "have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed." This ambiguity means that a folkloric human object, collectively designed by users in contemporary online communities using the value system of hero and villain archetypes, is indistinguishable from the authentic individual they were based on. Although Barnes (2024) observed that "Democracy Manifest" resonated empathetically with many, particularly in the more recent context of "excessively repressive" government measures during the pandemic,

it still resulted in Jack Karlson's authentic self being swallowed up by the context of a short viral video. Folkloric human objects as posthuman entities raise considerable questions about digital ethics, as distributed cognition can lead to a loss of agency. By following posthumanist theory, Käll (2017a, p. 1157) argues that, within the context of human rights, it is possible to consider the "hybridity" and "dematerialization" of a human being in relation to digital data. The following case studies will thus not only examine how the internet has accelerated the creation, dissemination and instrumentalisation of folkloric human objects, but also touch upon the ethical implications of this as a posthuman phenomenon.



Figure 16: The Handforth Parish Council Zoom Case Study

3.1. Case Study: The Handforth Parish Council Zoom

The Handforth Parish Council Zoom call was first recorded on Thursday, 10th December 2020 at 7:00 pm but was shared on social media on February 4th 2021 and subsequently satirised by numerous memes (*Know Your Meme*, 2025p). In the video, members engage in a heated discussion, prompting Jackie Weaver, the moderator, to remove the chairman, Brian Tolver, directly after he stated, “you have no authority here, Jackie Weaver. No authority at all.” This results in an outburst by fellow councillors, with one aggressively demanding that Weaver, “Read the standing orders. Read them and understand them!” Other elements in the video, such as councillors taking phone calls during the meeting, the sound of a toilet flushing, and Weaver asking people to refer to her as Britney Spears, made it a viable product for unintentional humour, and it quickly went viral (Carr, 2021). The attention brought to the video catapulted Weaver into fame, who was commended as a hero for her “diplomatic and calm approach,” requested for numerous media interviews, invited to open the Brit Awards, and had online shops plastering her image and notable quotes from the video on an array of merchandise (Waite-Taylor, 2021; Milne, 2024). On this basis, I consider the hype around the Handforth Parish Council as akin to physical folkloric events such as festivals, rituals and celebrations, which create “opportunities for community bonding, fostering social cohesion and a sense of unity” (Kumar, 2023, p.54). From this perspective, this case study argues that the Handforth Parish Council members as folkloric human objects affirmed values of civility and decorum concerning video conferencing, thereby uniting the British public in a time of remote isolation.

Klapp (1949, pp. 20-21) identifies distinct types of heroes that occur across mythologies in various cultures, three of which closely align with how Jackie Weaver was portrayed. The first is “*The Uncompromising Hero or Cinderella*,” characterised as a “poor, unfortunate or unknown” person who experiences an unexpected and satisfying triumph against persecutors through “modest toil.” Weaver embodied this archetype as a previously

unknown council chair who exhibited a composed demeanour and steadfast perseverance; as the *Manchester Evening News* reported, she “handled the situation with straight-faced calmness and self-deprecation, refusing to raise her voice or lose her temper” (Abbit, 2021). The second type is the “*Clever Hero*,” a hero who triumphs through brains over brawn. Just as Robin Hood outwitted the Sheriff of Nottingham, Weaver stood firm against aggressive councillors with clever retorts. The third type is “*The Defender or Deliverer*,” described by Klapp as an “avenger for wrongs suffered” and a “dragon-slayer.” This was manifested in Weaver’s symbolic vanquishing of Brian Tolver, a disruptive parish councillor, through simply ejecting him from the meeting.

The Handforth Parish Council incident was framed through familiar folk motifs to the point of elaborate theatricality, with media reports using terms such as “leading protagonists” (Forrest, 2021) and “lead character” (Picheta, 2021). Such language effectively cast the meeting as a dramatic folktale with heroes, villains, and side characters at play. This narrative framing celebrated Weaver as a hero, but it vilified other council members by portraying them as archetypal villains. Klapp (1956, p. 338) also developed a typology of villain types. Although these are grounded in the context of American culture, two of these types are particularly applicable to the villains of the Handforth Parish Council. Firstly, there is the “*Oppressor or Bully*,” a strong figure that abuses power over a victim, “seen sympathetically as the underdog,” which parallels Weaver as a put-upon Cinderella figure facing abrasive aggressors. The second is the “*Authoritarian*,” characterised by “a despot who would impose his will upon others or restrict individual freedom.” This is exemplified by the public perception of Tolver as a power-hungry chairman; a councillor later shared, “he has no power so he cannot do what he wants. He should have apologised for his behaviour but he didn’t.” Tolver himself stated that it was likely people saw him as “the monstrous villain of the piece” (*BBC News*, 2021). The real-world ethical implications of using folk archetypes to characterise the leading players of the viral video are particularly apparent in the experience of Alex Brewerton, another council member who opposed Weaver. Speaking to

the press in February 2023, he stated that the attention had resulted in death threats: “I’ve been told that I deserve to die and burn in hell. It’s that bad that even my partner has been threatened” (Shaw, 2023). Irrespective of who was objectively right or wrong in the incident itself, the Handforth Parish Council members were depicted and treated as passive characters within a scripted folktale. Drawing from Haraway’s (2016, p.11) posthumanist insights, this can be interpreted as a blurring of the distinction between being “self-developing and externally designed,” resulting in a diminishment of their complex humanity.

The Handforth Parish Council carries over a historical tradition of folkloric human objects being used to affirm norms and values as they relate to contemporary concerns. For example, Davy Crockett, described by McKee (1998, p.46) as a “forceful personality shaped by a violent and unstable frontier environment,” promoted the expansionist ideals of the American frontier. In this case, the video was widely circulated when remote video calls had become a ubiquitous part of daily life, promoting ideals around “Zoom etiquette” (Lufkin, 2020). The hero and villain archetypes serve as frameworks for distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate virtual call behaviour; Weaver, the hero, conducts herself with composure and procedural diligence, whereas the opposing council members, the villains, behave poorly by being aggressive and disruptive. This is consistent with Klapp’s (1954, pp. 57, 62) assertion that the function of hero/villain archetypes is to understand problematic behaviour by “reducing them to simple concepts, familiar to all, and indicating proper modes of response,” and act as “collective symbols with important functions for group organization and control.” Importantly, like Crockett, who embodied the 19th century American spirit, the Handforth Parish Council was considered a profound display of Britishness, described in news outlets as “the best British comedy in years” (Pidd, 2021), one that makes us “proud to be British” (Mellor, 2021) and Weaver herself as a “national treasure” (Drury, 2021). But specifically, this Britishness was related to the context of video conferencing and Zoom etiquette. The Mass Observation Archive, a research project dedicated to documenting the

everyday lives of people in Britain, found that concerning communication rules and values, “rhetorical constructions of reserve, politeness, good manners and discipline are constructed by positioning a sense of exhibitionism as substandard” (Wilkins, 2020, p.135-136). These principles are displayed in the online reception to the Handforth Parish Council video: Weaver was considered polite and disciplined, manifesting idealised British communication values, and the perceived unprofessional and overemotional behaviour of the opposing council members manifested attention-seeking exhibitionism. This is indicative of how folkloric human objects can mobilise online users of a specific country or culture by affirming norms and values specific to them.

The framing of the Handforth Parish Council as an exemplar of Britishness opened up opportunities for patriotic expression. This is especially true of the treatment of Weaver as a figure comparable to the British folk heroes of ancient ballads and poems. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Don Black’s composition, “Ode to Jackie Weaver,” posted online a week after the video went viral, is evocative of the patriotic balladry popular in 18th-century wartime Britain among the Royal Navy. These ballads, Davey (2017, p.63) writes, were grounded in “accounts of major fleet actions and descriptions of heroic officers and seamen,” which “reflected the patriotic manpower needs of the nation.” Analogously, the lyrics of “Ode to Jackie Weaver” describe her in heroic terms as a model British citizen persevering through the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis prolifically compared to wartime (Bernhard, 2020). The lines, “Jackie Weaver, Britain’s answer to the American dream,” and “the role model we all strive to be, she doesn’t want a medal, just a nice cup of tea,” encapsulate a vision of heroism rooted in humility and steadfastness (*The Telegraph*, 2021). Considering this, Weaver could be regarded as a spiritual successor to British folk heroes who were adapted to suit evolving ideas of national pride and patriotism. Barczewski (2000, pp.15-16) highlights Robin Hood and King Arthur as primary examples of this phenomenon; King Arthur was transformed in the 12th century from a Celtic warlord to a king, thereby linking Arthur genealogically to the Norman rulers of England following their conquest.

Arthurian legend was employed by the Tudor dynasty “as one of its chief propaganda weapons,” and Robin Hood consists of an amalgamation of memories in a “mythic archive (...) selected and reorganised to serve many ideologies” (Knight, 2006, p.158). The Handforth Parish Council Zoom emerged at a time when “national and patriotic discourses” were used to enforce lockdown measures and restrictions (Mylonas and Whalley, 2022, p.3). Basing Weaver’s hero status primarily on her Zoom etiquette was to implement the social distancing measures of video conferencing. Ultimately, the viral Handforth Parish Council video and the folkloric human objects it created were a reaffirmation of norms and values around British civility, helpful for navigating the unfamiliar terrain of video conferencing. The following case study will build on this by examining Captain Tom Moore as a pandemic-era folkloric human object, the distinction being that Moore was used to both affirm *and* challenge norms and values.

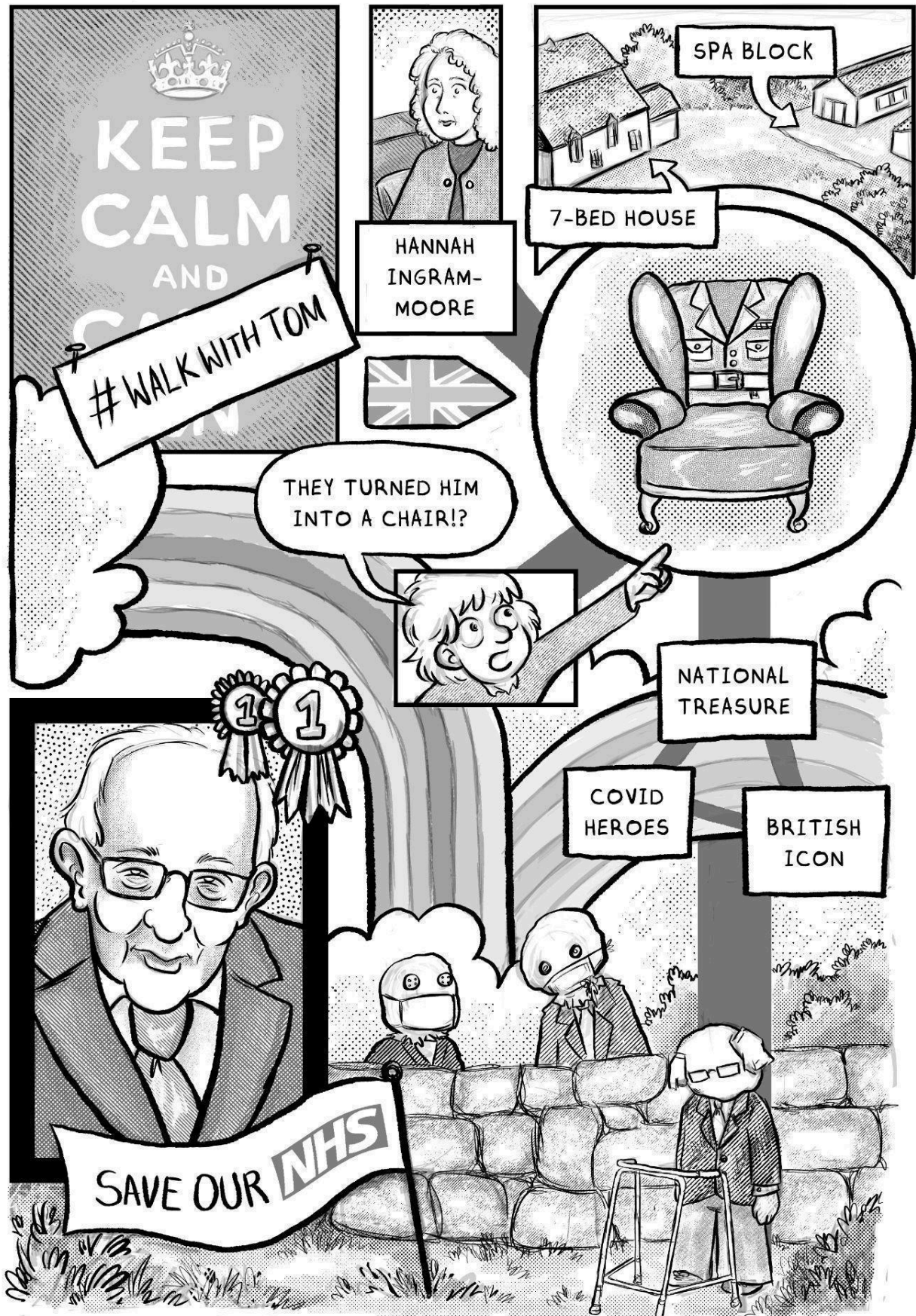


Figure 17: Captain Tom Case Study

3.2. Case Study: Captain Tom

As Rusu (2013, pp.543-544) observed in an analysis of American hero turned-pariah Lance Armstrong, the function of mass media in modern society “is similar to the function of the institutions that produced myths in ancient societies.” Today, social media continues to use the hero myth to promote the values and ideals of society, and “discharge and replace them after a certain period of time.” This process could not be better understood in the context of an online folkloric human object than through Captain Tom Moore. Moore is a prime example of the dual capacity of some folkloric human objects to affirm *and* challenge norms and values. Moore was initially being framed as a pandemic-era hero evoking values of hope, unity and resilience. As he walked laps around his garden to raise money for the NHS a month after the lockdown was imposed, the “perfect narrative” emerged online, where “multiple strands and nuggets of ‘bite-size content’ linking to his efforts were generated daily across all social media platforms” (Adams, 2023). However, a combination of growing public disillusionment towards institutional responses to the pandemic and allegations regarding mismanagement of Moore’s charitable foundation devalued his “hero” status, prompting a reevaluation of the values he espoused. This case study argues that the collaborative online engagement and democratisation of the internet played a key role in generating and later undermining Moore’s hero status, shifting his function as a folkloric human object from affirming values of hope and resilience to deconstructing them.

Captain Tom Moore presents a strong case for how online media platforms have enhanced the process of creating and spreading folkloric human objects. Social media played a huge role in cultivating Moore’s role as a national treasure, with his encouraging words to followers “tomorrow will be a good day,” becoming a trending hashtag (Sommerlad, 2022) and fundraising campaigns such as “Walk with Tom,” reaching over 12.8 billion impressions online (Pease, 2020). “Walk with Tom” capitalised on the internet’s expansive networking capabilities by inviting participants to share their progress using the hashtags #WalkandTalk

and #CaptainTom, instigating collective movement in a time of forced isolation (*JustGiving*, 2021). The democratised nature of the internet also allowed users to participate in the formal recognition of a hero actively; Moore's knighthood was spurred on by an online petition which amassed over 1 million signatures (Snuggs, 2020). *JustGiving*, the platform that supported the fundraiser and the accompanying campaigns, noted that the use of interactive web experiences and techniques was essential to the campaign's success. In particular, Moore's unique story as a 100-year-old World War II veteran was key to *Just Giving's* online marketing (Gregory, 2020). This story was especially resonant at a time when Western online culture was saturated with memes that treated the pandemic as a rerun of historical crises in the early 20th century. These memes drew parallels between the pandemic of 2020 and the Spanish Flu of 1918, noting unsettling contextual similarities such as economic instability and the looming threat of right-wing nationalism (Meeeeesh, 2020). Others compared WW2 to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of saving the world by storming the beaches of Normandy and saving the world by simply staying indoors (*Covid-19archive.org*, 2019), and expressed concern that the current generation would not match up to the "greatest generation," that survived the war (Browning and Haigh 2022, p.9). Within this online climate, Captain Tom Moore, a World War II veteran who chose to serve his country again in a new era of crisis, was uniquely positioned to go viral. The insistence of British media outlets and government figures that lessons could be learned from wartime experiences to survive the pandemic further bolstered his shareability value (Bernhard, 2020; Rawlinson, 2020). Central to Moore's digital iconography at this stage was its encapsulation of the "Blitz spirit," a nostalgic myth of civilised unity during World War II (Calder, p. 75). The most frequently reposted online images of Moore depict him adorned with medals, smiling triumphantly, arm raised in a gesture of victory, giving a thumbs up. Wrapped in this simple yet effective image is Moore's intrinsic function as a folkloric human object: to affirm the values of hope, unity and resilience amidst a global catastrophe.

While the internet's affordances for interactive, user-driven networks enabled Moore's rise to prominence as a hero, they also facilitated a progressive devaluation of his hero status. In February 2021, following Moore's death, a Church of England clergyman was forced to apologise for a tweet in which he stated, "the cult of Captain Tom is the cult of White British Nationalism" (Skopeliti, 2021). This was met with a "social media lynching" (Sherwood, 2021); however, a post on the subreddit *r/BritishProblems* shows that as early as 2020, an undercurrent of discontent towards Moore's treatment as a national hero was present in some online communities. "This is definitely an unpopular opinion which will make me sound like a miserable git," the poster writes, before going on to outline their reasons for disliking the "fuss" over Moore, arguing that he was being exploited, that the decision to give him a knighthood was unnecessary, and that the increased media presence was putting his and others' lives in danger of contracting COVID-19. Responses were praiseful: "join the club, we've got jackets," one writes. "Thank God someone finally had the balls to say it," says another (*r/britishproblems*, 2020). Similarly, acrimonious views were expressed through another Reddit post amassing over 16k upvotes, mocking the excessive capitalisation of Moore's image through a doctored picture of a ceramic bong in the shape of his head being sold on Amazon (*r/comedyheaven*, 2021). Irreverently depicting Moore as merely a tacky shop item diminished the resonance of his heroic image, rendering it culturally irrelevant. Browning and Haigh (2022, pp. 10-11) argue that this shift in Moore's symbolism correlates with a growing ambivalence towards the British government's "veneer of militarized interpellation" during the pandemic. An example they provide is the response to an interview with Moore's daughter in February 2022, in which she stated her father would have approached the cost of living crisis and the impending invasion of Ukraine with the "power of positivity." This was mocked as a meaningless platitude, and some criticised the use of Moore's image "to deflect widespread anger towards the government with calls for unification." This response is indicative of how devaluing the relevancy of a hero provides an opportunity for the values they espouse—in Moore's case, hope, unity and resilience—to be reexamined. As reports of the government's mismanagement and internal corruption during

the pandemic continued to accumulate, these values, when scrutinised through a renewed perspective, appeared laughable and ineffectual. Moore's function as a folkloric human object had now shifted to highlighting the hollowness of these values in the context of an impotent government disconnected from its citizens' needs.

This function would continue as allegations emerged related to the actions of some in Moore's inner circle, further diminishing his hero status. In June 2022, the Charity Commission launched an inquiry into concerns that the Moore family had profited from charity funds raised in his name (Butler, 2022). This ultimately resulted in Moore's daughter, Hannah Ingram-Moore, and her husband being disqualified from serving as charity trustees in July 2024 (Fullbrook, 2024). Ingram-Moore also "became a meme" as she was accused of making a planning application to build an office for the Captain Tom Moore Foundation, which instead resulted in a "50ft by 20ft pool house complete with changing rooms, toilets and showers" (Fletcher, 2023). This added a new dynamic to the Captain Tom story, which shifted the focus from Moore as a hero to his daughter as a villain. The depiction of Ingram-Moore in TikTok video memes callously making her father walk around the garden to fund the luxuries of a new spa and pool complex (@joeefoster, 2023; @herecomesthefunny, 2023) resonates with Klapp's understanding of villains: "idealised figures of evil who tend to counter moral actions as a result of inherently malicious will" (Klapp, 1958, p.58). These depictions only added to the devaluation of Moore's hero status as they rendered him an enfeebled victim. One such meme, posted on Twitter, parodies the 1990 film *Misery*, in which an author is held hostage and forced to write a book. A still image from the film shows the author strapped to a bed, accompanied by the caption, "Captain Tom's daughter forcing him to write more books so she can afford her new Louis Vuitton handbag" (@GregggggWallace, 2023). The evocative scene presented in this meme subverts three of what the *Encyclopedia of Heroism Studies* defines as the "Great Eight Traits of Heroism," strength, resilience, and charisma (Goethals, 2023, pp.1-4). Twitter, the same social media platform that had uplifted Moore as a strong, determined hero, was now actively depreciating it. Rathnayake, Smith,

and Higgins (2023, p.466) found that Twitter uses the discursive practices of intertextuality and humour as a “common currency of critical exchange.” This suggests there is inherent shareability value in this narrative framing of Captain Tom because, in straightforward terms, it is funnier than an earnest story of a man marching around his garden to raise money. Moreover, given the internet’s wealth of instantly accessible information and easily manipulable images, users could quickly subvert poignant news stories regarding Moore and join in with the joke. One such news story that was cynically repurposed was a unique gift to the Moore family: a tailor-made chair reupholstered with his service uniform, complete with “belt, buckles, buttons and insignia” (Dunderdale, 2020). Several popular memes utilised the image to lampoon the exploitation of Moore’s legacy, claiming that Ingram-Moore had turned her father into a chair (@deanoshoes, 2023; Real2Retro, 2023). The image of Captain Tom Moore sitting in a chair stands out amid the multitude of jokes directed at his tarnished legacy. It eerily recalls the phrase “to become part of the furniture,” wherein a person has existed for so long in a particular place that they are no longer noticed. It also highlights the folkloric human object as a state of posthuman hybridity, the “instability of the binary between what we refer to as human, as well as what we refer to as thing” (Käll, 2017b, p.20).

This phenomenon does raise considerable ethical implications. While it would be irresponsible to state that those around him exploited Moore categorically, it can be reasonably inferred that his public image was, at the very least, strategically appropriated by many. Wade et al (2022, p.9) using Julie Robert’s theoretical framework of “embodied philanthropy,” contend that as inspiring as Moore was during the crisis, his commodification and use as political leverage served as a reminder that “models of citizenship should not be exploited as a means of distracting from state failures.” A striking visual metaphor for Moore’s exploitation is the appearance of Moore’s likeness in scarecrow festivals and public displays across the UK (Moody, 2020; Hanson, 2021; Scull, 2021). Moore’s “self-sacrificial labour” as described by Wade et al (2017, p.3) resonates with the folkloric significance of the scarecrow itself, an object present in pagan rituals as a surrogate for human sacrifice (Król,

Kao, and Hernik, 2019, p.20). On the surface, these scarecrows commemorate Moore's efforts, but inadvertently allude to a deeper cultural practice of sacrificing individual autonomy in the name of becoming cultural symbols. Dyer (2019, p.34) previously explored this topic through analysing media celebrities and film stars, arguing that a "star" is not a real person but a constructed image that manages or resolves contradictions within ideologies, or they can embody "oppositional ideological positions ... to dominant ideology." This latter function can be applied to Captain Tom Moore's later reframing as a folkloric human object, opposing the ideological position of using his image to distract from government failures. As this case study has shown, the internet's technological affordances have accelerated, amplified in scope and broadly democratised this process. It allows a man like Moore to transition from an unknown, humble individual seeking to raise money for the NHS to an exalted national hero, and then to a sombre personification of an era we would rather forget.



Figure 18: Luigi Mangione Case Study

3.3. Case Study: Luigi Mangione

On December 4 2024, Brian Thompson, CEO of the health insurance company UnitedHealthcare, was shot and killed in New York. In the immediate aftermath, social media was flooded with responses which showed little sympathy towards Thompson (Mahdawi, 2024). Reports circulated that the bullet casings were etched with the words, “deny,” “depose,” and “defend,” referencing the title of a book criticising the insurance industry, and a phrase used by opponents and attorneys to describe the tactics used to deny payment for claims (Murphy, 2024). According to the *New Yorker*, sardonic jokes streamed into “every social-media platform,” amassing thousands of likes and “laugh” reactions to Thompson’s death (Tolentino, 2024). Users shared their stories of negative experiences concerning denials of medical claims. The shooting came to epitomise the broader frustration held towards the American healthcare industry and invited people to share their experiences. This reflects what Baron (2016, p.589) describes as the “inherent dialogism of public folklore,” which “diminishes power asymmetries and fosters participation through its distinctive approaches to mediation, intervention, representation and community cultural self-determination.” The internet has enhanced this process by allowing a vast quantity of voices across different vantage points to be represented within contemporary social media platforms. Memes, in particular, can serve as a tool for accessible political dialogue in the public sphere, driven by “the interplay of self-expression, entertainment, and social identity” (Leiser, 2022, p. 236). Once the suspect was arrested and named as 26-year-old Luigi Mangione, he became the subject of a slew of praiseworthy memes which acquired him the status of folk hero: a moniker which major news outlets such as *Forbes*, *BBC News*, and *The New York Times* have acknowledged (Suciu, 2024, Honderich, 2024, Kilgannon et al., 2024). Social media texts are rarely static and instead highly multimodal, mixing various genres of communication and often integrated with image-based media (Bouvier and Machin, 2018, p.179). The folk hero narrative experienced a cross-media proliferation across videos,

memes, group chats and posts, which creates an “engaging, immersive experience of a story, which can facilitate strong affective responses” (Gretter, Yadav and Gleason, 2017, p.10). This interactive, participatory storytelling activity turned Mangione into an intensely politicised folkloric human object crafted as a catch-all symbol of grievances against the US healthcare system.

The hero tropes and archetypes projected onto Mangione sculpted a character that could drive a movement seeking to expose an unethical and exploitative healthcare industry. It is a process indicative of what Jasper, Young, and Zuern (2018, p.129) describe as strategic “character work” in social movements. Characters, it is argued,

matter in all the central questions that social scientists ask about social movements: about how they recruit and motivate members; how they interact with their opponents, authorities, and other players; how they are treated in the media; whether they have an impact on policies and opinion.

Referring back to Klapp’s (1949, p.21) key traits of the folk hero, Mangione embodies “*The Benefactor*,” sitting among Robin Hood and Jesse James- kind-hearted bandit heroes providing a service to the public. Users were eager to place themselves in the role of the bandit’s devoted followers; one post reaching over 85k likes on X/Twitter, which quoted an MSNBC report regarding the manhunt, stated, “this is what it must have felt like to hear robin hood stories in like 1370.” The user replied to their post to add, “im a peasant and i am CHEERING” (@mcmansionhell). This act of role-play demonstrates the use of “cultural inventory,” as conceived by folklorist Trevor Blank (2018, p.5), which describes how internet users, when encountering traditional folkloric forms online, “correlate appropriate analogs from popular culture and knowledge gleaned from mass media to process their interactions in context.” Fixating on Robin Hood as a key comparison is significant because it frames Mangione as an explicitly “good guy” and also makes him more desirable. Robin Hood has

historically been portrayed onscreen by those considered to be prime vehicles of Hollywood masculinity, such as Douglas Fairbanks, Kevin Costner and Errol Flynn, the latter described as “probably the greatest symbol of masculinity and virility developed in the modern age” (Clark, 2009). Memes highlighting Mangione’s desirability augmented the attractiveness of the social cause he symbolised. Even before he was identified, users would photoshop grainy CCTV images of Mangione smiling at a cashier to include a flurry of love hearts and captions in glitter lettering reading, “baby girl,” “thank you,” “100% cute,” which reached over 90k likes (@cookedairforce, 2024). Another tweet, reaching over 400k likes, joked that “like a true Italian, fatal error as an assassin was giving himself away by stopping to flirt with the cashier at the cafe.” *WIRED* reported that the fanfiction site *Archive Of Our Own* was beginning to spawn stories about Mangione, which depicted him as a heartthrob and romantic vigilante (Gilbert, 2024). Mangione’s vigilantism contributes to a romantic cachet which can be equated to the appeal of the alluring outlaw or “bad boy” in popular cinema and literature. Dyhouse (2017, pp.115) points to the prevalence of highwaymen in the 1940s cultural imagination, stories of muscular, suave men with a “silky menace,” represented as “gallant and reckless: as objects of desire and also as models for emulation.” These stories were popular during wartime, as resilience and courage were highly valued and praised during the time of war (Dyhouse, 2017, p.119). We can identify a similar dichotomy in how the celebration of Mangione resulted from the prolonged economic turmoil and crises of post-pandemic America, where weaknesses in the healthcare system become increasingly apparent.

Assuming that folkloric human objects can provide the function of challenging societal norms and values, Mangione does so by being celebrated despite his alleged criminality. To commemorate a criminal, a figure who, by their very nature, disrupts and cares nothing for social conventions, constitutes a deconstruction of those norms and values. As historian Elliott Gorn (2024) observed, Mangione’s popularity as a folk hero recalled the “celebrity criminals” of the Great Depression, such as bank robber John Dillinger, whose bank

robberies galvanised the public's hatred of financial institutions. The conception of outlaw figures like Mangione, Gorn argues, is "libidinal," and presents an "unleashed desire," which spills over into fixations on their sexuality and attractiveness; like Mangione, Dillinger was also subject to rumours of his "sexual potency." Mangione was even compared to the Menendez Brothers, convicted of murdering their parents, whom they claimed had abused them, similarly regarded as "attractive, well-positioned, and rebels with a cause" (Alonso, 2024). Mangione's Italian heritage added to his status as a heartthrob; Italian masculinity has, historically, been culturally stereotyped as "sexually potent and protective (...) preserving his honor," (Reich, 2004, p.1) and "having an unnatural appetite for sex" (Vitulo, 1996, p.78). Simultaneously, his heritage evoked associations with another celebrated Italian-American criminal figure through the use of a trending sound on TikTok. An audio snippet frequently associated with Mangione is a 1992 news interview conducted after the trial of John Gotti, a member of the Italian-American mafia. In it, the interviewee states, "he was the best guy around!" The reporter asks, "what about the people he murdered?" to which they respond, "what murder?" (ZayTashon88, 2024, ohhhsnapitsgerii, 2024, henriquinuh, 2024). The sound had previously been used by users to showcase injuries sustained by their cats and to express their fondness for movie characters despite their crimes. Ramati and Abeliovich (2024, p.5375) suggest that TikTok is an app of echoic "network ventriloquism," which reuses, remediates and reproduces sounds and transforms the past "into an echo of the present." The sound not only alludes to a previous high-profile trial of an Italian-American man but also rehashes how the format was used to showcase vicious yet cute-looking cats in 2023 (*Know Your Meme*, 2025q). The effect of users taking a historical sound-byte and having it apply to contemporary culture by using network ventriloquism is a form of folk tradition, which itself is "symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present" (Kuutma, 1998, p.20). Using the Gotti trial sound byte reinvents two traditions that portray Mangione in a positive light: the romanticisation of criminal suspects and public trials, and the internet's long-held fondness for cats. It also contributes variation to Mangione as a

folk object, a core component of folklore, as it allows it to “react to events and phenomena with the help of traditional knowledge” (Sarv and Järv, 2023).

Italian stereotypes and references contributed heavily to the humorous thematic element of Mangione memes, which made frequent references to his heritage by recalling other popular Italian characters in meme culture, such as Luigi from the Super Mario Brothers video game series and Tony Soprano (*TMZ Staff*, 2024). Tweets amassed over a hundred thousand likes, falsely claiming that the Luigi hat was selling out on Amazon, and Nintendo itself had voiced its support for Mangione by posting “free him” (Liles, 2024; Rao, 2024). Others used pictures of Nintendo Luigi as reaction images, which reflected the romanticisation of Mangione (Luigi shown being kissed with the caption “I’m gonna write him so many prison letters”) and his vigilantism (Luigi photoshopped holding a gun) (Phil, 2024). Humour is a vital tool, Kuipers (2009, p.219) claims, for demarcating symbolic and social boundaries as the act of sharing humour “signals similarity- and similarity breeds closeness.” Forming these groups based on shared perspectives through humour was a key factor in building an active protest base around Mangione as a folk object. In a study conducted by de Saint Laurent, Glăveanu, and Literat (2021, p.12) into using character archetypes as a framework for analysing memes, it was observed that memes are instrumental in not just “referring to a harsh reality, at a personal and societal level, but they also lend their backing—or share their disapproval—for specific belief systems and courses of action.” Humorous memes and online role-play lionised Mangione by associating him with a beloved Nintendo character and portraying him as an attractive vigilante while villainising his opponents: health insurance companies. Some memes even acted as a direct warning to other healthcare CEOs, such as a meme with an anxious-looking puppet with the caption: “other healthcare execs when the CEO of UnitedHealth gets murdered in broad daylight and instead of being horrified, everyone is kinda happy about it” (ogbenjamim, 2024). The humorous appeal of the Mangione memes was crucial to the growth of the social movement supporting him, as it helped clearly distinguish an ideological separation between those who supported

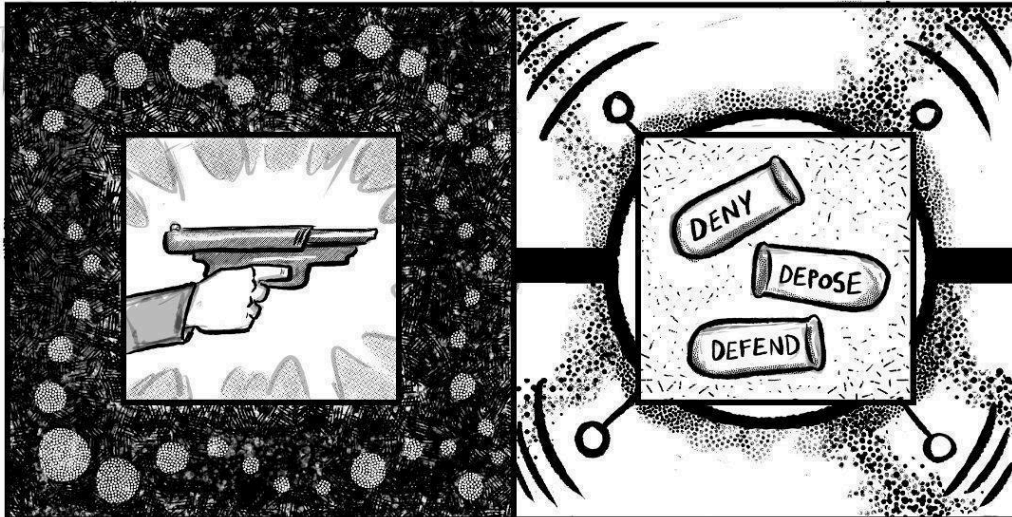
healthcare reform and those who didn't. This typifies what philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a, p.10) describes as "carnavalesque," wherein a utopian, ritualistic event subverts "hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions." Memes subjecting wealthy, powerful healthcare CEOs to such public mockery while romanticising Mangione can be related to the "crowning/decrowning" ritual act in carnivals, which expresses the "joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position" (Bakhtin, 1984b, p.124). Hence, as a carnivalesque space, subversive memes provided a means for Mangione to spearhead a defiance against the institutional hierarchies of healthcare insurance organisations.

With the aid of carnivalesque spaces in the form of memes and the layering of multiple historical and cultural contexts through references to celebrated criminals and folk vigilantes, Mangione, as a folkloric human object, was given ample opportunity to subvert and hijack official narratives. While mainstream media outlets expressed a comparatively tepid response to this newfound folk hero, with some calling it "disturbing," online users supporting Mangione combated this narrative by certifying him as a folk hero (Meko, 2024). In one such instance, when Andrew Witty, CEO of UnitedHealth Group, wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* addressing the concerns with the healthcare system and decrying Mangione's alleged actions, the overwhelmingly negative response was sizable enough that the comments section on the article was shut down (Houghtaling, 2024). While the case remains ongoing, with Mangione still awaiting trial as of April 2025, the reimagining of Mangione as a folk hero has already had a lasting impact on the trajectory of the case. Sam Beard, the organiser of an online campaign to raise money for Mangione's legal defence, attributes the mass of donations reaching over \$700,000 to the post-arrest "perp walk," which backfired on authorities (Vargas, 2025). A highly publicised spectacle in which Mangione, handcuffed and clad in an orange jumpsuit, was slowly paraded through the streets of New York was seen by users as inadvertently making him more appealing to supporters. Viral tweets cited the perp walk as only intensifying his "brooding and sexy" image, and likened it to "Christ being taken

to the cross” (*ET Online*, 2024). The overwhelming support given to Mangione has been acknowledged by the official website for his legal defence, which features an FAQ tailored towards online supporters who wish to contact him, and a link that directs users to his legal fund (*Luigimangioneinfo.com*, 2025). This strategic use of digital platforms to mobilise support and legal assistance for Mangione demonstrates the decisive role of online media platforms and communities in shaping social and political movements through the use of folkloric human objects.

THE SEISMIC CULTURAL EVENT MODEL- LUIGI MANGIONE

RIPOSTE PERIOD



FIELD
DOCUMENTATION

BORN NARRATIVES



MEME INNOVATION
AND CURATION



MAINSTREAM
CULTURAL ARRIVAL

Figure 19: The SCE Model- Luigi Mangione

3.4. Concluding Statements

By focusing on simplified traits and moral functions, folklore can perpetuate the objectification of specific figures, reducing them to roles that are less than human. The viral narratives of contemporary online media transform individuals into folkloric human objects by mythologising their identities through traditional archetypes of heroes and villains. As Barthes (1957, p.143) stated in *Mythologies*, myth

abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics ... it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.

The simplification of human complexity by reducing identity to simplistic tropes can be used to encapsulate and influence sociocultural discourse. Yet, significant ethical questions remain regarding the rights of individuals to privacy and control over their online presence. This is consistent with the posthumanist perception of human identity provided by Ferrando (2014, p.171): “We are material networks of relations, fluctuant becoming in symbiotic interaction with the others, the environment, our surroundings; we are constant potentials.” Regardless of an individual’s wishes, their public image is not a fixed, autonomous entity but a fluid, constantly evolving and interacting construct influenced by sociocultural discourse. They have little to no control over the reproduction and commodification of their public image as it is distributed across technological and social networks. As Hayles (1999, p.4) observes, the distributed cognition of the posthuman “complicates human agency,” because “there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other-will.” Admittedly, there are ways in which being transformed into a folkloric human object can be of personal benefit to the individuals in question; Weaver released a self-help book and used her new platform to encourage women and young people “to get involved in local

democracy,” (Bullock, 2021) Captain Tom raised over £38 million for NHS charities, and Mangione’s legal team were able to galvanise online supporters to fund his defence. However, these all came at a cost of individual autonomy, and those framed as archetypal villains in these respective narratives experienced profoundly harmful consequences.

The fluidity and adaptability of folkloric human objects in the digital age underscore a profound shift in how image and identity are constructed and disseminated in the public sphere. The way the internet processes information “in much faster timescales than in traditional media ecologies” has enhanced the capacity of the folkloric human object to adapt to contemporary issues and evolving perspectives rapidly (KhosraviNik and Unger, 2016, p.217). This also allows them to become major cultural symbols with a significant sociocultural impact within a matter of days, an unlikely feat in pre-Internet contexts. Internet memes in particular play a pivotal role in enhancing the function of folkloric human objects, as they are a modern folklore medium “in which norms and values are constructed,” (Shifman, 2013, p14) which enables them to serve as “vehicles for political expression and instruments for reinforcing ideological divides” (Alafnan, 2025, p.1). All three of the case studies examined in this chapter display had significant sociocultural, even political influences; the Handforth Parish Council reinforced British values of civility in the context of video conferencing and provided comic relief during a difficult time; Captain Tom Moore became a powerful cultural symbol of hope and resilience, which was later repurposed to critique institutional failures, and Luigi Mangione a conduit for frustrations directed at the US healthcare system. As Jasper, Young, and Zuern (2018, p.114) found, characters

clarify the emotional resonance of many cognitive components; they explain why individual examples are so important in inspiring actions; they also demonstrate that images are as important as words in the transmission of meanings.

When considered in a contemporary online context, where image-based memes are integral to the construction and transmission of meaning, folkloric human objects operating within these formats can possess even greater opportunities for enacting sociocultural influence in an increasingly interconnected world. This provides further clarification for the observations of the SCE model, which found that folkloric activities and practices have not only adapted to contemporary media technologies but have also been significantly advanced by them.

4.0. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored how folklore shapes and adapts to contemporary online platforms, with a particular interest in how these platforms influence the transmission of folk traditions and narratives. The sociocultural impact of folklore is reciprocal: advances in media communication technologies shape the form, content and circulation of folklore, while folklore itself contributes to how these technologies are culturally interpreted and deployed. The Seismic Cultural Event Model, introduced in Chapter 1, provides a theoretical framework for understanding this interplay, showing how major shifts in media, from the printing press to the internet, have transformed not only how folklore is disseminated but also how it functions within society. These shifts have had a pronounced sociocultural impact through an accelerated rate of narrative diffusion, destabilising traditional media hierarchies, and expanding access to media editing and sharing devices. As Howard (2015, p.103) describes it, “more people and more diverse people have access to the same representational resources for our mundane communication practices than ever before.” The case studies presented in Chapters 2 and 3 further illustrate how enduring cross-cultural folkloric motifs, such as character archetypes, anthropomorphic animals, and monsters, have been leveraged in meme culture and reimagined through newly participatory, hypertextual, and immersive modes of engagement, which have propelled their usage as contemporary social critique and cultural commodification of public figures.

The continuance of folkloric activities and practices has helped societies acclimate to the internet as a community space. They have adapted to new media tools to spread traditions further and strengthen existing practices through platforms that enhance their immersive capacity through multimodality and interactivity. The primary circumstance is that narratives are now disseminated and absorbed at a rate and in a variety of contexts that have never been seen in human history. While I refrain from speculating on the precise cognitive implications of this, my case studies confirm that the internet has vastly expanded the

potential for community formation, social cohesion and the exchange of ideological perspectives. This rapid dissemination fosters connection and cultural participation, but it also facilitates the spread of misinformation, extremist ideologies, and the commodification of real human beings as memetic objects. Indeed, throughout this four-year research, I observed several significant developments in online media ecosystems that significantly impacted the nature of folkloric discourse. Chiefly among these was the acquisition of Twitter by Elon Musk in 2022, followed by its rebranding to “X” in 2023. This transition marked a turning point: while the platform remained a vital space for emergent online cultural expression and public discourse, it also experienced a documented increase in hate speech, rampant bot activity and the spread of misinformation (Hickey et al., 2025, Wang et al, 2023). These factors, along with Dundes’ (2007, p. 386) essay that urged the use of folkloric analysis to combat “highly pernicious and even life-threatening” bigotry, influenced my decision to examine the rise of radicalised subcultures through the Wojak case study. Additionally, recent developments in generative AI models have drastically altered the social media community experience; navigating meme culture, a site of human creativity and ingenuity, has been increasingly beleaguered by the rising presence of AI-generated content. As stated in the introduction, this thesis is grounded in the core principle that internet folklore is an authentic, rather than synthetic, source of human expression. AI-generated content, particularly memes, complicates this matter somewhat, leading me to avoid analysing any memes that appeared to be inauthentically generated. However, an intriguing avenue for future research would be the examination of how the disruption caused by AI has, to some extent, become entwined with internet folklore, particularly in the context of deepfake AI-generated political memes (Bond, 2024; Sabin, 2024). This would contribute to a broader understanding of how AI can disrupt political discourse by subverting their primary means of online folkloric transmission: memes.

At the beginning of this project, I assumed that comics would serve solely as a means of presenting findings. As my research progressed, I discovered that the process of creating

these artworks was an act of generative analysis in itself. Kuttner et al. (2021, p. 208-209) note that comics-based research is still in its infancy in most disciplines, but it benefits from growth and further exploration that extends beyond merely presenting research. The word-picture relationship, they argue, can amplify, expand on, and challenge written narrative, “creating an opening for new interpretations and critical analysis” situating the comics-based methodology as a framework for interpreting complex materials (p.201). This thesis contributes to further development of the methodology by utilising comics as a platform for new avenues of exploration and critical inquiry within folklore studies. It also showcases the cognitive benefits of incorporating comics into research contexts. Some comics were produced during the writing phase, meaning I would alternate between illustrating a case study and writing about it. Through this back-and-forth process, I discovered that creating comics plays a valuable role in advancing research. For instance, my early experiments with comic panel structure, inspired by the *Mappa Mundi*, led me to explore the monstrous figures depicted on the map’s borders, which prompted a comparative analysis with Wojak memes. As fellow researcher/comics artist Shawn Forde (2022, p.664) states, the “reflexive ethnographic practice” of comics can allow a researcher to reflect on how they frame information. As I drew each comic, I actively expanded my analysis and arguments, which provided a level of interrogative complexity regarding the subject matter that would have been difficult to achieve in the one-dimensional context of text-based analysis. In the words of Kuttner et al (2021, p.205), the simultaneity of the comic format allowed me to

move beyond the linear, left-right carriage returns of text. It opens up opportunities to take analysis in divergent directions, to build up multiple layers of meaning, and to explore themes that don’t necessarily fall into a traditional model of causality.

It also provided an ideal medium for conveying the symbiosis between the digital and the folkloric. As comics achieve a juxtaposition of “different narrative sequences within a

contained space,” utilised to create “larger units of meaning” I was able to provide a comprehensive view of how internet folklore operates within a broader cultural context (Kannenberg, 2009, pp. 307-308). Furthermore, the act of adapting and illustrating folklore mirrors the way traditions have continually evolved, making it a folkloric practice in its own right. Participating in folkloric practice has a reflexive aspect; it has enabled me to bridge the gap between being an academic observer of internet folklore phenomena and engaging in the lived reality of actively reinterpreting it. Adapting and reinterpreting folklore through comics enriched the research process as it created a more in-depth understanding and authentic connection to the subject matter, through the immersion that comes with visually delving into a case study.

While grounded in folklore studies, this thesis demonstrates how comics can interpret and synthesise complex qualitative findings while also providing cognitive support to the research process itself. In doing so, it contributes a transferable methodological approach to the comics-based research field and the wider academic discourse of visual communication. Although comics-based practice remains an interpretive process shaped by the individual practitioner, the methodological framework articulated here can be adapted by other comics-based researchers working across diverse research contexts. Extending beyond the field of visual communication, a predominantly qualitative discipline, comics-based research would benefit from collaborative engagement with research disciplines with more empirical approaches such as data collection or algorithmic studies. In terms of my own research, future dissemination of the practice could extend to collaborations with areas of folklore studies which employ extensive survey-based research and data collection. By laying out in “diverse pieces of data from across a study,” comic page spreads can be used to “explore similarities, contrasts, patterns, and an overall intuitive sense of what is emerging from the research,” (Kuttner et al, 2021, p.205). I can foresee applying this research tool of visual interrogation to findings from folklore surveys, such as the currently-ongoing National

Folklore Survey for England, and using it as a means of interpretive documentation during the survey process itself.

Upon establishing the significance of folklore studies to inform the theoretical foundations of this research, the work of Alan Dundes provided my initial point of entry. Through his writings, I came to recognise the intrinsic value of highlighting the folkloric aspects of internet culture. Folklore, he argued, is a “mirror of culture,” underlaid with a means of better understanding ourselves and others (Dundes, 1969, p.482). However, folklore is not only a passive reflection of culture, but also a generative and active force that reconfigures meanings and shapes contemporary sociocultural realities through public discourse. It is thus essential to continue analysing folklore as it manifests itself in online spaces, as this will enable scholars and policymakers alike to gain a better understanding of what the convergence of folklore and the internet means for individuals, groups, and societies.

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Introduction

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Chapter 1: The Seismic Cultural Event Model

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Chapter 2: Digitised Folk Creatures as Social Critique

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Conclusion

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Appendix

This section constitutes a visual roadmap examining the references informing the comics in this thesis, clarifying the compositional choices and visual systems that underpin them. The central aim of the comics was to construct an illusionistic panel structure capable of moving fluidly between different registers of meaning while still maintaining narrative and thematic coherence. This approach draws on Chris Ware's experimental panel structures and Nick Sousanis' symbolic, surreal visual language, to present folklore as layered and fluid as opposed to fixed or linear.

A key early influence was the Hereford *Mappa Mundi*, the largest surviving medieval map. Its design as a single flat visual plane composed of interconnected compartments of religious narratives, mythologies and beasts closely parallels what Nick Sousanis refers to as the "unflattening" effect of comics; it is able to document nonlinear, tangential ways of thinking, which the linear, sequential pattern of text cannot. The *mappa mundi* therefore serves as a conceptual analogue for the comics, modelling a form of visual language through which folklore can be authentically depicted and explored. Accordingly, the cover illustration functions as a pastiche of the *mappa mundi*, structuring the thesis content as a series of diagrammatic, symbolic compartments.

This visual principle continues in the chapter headers (Figures 3, 7, 14) which in effect are alternative, more detailed versions of the singular compartments in the cover illustration. Here, each header consists of the specific contents and visual identity of its respective

chapter, the diagonal, non-adjacent panel lines analogous to the compartmental divisions of the *Mappa Mundi*.

The following 22 pages provide a labelled visual map of each comic, explaining each leitmotif and compositional choice as it relates to the content of the thesis.

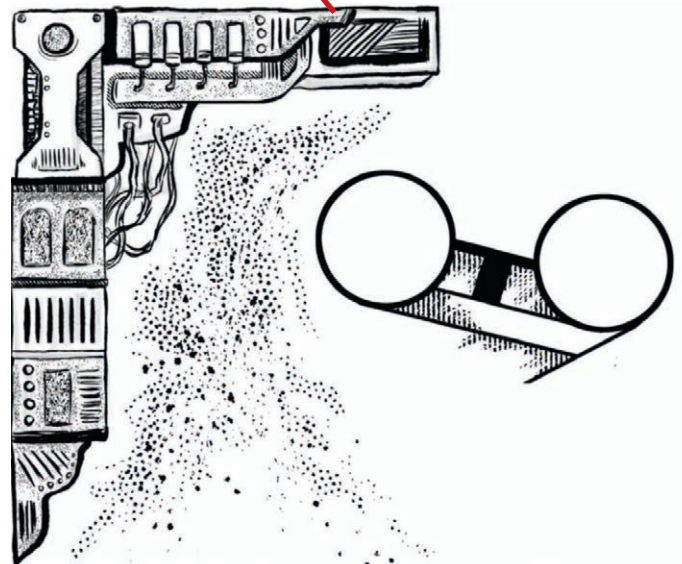
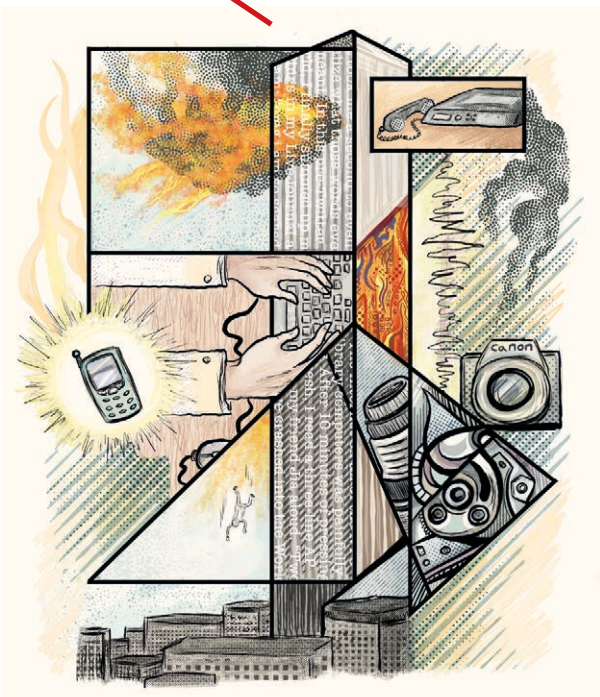
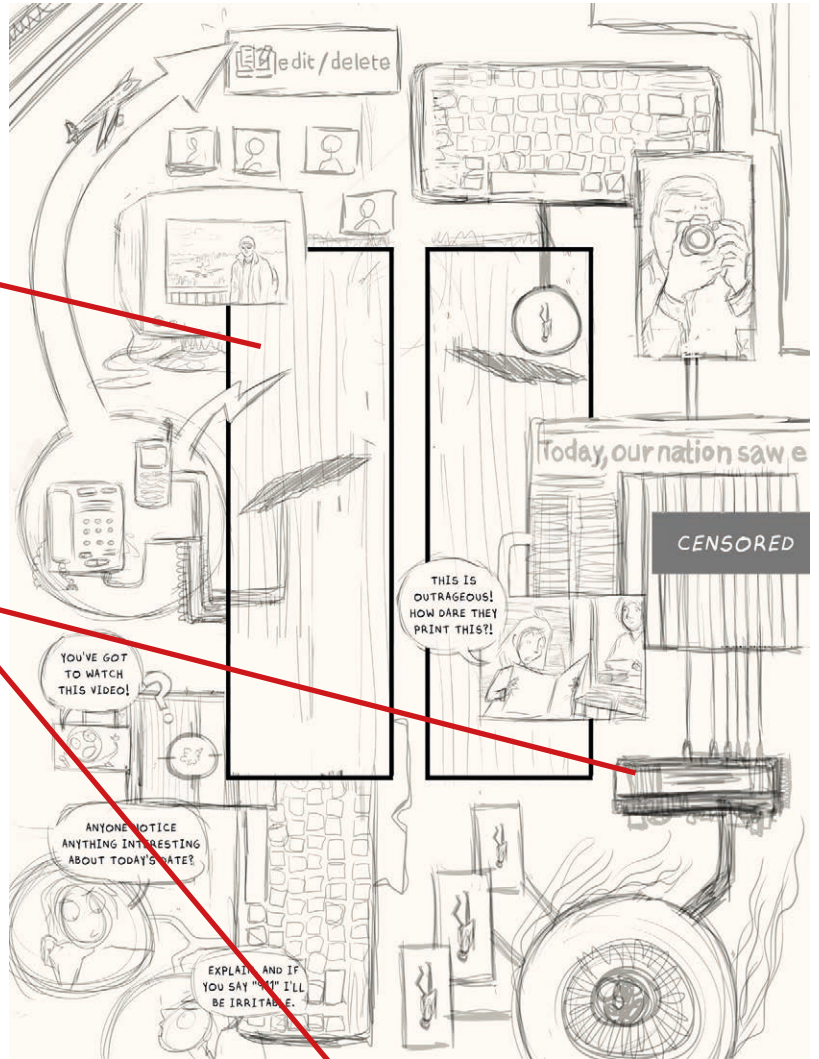
Preparatory sketches/Artwork breakdown

Early artworks produced in July 2023, exploring diagrammatic comics informed by the 9/11 case study discussed in Chapter 1 (Figure 5). This initial comic marked the first visual experiment undertaken for the thesis and established the key leitmotifs and compositional strategies that informed subsequent works.

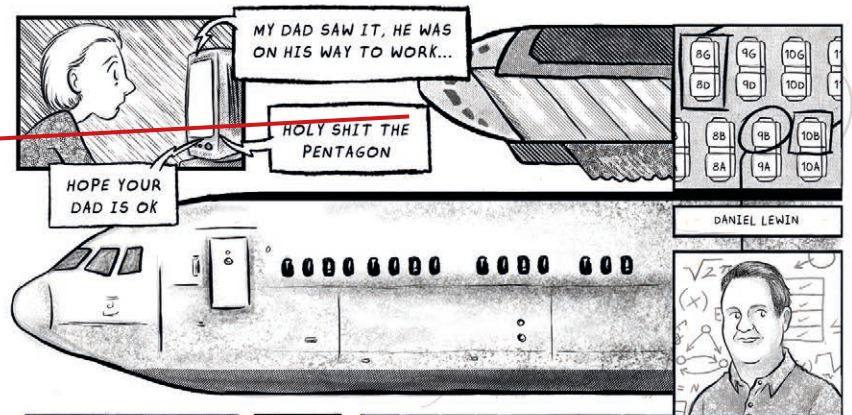
The use of the Twin Towers as an overarching compositional structure was influenced by Chris Ware's use of cutaway architectural interiors that function simultaneously as comic panels.

The computer motherboard, circuitry, and oversized eyes became recurring visual leitmotifs throughout the comics in the final thesis, signifying gateways to the online world and the pervasive role of media technologies in the dissemination of folk narratives.

An early experiment in the use of colour. The incorporation of colour in the comic illustrations was later abandoned, as its emotive cues risked obscuring the sharp contrast and tonal clarity I considered preferable for diagrammatic and symbolic imagery.

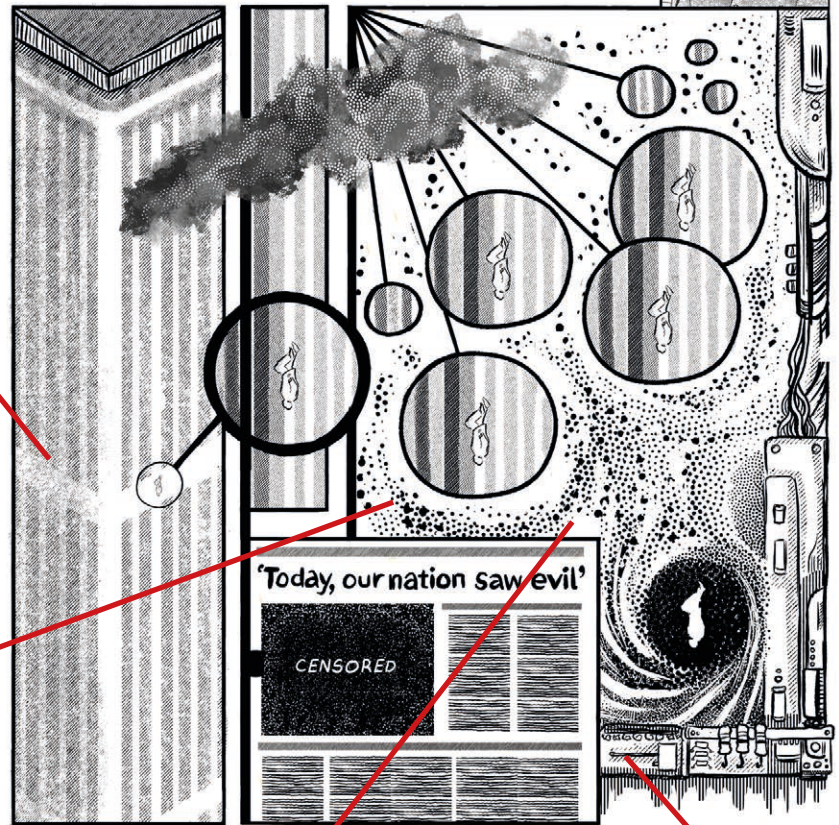


Box cutter/plane hybrid. Hybrid objects are used to create ease of transition between registers of meaning, analogous to the transmission of folklore itself.



Panels either act as traditional borders or as objects in and of themselves (e.g. tower) to create fluidity of meaning.

Interrupted, cross-sectioned panels and the repeated falling man represents how the image cut across restrictions in traditional media through repeated online circulation.



Nebulous/illusionistic pattern leitmotif, showing the passage of information.

Circuit board leitmotif to represent gateways into the online world and technological advances.

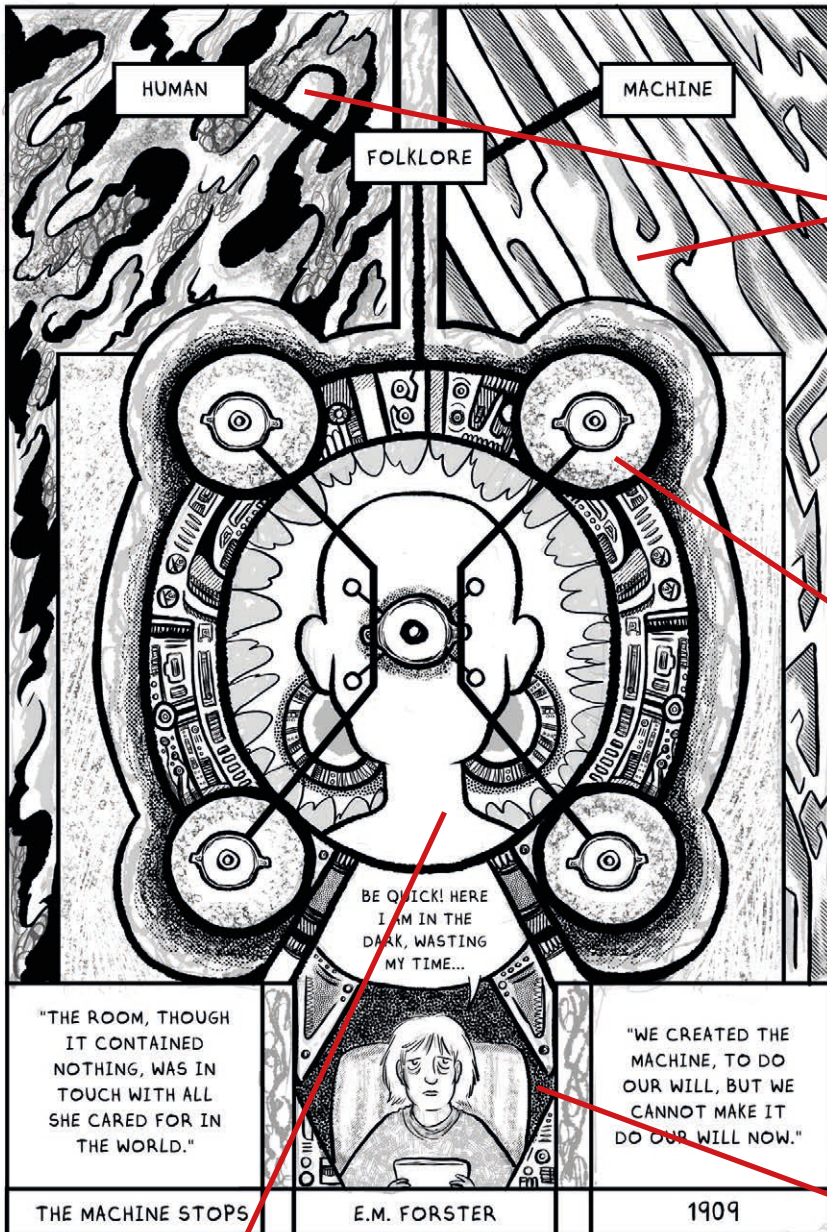
Through these visual linkages, the comic articulates relationships that are difficult to convey through text alone: the entanglement of cultural narrative and technological reproduction during significant events and how multiple layers of meaning overlap and interconnect within contemporary folklore.

In the top-right corner, for example, a plane with a box-cutter for a fuselage (referencing the terrorists' weapon of choice) connects to a seating-plan panel identifying the hijackers' seating positions on the aircraft. A circled seat leads directly to a portrait of Daniel Lewin, believed to be the first victim of the attacks. From there, his image extends into a long vertical structure modelled on a computer motherboard, visually alluding to Lewin's pioneering contributions to the early internet. This structure then flows into the recurring motif of The Falling Man, one of the earliest 9/11 images to achieve lasting notoriety through repeated online circulation. The surrounding field of nebulous halftone dots visualises the movement of information. Both this device and the motherboard pattern function as leitmotifs that recur throughout the comics in the thesis.

Humanising Digital Folklore (Figure 1)

“...while the comics that precede sections focusing on theoretical frameworks lean toward the abstract and diagrammatic, those illustrating case studies adopt a more sequential and narrative form” (p.19).

This first comic is predominantly diagrammatic rather than narrative-based. This reflects its function as a visual analogue to the thesis introduction, in which the foundational arguments, key literature, structural framework, and analytical ethos of the subsequent chapters and case studies are established.



Sinuuous, flesh-like curvatures signify the human, while sharp, angular industrial patterns denote the machine. In the central image below, these two visual languages envelop and intersect, demonstrating how each thrives from its entanglement with the other.

The mechanical eye is introduced here and becomes a recurring leitmotif throughout the comics in the thesis. It chiefly symbolises the processes of observation, mediation, and circulation through which folklore develops meaning in evolving media environments.

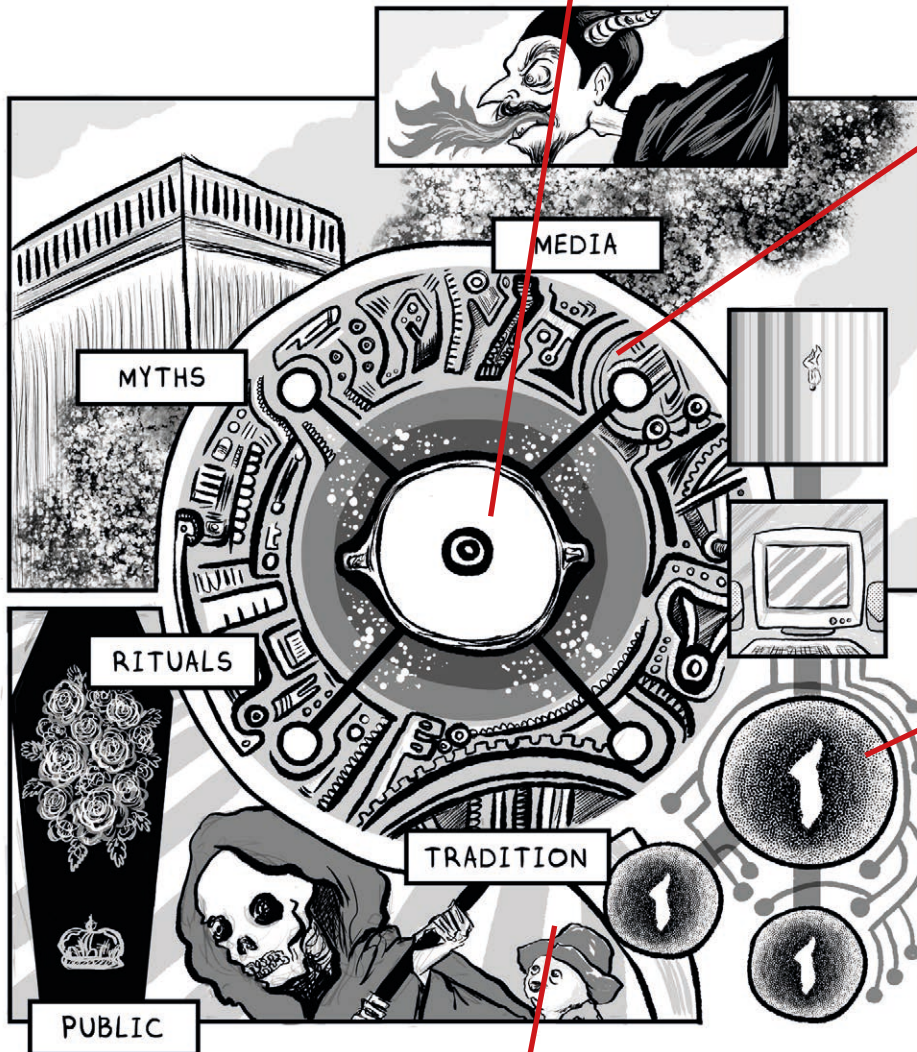
An illustration accompanied by quotations from E. M. Forster’s *The Machine Stops*, referenced in the thesis introduction. It depicts Vashti ensconced within her hexagonal room, detached from the natural world. The selected quotations exemplify anxieties surrounding the colonisation of human experience by the economy of digitally mediated information.

Imagery involving human heads and bodies intersecting with tech-inspired patterns were inspired by my visit to an exhibition displaying the work of Alex Grey and Allison Grey. Their artworks depict highly detailed, transparent human bodies revealing nervous systems and energy fields, merging with geometric or cosmic patterns. These diagrammatic figures struck me as an ideal means of conveying the interconnected relationship between human culture and the digital.

Chapter 1 Header (Figure 3)

As well as illustrating the processes through which folklore adapts and responds to technological advances, the mechanical eye leitmotif signifies the intersection of humanity and digital technology. This is particularly important in Chapter 1, where the analyses consider the evolution from traditional visual media to contemporary digital platforms.

This central image pulls heavily from Figure 1. This is to show that Chapter 1 develops the opening argument of the Introduction that digitised societies are not inherently inhuman, and also highlights the significance of the mechanical eye leitmotif, which features prominently in the SCE phases comic (Figure 2)



Leitmotifs used to visualise phases of the SCE model (looping strands) intersect with imagery from the 9/11 *Falling Man*, illustrating how the photo is used as one of the key foundations of analysis for the model.

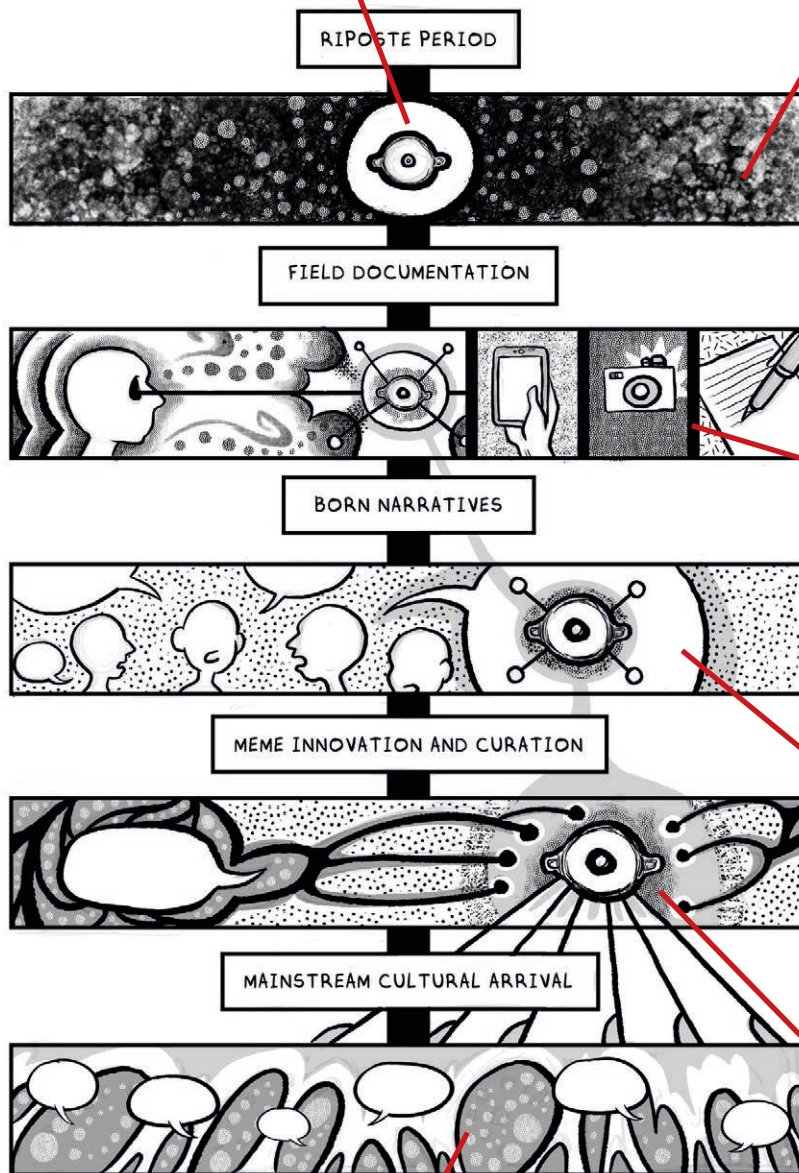
This comic references the case studies of the chapter and their key visual themes, providing an overview of the chapter's visual identity before the reader engages with the material. As noted:

"...the comics are strategically placed at the beginning of each section, prompting readers to engage with key themes, structures, and visuals before delving into the written analysis. This visual engagement is intended to activate the reader's interpretive faculties, enriching their understanding of the material by reflecting the participatory processes central to both comics and contemporary internet folklore." (p.17)

The Seismic Cultural Event model comic (Figure 2)

This comic transforms the five-step template of the Seismic Cultural Event (SCE) model into a narrative form, employing the mechanical eye as a recurring character.

The Riposte Period is depicted as a dark, nebulous visual field devoid of discernible imagery, reflecting the spontaneous nature of reactions to an event.



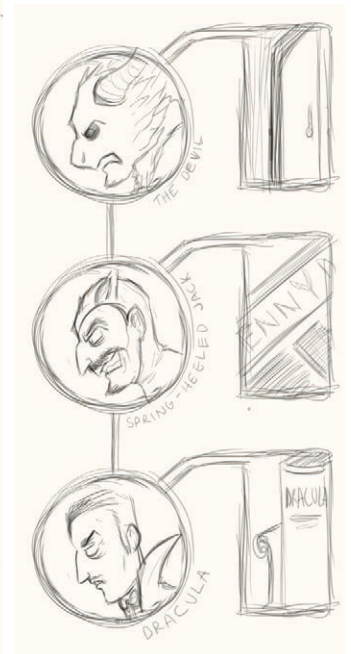
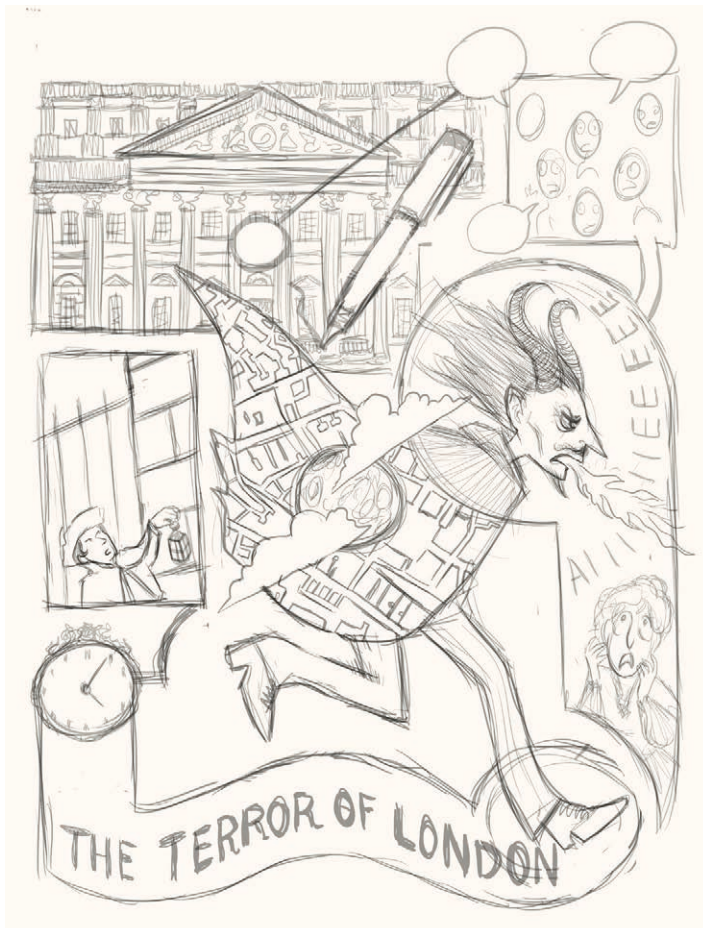
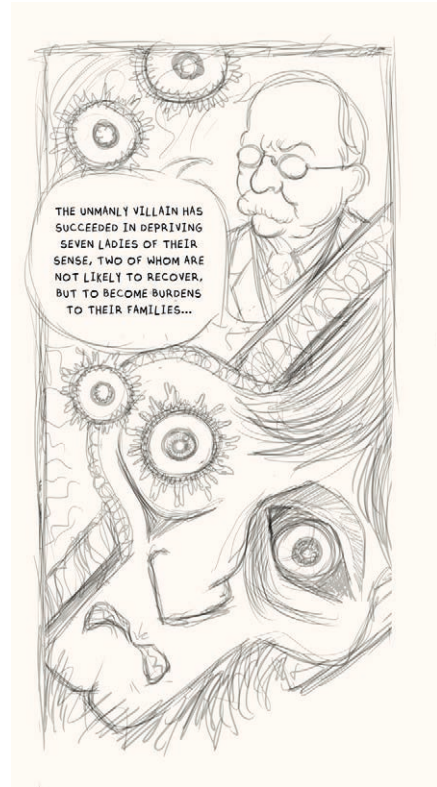
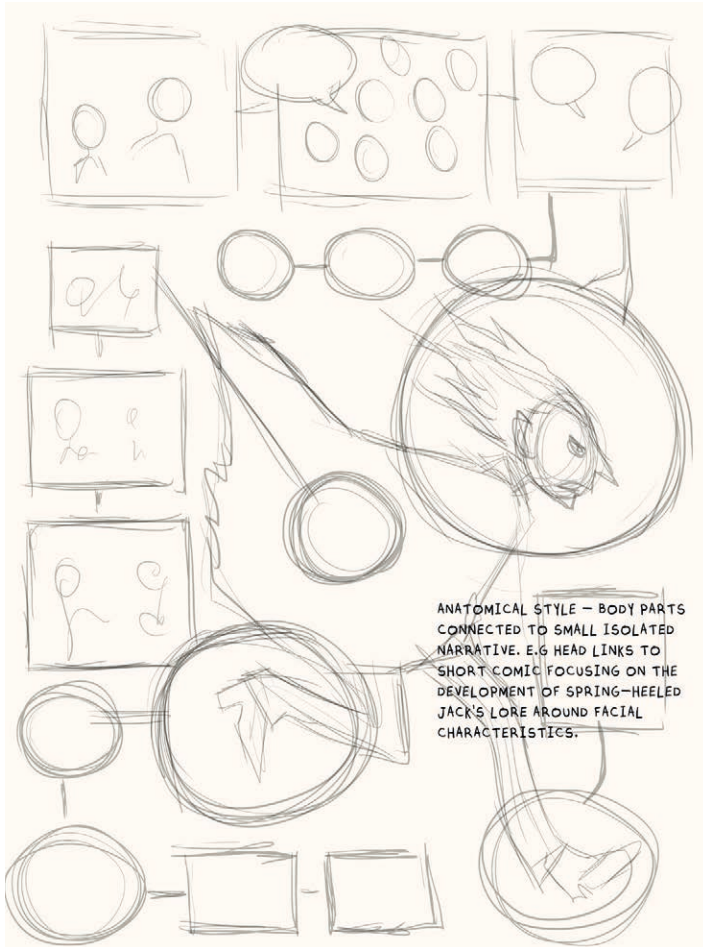
The Field Documentation phase is represented through images of media technologies alongside a human eye connected to the mechanical eye. This visualisation conveys how meaning emerges at the intersection of human perception and online mediation.

In the Born Narratives phase, figures are shown in conversation, with one speech bubble containing the mechanical eye. This signifies the emergence of communicative practices in which reflective and measured responses are exchanged through media technologies.

In the Meme Innovation and Curation phase, strands extend from the speech bubble and converge on the mechanical eye, symbolising the collective development of narratives through meme-making and creative reinterpretation across media platforms.

In the Mainstream Cultural Arrival phase, the mechanical eye produces its own strands and speech bubbles. The comic as a whole visualises how collective human thought, mediated through evolving technologies, allows narratives to enter public discourse and ultimately achieve cultural ubiquity.

Notes and preparatory sketches for the Spring-Heeled Jack case study comic (Figure 4)





Mansion House, the site of the first official complaint to reach the Mayor of London regarding the alleged attacks.

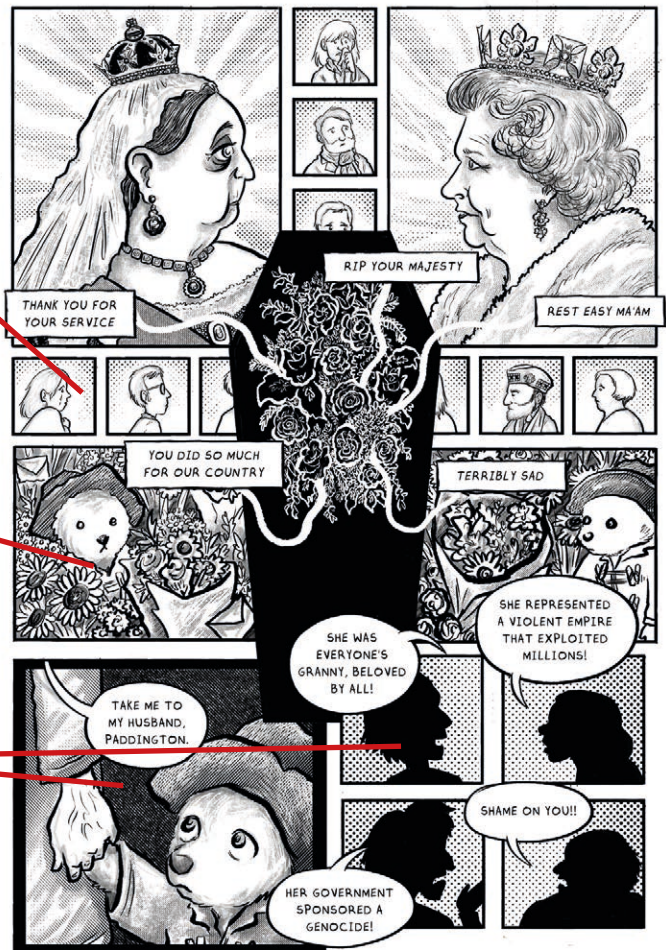
London street map intersected with figure of Jack and night sky, inspired by the cross-sectioned building interiors of Chris Ware.

Panel design/borders inspired by illustrated Penny Dreadfuls and leaflets.

Panels lined up to coffin, emulating the queue for the lying-in-state of Elizabeth II. Flowers connect to tributes inspired by online tweets

Panels lined up to coffin, emulating the queue for the lying-in-state of Elizabeth II. Flowers connect to tributes inspired by online tweets

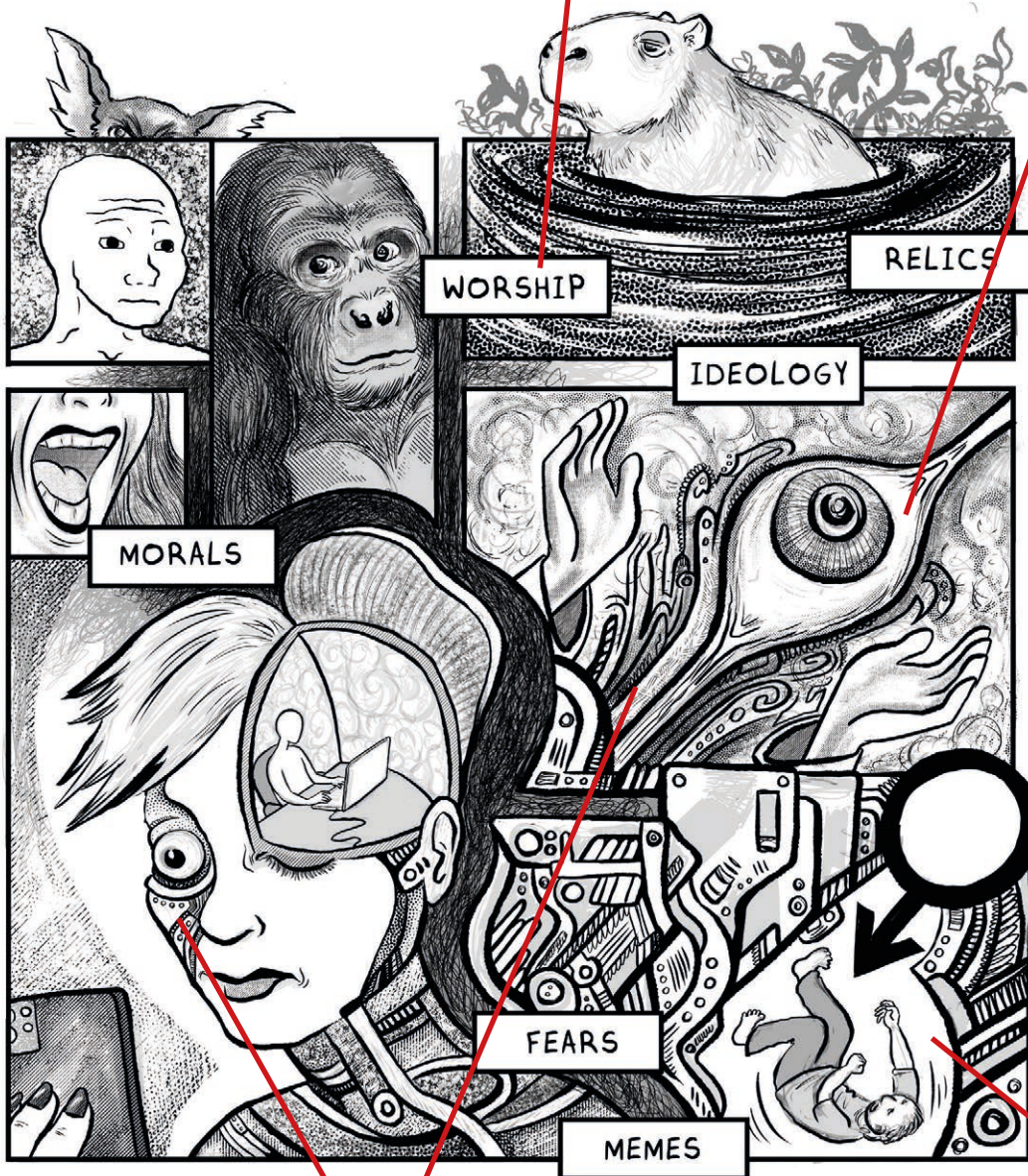
Paddington leading the Queen into the afterlife, as depicted in a popular meme



Chapter 2 Header (Figure 7)

Key words indicating the key points of analysis and argument.

The eye leitmotif reappears in Chapter 2 in a more naturalistic form, signaling a shift toward case studies grounded in folkloric heritage and traditional character tropes (monsters, folk creatures etc).



Continuing the motherboard/circuit motif, this iteration uses curved lines to reference older technologies, such as gyroscopes and mechanical cogs. These forms merge with flesh and body parts, evoking the figure of the monster as a manifestation of anxieties surrounding increasingly industrialised societies.

The figure depicted in a state of turmoil symbolizes the emotionally challenging subject matter addressed in the chapter. The accompanying gender pictogram highlights the extent to which these issues intersect with gender, as exemplified by phenomena such as incels and the “Karen” meme.

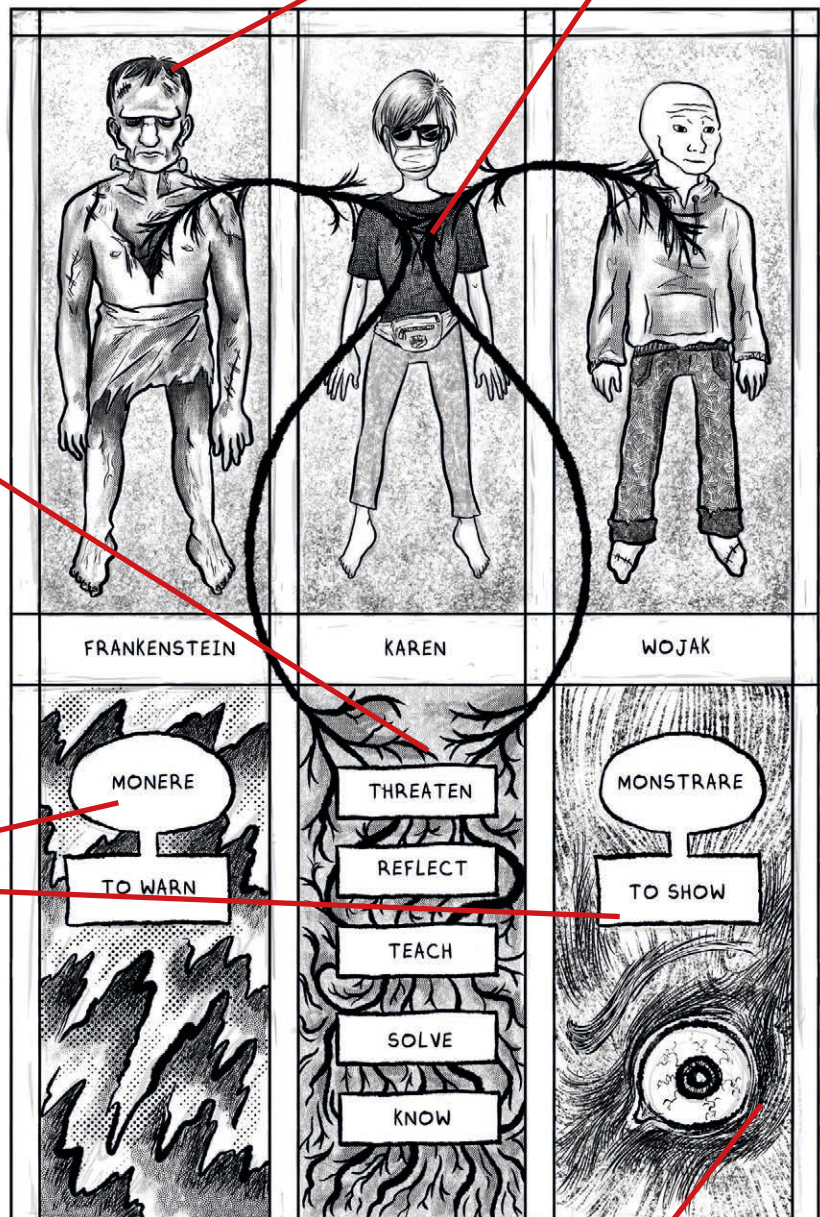
The Monstrous Creature comic (Figure 8)

The two key case studies in the monstrous creature section of Chapter 2 are connected via vein-like strands to Frankenstein's monster. An early decision was made to depict the Karen and the Wojak, meme characters made up of various cultural components, as Frankenstein's monster, a character who similarly possesses a composite body.

"Like Frankenstein's monster, meme characters are composites; an amalgamation of cultural symbols pulling from a breadth of folkloric traditions that extol or confront human virtues and flaws." (p104)

These strands connect to a series of words which illustrate the baseline functions of the monster as outlined in the thesis: to impart lessons and knowledge through threatening, fearsome creatures.

Flanking the functional traits of the monster are the Latin terms *mostrare*, meaning "to show," and *monere*, meaning "to warn," from which the word "monster" is derived.



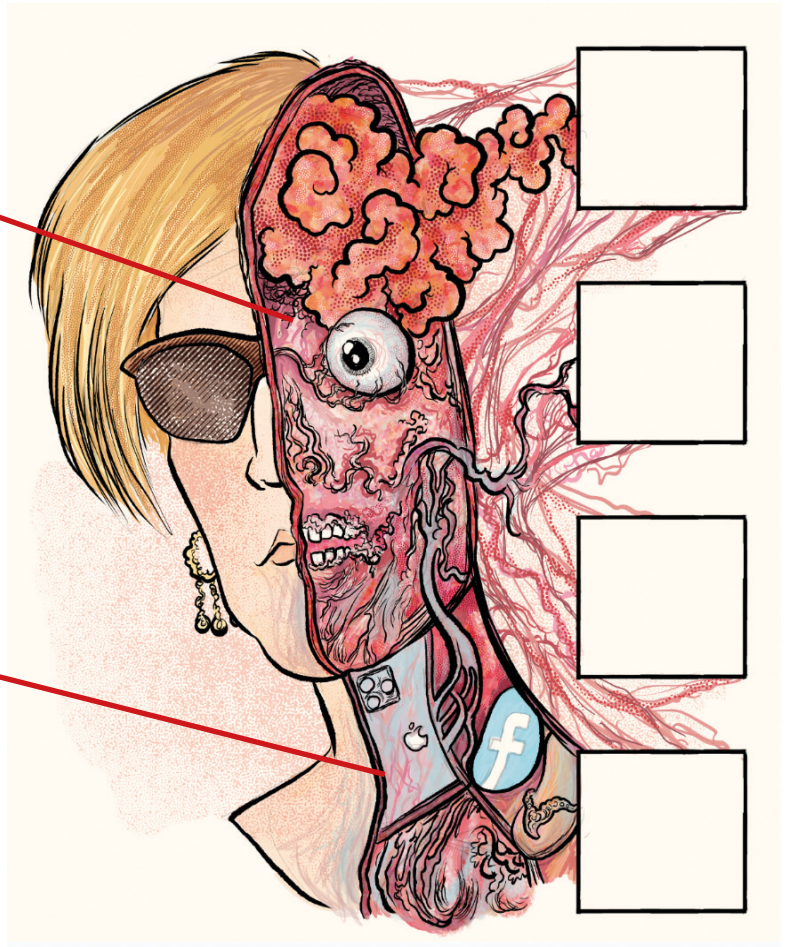
Reappearance of eye leitmotif, only overlaid with harsher details such as veins and a frowning brow, as befitting of the monster theme.

Preparatory concept art for the Karen case study comic (Figure 9)

An early decision was made to depict the Karen, a meme character made up of various cultural components, as Frankenstein's monster, a character who similarly possesses a composite body.

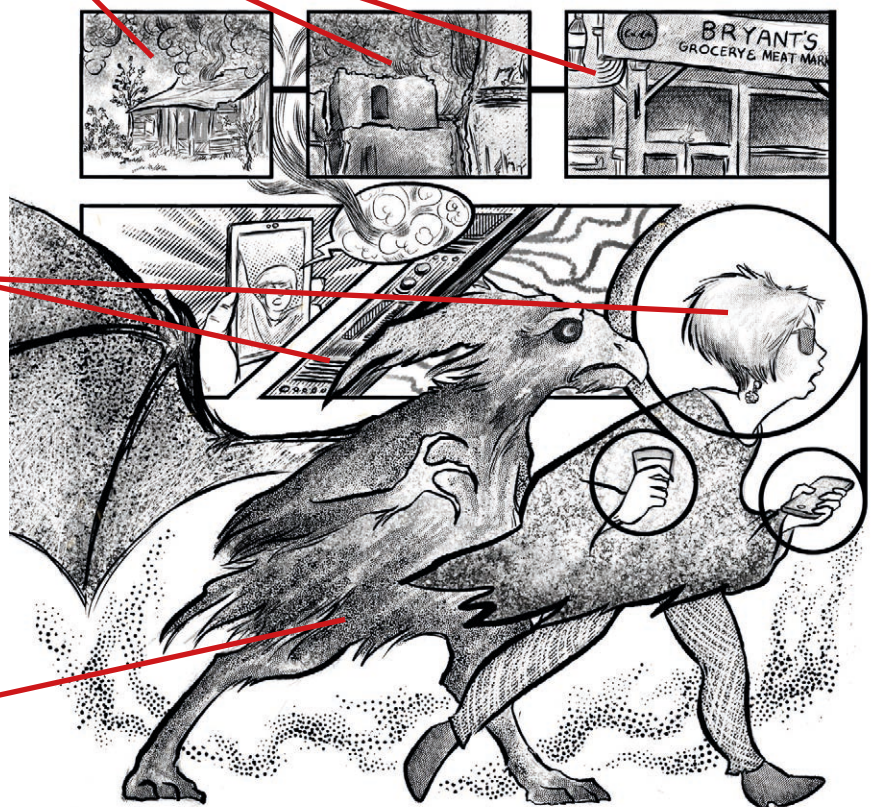
"Like Frankenstein's monster, meme characters are composites; an amalgamation of cultural symbols pulling from a breadth of folkloric traditions that extol or confront human virtues and flaws."
(p104)

The Karen's anatomy is intersected with technological devices and patterns, relating the concept of a character conjured by online discourse.



Snapshots of key locations related to racist killings prompted by false accusations of attacks on white women- Rosewood, Tulsa, and Bryant's Grocery & Meat Market

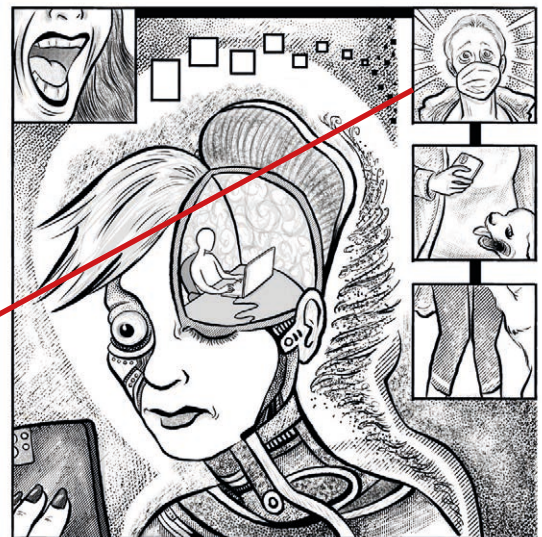
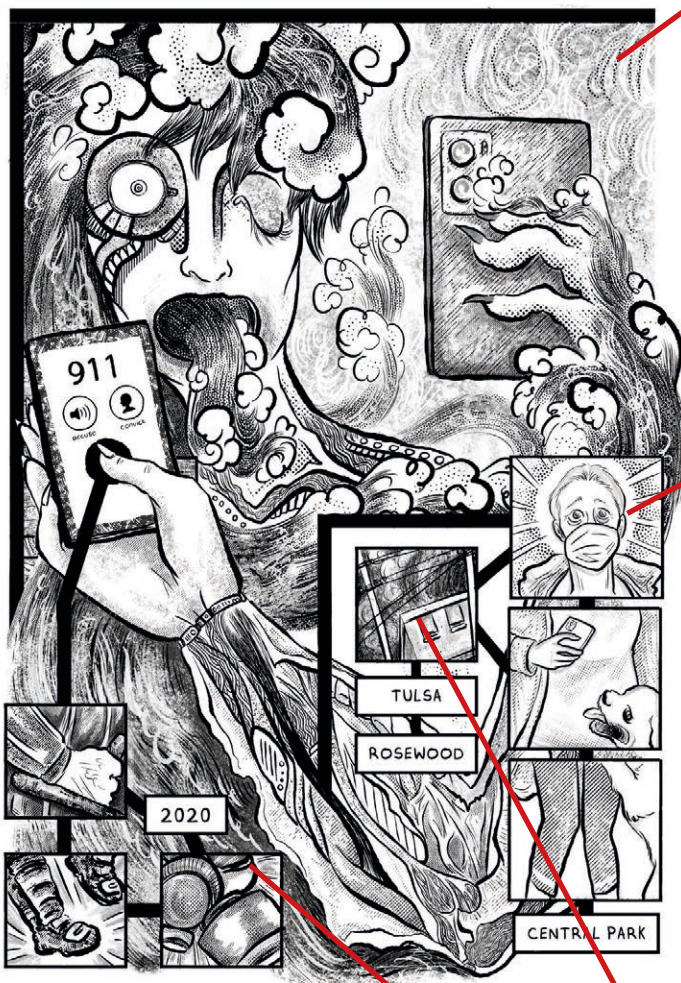
The physical features and accessories of the Karen are linked to the snapshots and motherboard patterns, referencing how historical context influences the development of meme character narratives in contemporary online communities.



Traditional devil-esque monster walking alongside the Karen, a monster of contemporary society.

Early iterations of the comics employed a square format before the decision was made to adopt a full-page A4 composition. Following this shift, previously produced square-format comics were recomposed and combined to form larger, full-page layouts. This process is illustrated here, in which three individual square comics based on the the Karen case study were integrated into the final full-page composition (Figure 9).

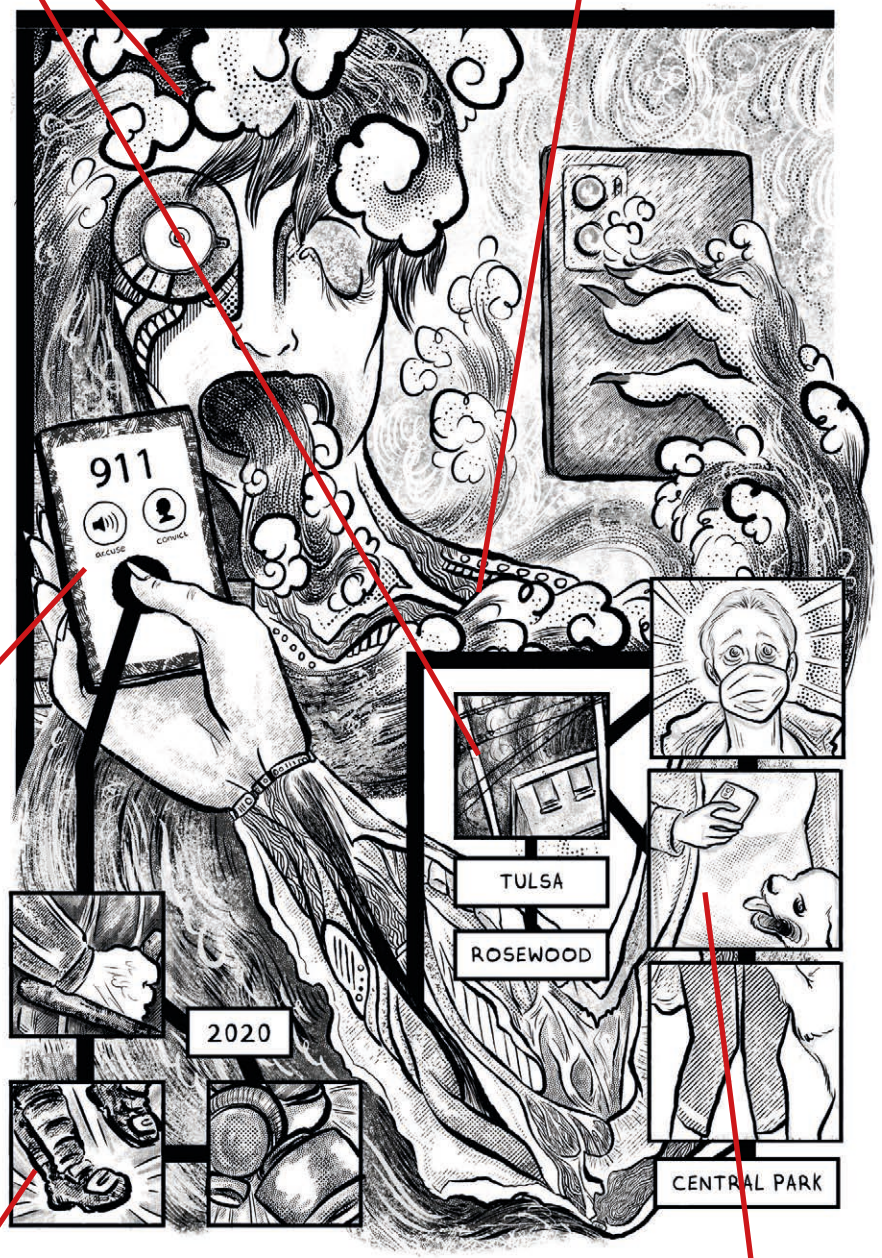
Additionally, the bust of the Karen depicted in the second panel was subsequently repurposed as the chapter header illustration (Figure 7).



In this final version, the smoke and blood from the Tulsa/Rosewood massacres are intersected with the anatomical cross-section of the Karen figure, symbolising the racial history embedded in the Karen's symbolism.

Motherboard/technological pattern leitmotif

911 call interface, with the words "accuse" and "convict" integrated into the call button icons. The cross-sectioned veins of the arm holding the phone extend into the Tulsa and Rosewood panels, visually linking the contemporary device to these historical events. This connection underscores the recurring pattern of false accusations by white women and their role in instigating racially motivated violence.



Police/riot gear referencing response to the George Floyd protests in 2020, an event which triggered further dissemination of the Karen meme

The "Central Park Karen," who went viral days before the murder of George Floyd

The Wojak case study comic (Figure 10)

Soybeans, symbolising to the “soy” suffix in “soyjak” to denote the unproven belief that products with high levels of soy increase oestrogen levels in men, a hormone that develops female reproductive characteristics, making them weaker.

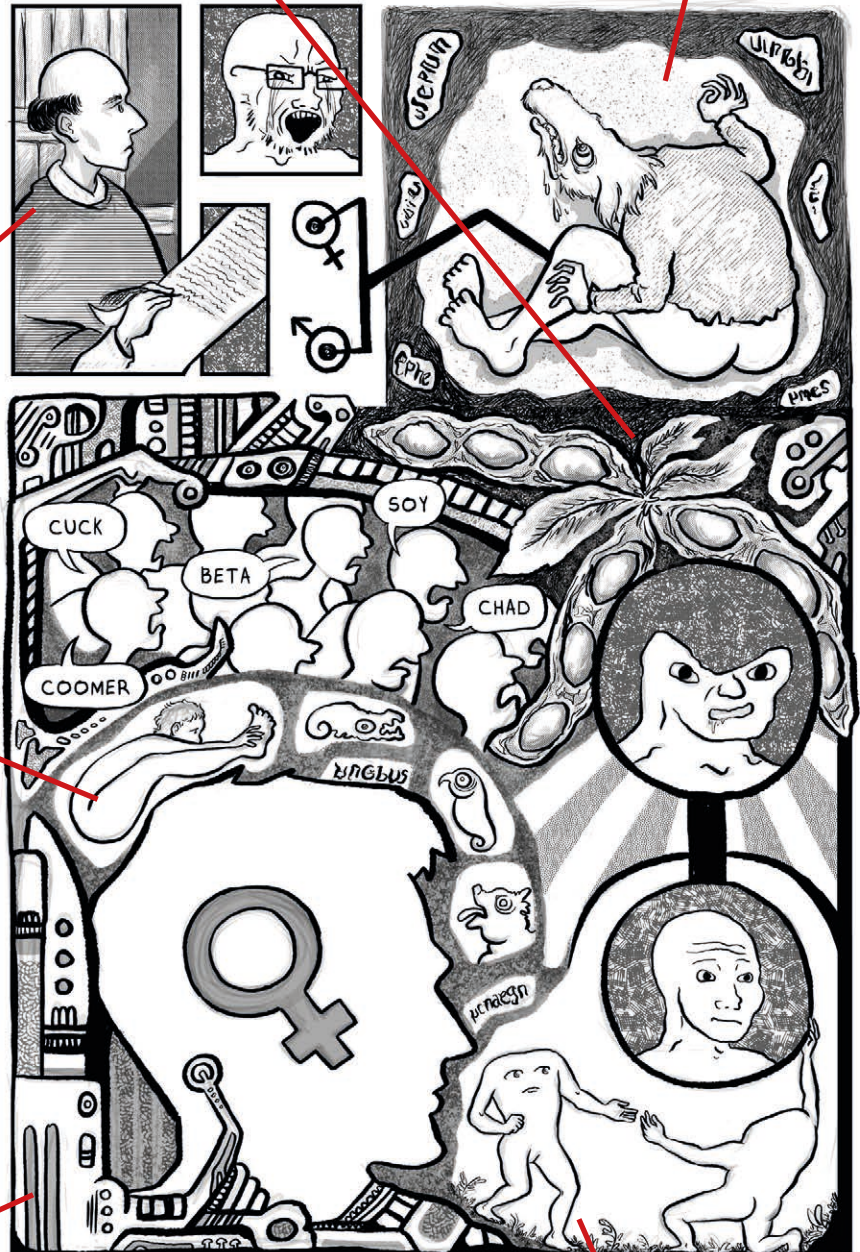
The “dog-headed monster” with ambiguous sexual traits, related to perspectives of gender and monstrosity, explored in contemporary culture through Wojak memes.

Portrait of Vincent of Beauvais, medieval friar and encyclopedist who described the “dog-headed monster.” His presence in the comic symbolises the overarching influence of medieval bestiaries and encyclopedias on contemporary Wojak memes.

The creatures depicted are inspired by the monsters inhabiting the outer margins of the Hereford Mappa Mundi. In this composition, they frame the silhouette of a conventionally attractive man, symbolising the historical continuity between the monsterisation of marginalised figures and the contemporary deployment of gendered Wojak imagery within manosphere communities.

Motherboard visual leitmotif intermingled with Mappa Mundi-style borders and compartments.

Blemmyes, medieval humanoid monsters featured in the Hereford Mappa Mundi, who bear strong physical similarities to the design of the average Wojak.



The Benign Creature comic (Figure 11)

The Furby, an amiable yet playful character that became a popular virtual pet and exemplifies the essence of the benign creature.

The “creeper” a personified computer bug/virus with a mischievous character.

A 1980s/1990s early-era desktop computer.

The motherboard circuit patterns and background are interwoven with archaic tech equipment, such as cog wheels and pistons, to show the storied history of the benign creature as the personification of evolving yet unreliable tech.

The benign creature mischievous yet ultimately affirming and encouraging, embodying altruistic and empathetic values. This central image represents my interpretation: large-eyed and cute, but intentionally tinged with the bizarre and monstrous to highlight its mischievous nature and to suggest an overlap between benign and monstrous creatures in terms of transgressive playfulness.

Thomas Edison, who used the term “bug” to personify technological issues as early as 1878. Via a series of tech-inspired connecting lines, Edison is linked to the Gremlin, the desktop computer, the creeper virus, the Furby, and finally the illustration of the ultimate benign creature.



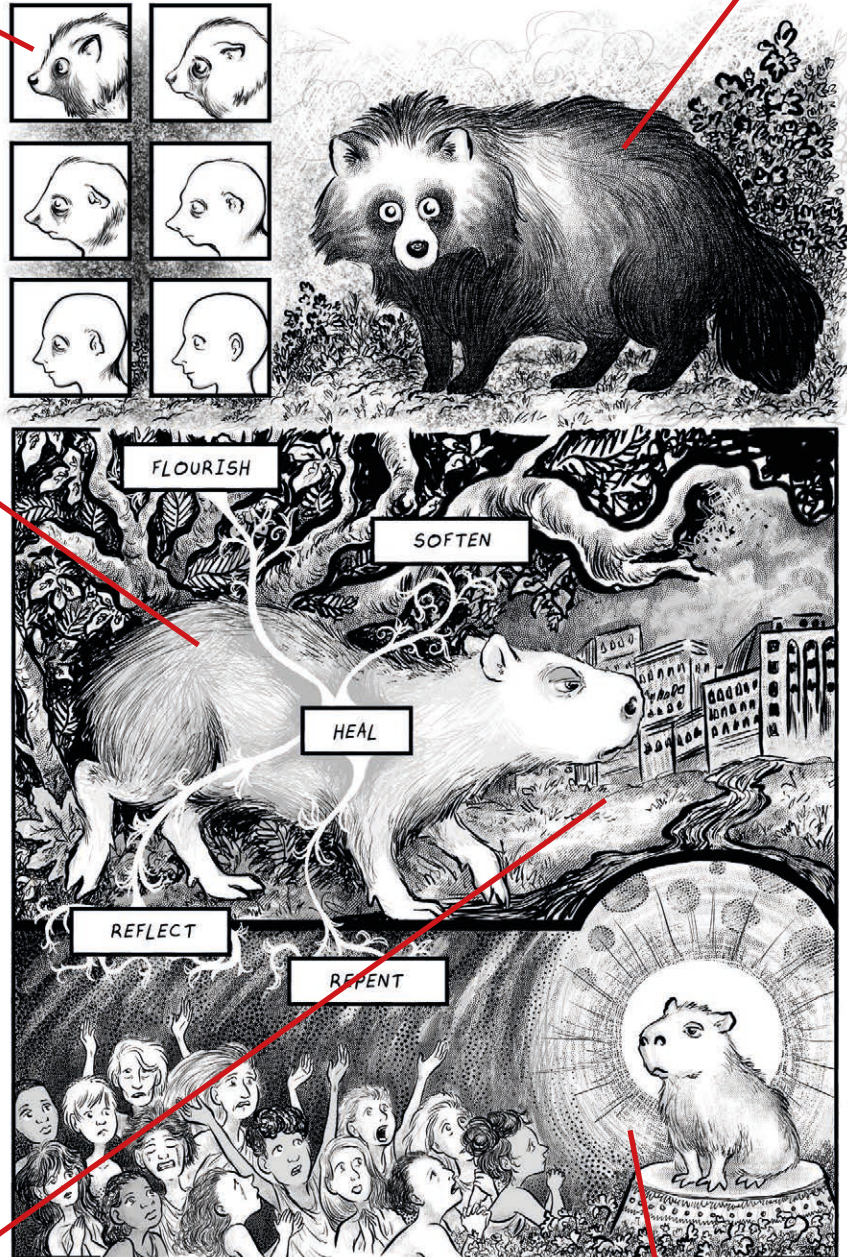
A pesky gremlin holding a spanner. These folkloric creatures were blamed for inexplicable faults in advanced aircraft machinery, and are considered in this thesis to be a spiritual ancestor of computer bugs.

The Capybara case study comic (Figure 12)

Tanuki, portrayed as lovable tricksters in Japanese folklore, are subject to comparative analysis with the capybara in this case study. They are placed above the capybara in the comic, denoting their status as spiritual ancestors to the capybara in terms of their role as bespoke symbols of harmony with the environment.

These panels show a tanuki (raccoon dog) shapeshifting into a human to play tricks and impart moral lessons.

The terms “flourish,” “soften,” “heal,” “reflect,” and “repent,” surround the capybara. These terms are to exemplify the tranquility, wellness and reflectiveness associated with the capybara in meme culture.



The capybara is journeying from the South American flora into a cityscape, with a dirty river descending from it. This highlights the recurring theme of environmental consciousness underpinning some capybara memes, particularly in the context of the viral news story concerning capybaras invading a gated community in Argentina to reclaim their habitat.

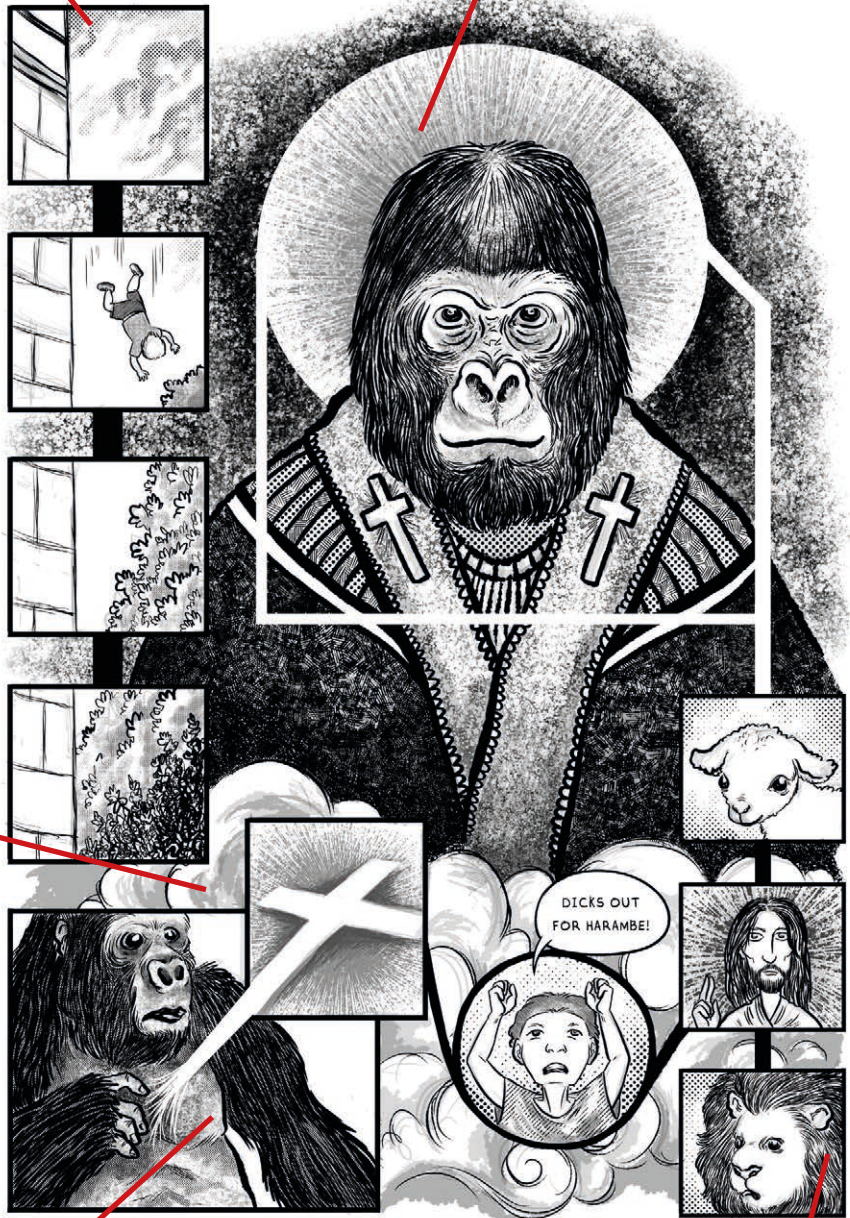
This scene of a crowd worshipping the capybara as a god-like figure references another aspect of the capybara meme; that of fanatical reverence of the animal due to the lessons they impart.

Harambe the Gorilla case study comic (Figure 13)

Harambe is depicted here with heavy religious iconography, clad in holy garmets and given a halo to designate his status as a figure considered to be sacred in meme culture.

Descending panels showing the child falling into Harambe's enclosure.

This background references both the smoke emitting from a gun, and the clouds of the "Meme Heaven" collage, where Harambe is often placed in the center of various well-respected celebrities.



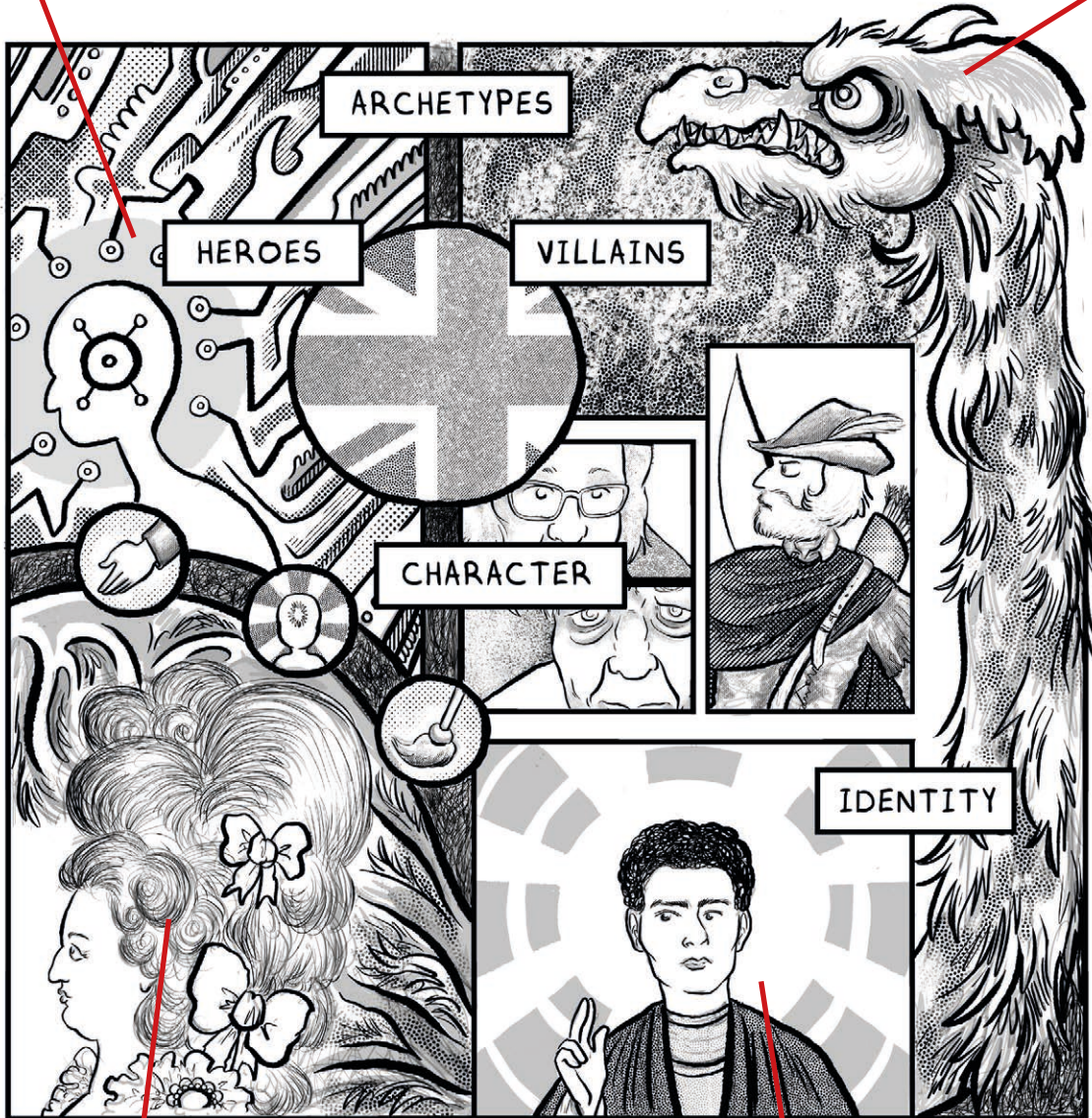
Harambe shot by a bullet that transforms into a crucifix, showing his status as a martyred figure. This connects to a circular pane, imitating the sight of a gun, featuring an angry online commentator declaring the oft-quoted tribute, "dicks out for Harambe,"

Harambe's halo is connected Jesus, referred to as the "Lamb of God," and the "Lion of Judah." This is to show the connection between animal symbolism and religious iconography, and how this theme relates to the treatment of Harambe as a sacred animal.

Chapter 3 Header (Figure 14)

This panel echoes the visual style of the SCE model comic, as the chapter builds on the model's findings. It also references the comic at the end of the chapter, which visually applies the SCE model to the public fascination with Luigi Mangione.

A dragon, typically slayed by a brave knight. This references the traditional hero's tale of British folklore examined in-depth in the Captain Tom and Handforth Parish Council Zoom case studies.

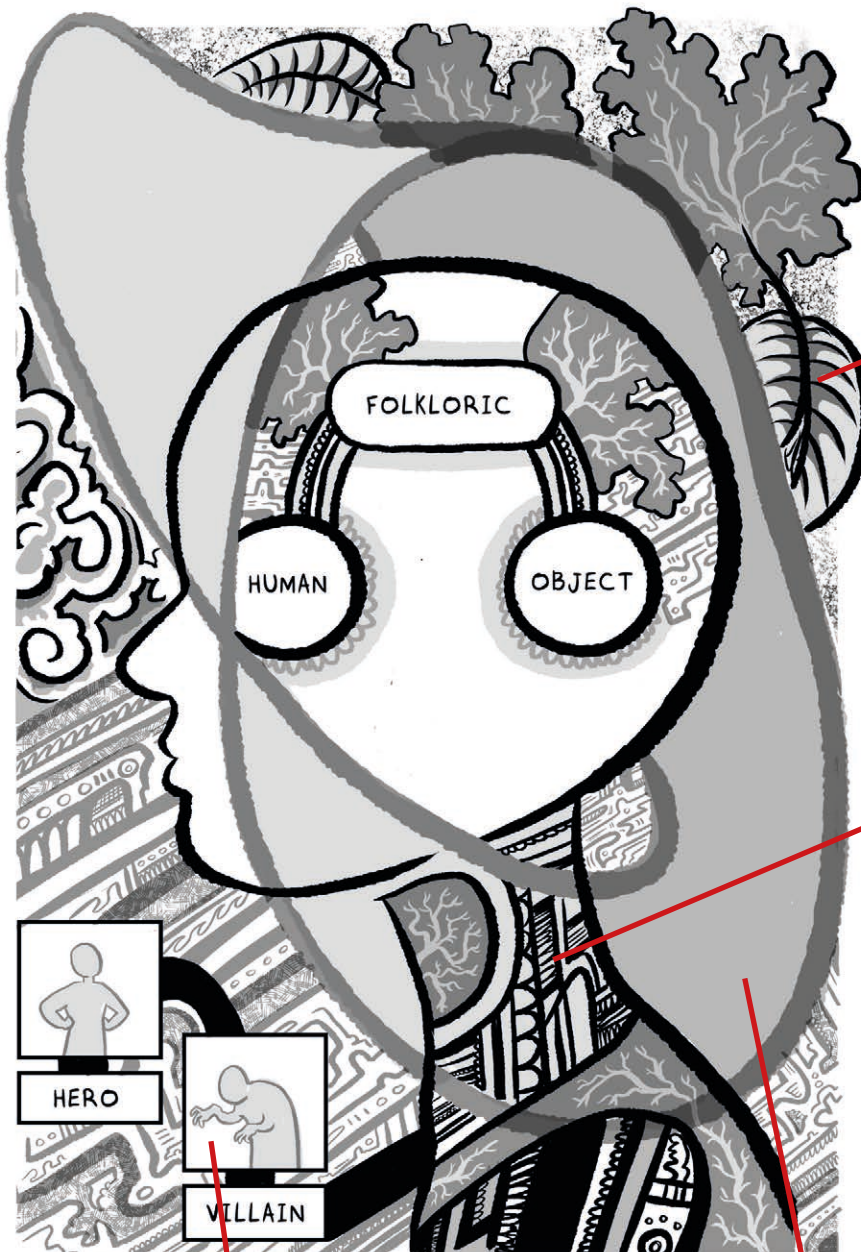


Marie Antoinette is used in the introduction to this chapter as an example of a pre-internet folkloric human object, whose unpopular public image was heavily influenced by the growing pamphlet industry. Above are three distinct symbols which represent three hero types outlined by Klapp (1949).

Luigi Mangione, depicted as a holy figure. Some artwork shared online has shown Mangione as a beatified saint to show support for his alleged cause.

The Folkloric Human Object comic (Figure 4)

The comics that precede sections on theoretical frameworks tend to be abstract and diagrammatic. By contrast, the comic introducing the coinage of the term “folkloric human object” employs an anatomy-inspired diagram featuring a large human head intersected with various symbols, all conveying the essence of the concept.



These shapes, reminiscent of brain cells and neural pathways, are positioned behind the Möbius strip to symbolize how the authentic human is obscured by folkloric narratives which emerge in public discourse.

Recalling the cyborg imagery of the Frankenstein's monster Karen in chapter 2, the folkloric human object consists of circuitboards and cables, symbolising the intersection of digital narrative with the identity of flesh-and-blood human beings.

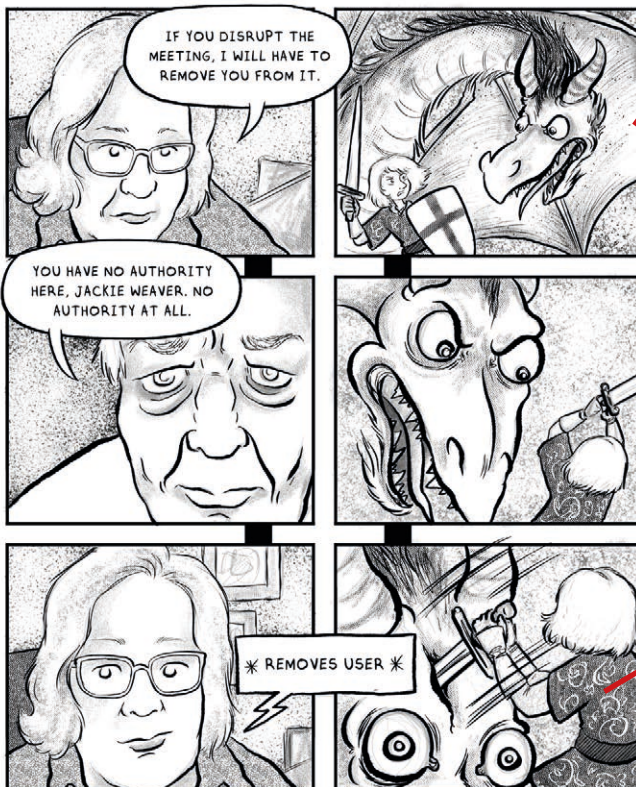
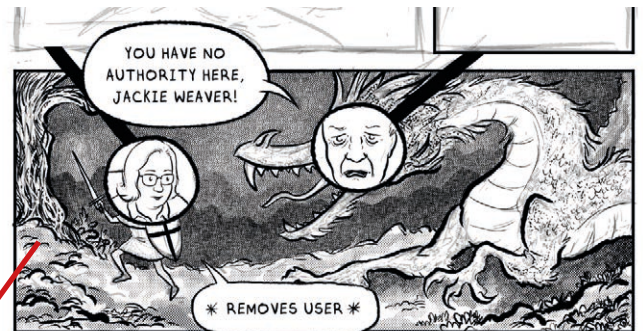
Archetypal “hero” and “villain,” symbols. These simplistic tropes popular in folk narrative are used as a basis of analysis for several figures who earned immense popularity online.

This overarching shape alludes to the opening of the introduction, specifically Foster's (2015) likening of the relationship between folklore and the “folkloresque” to a Möbius strip, in which both exist as two sides of the same surface. With regard to the folkloric human object, real-life individuals intersect with and become interchangeable with the “folkloresque.”

Preparatory concept art and final comic for the Jackie Weaver case study comic (Figure 4)



This artwork, depicting Jackie Weaver as a wizard, was produced in 2021 during the height of the video's popularity. This was prior to my decision to include the Handforth Parish Council Zoom as a case study, but returning to my original satirical interpretation of Weaver proved to be a key starting point for analysing the meme from the perspective of how it relates to traditional British folklore and heroes.



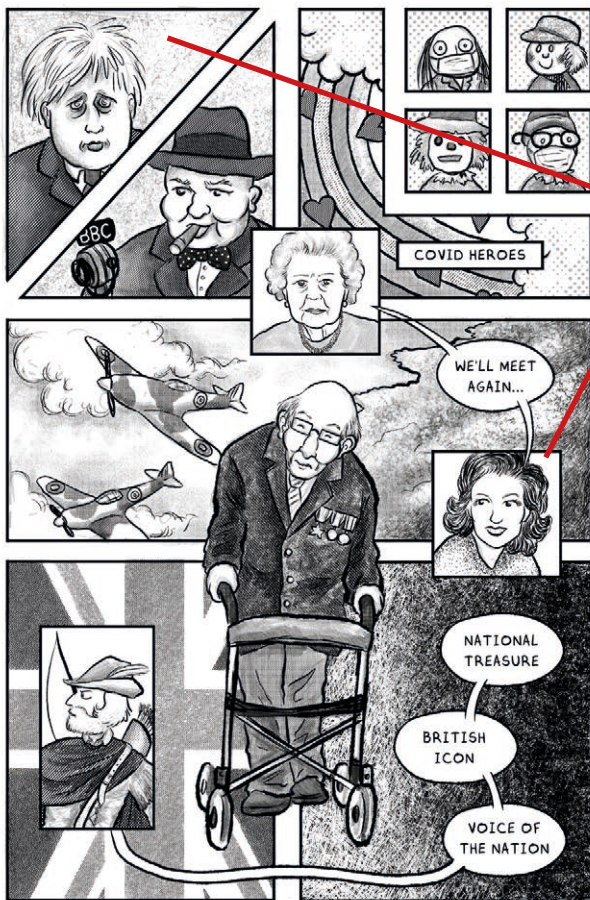
This initial artwork shows the process of formulating a visual theme that compares the narrative of the Handforth Parish Council Zoom to that of the traditional British "dragon-slayer," myth, and the idea of the plucky hero slaying the villain.

The moment in which Weaver ejects a member of the call is lined up alongside a scene of a medieval hero slaying a dragon.



Diagrammatic symbols of the three hero types outlined by Klapp (1949) that can be closely associated with the hero image cultivated on-line of Weaver.

Discarded original version and final artwork for the Captain Tom case study comic (Figure 4)



This initial artwork for the Captain Tom case study was scrapped following my removal of certain analyses and arguments in the editing process, such as comparisons between the UK government's rhetoric and that of wartime prime minister Winston Churchill, and the use of WW2 nostalgia via the song "We Meet Again," by Vera Lynn.

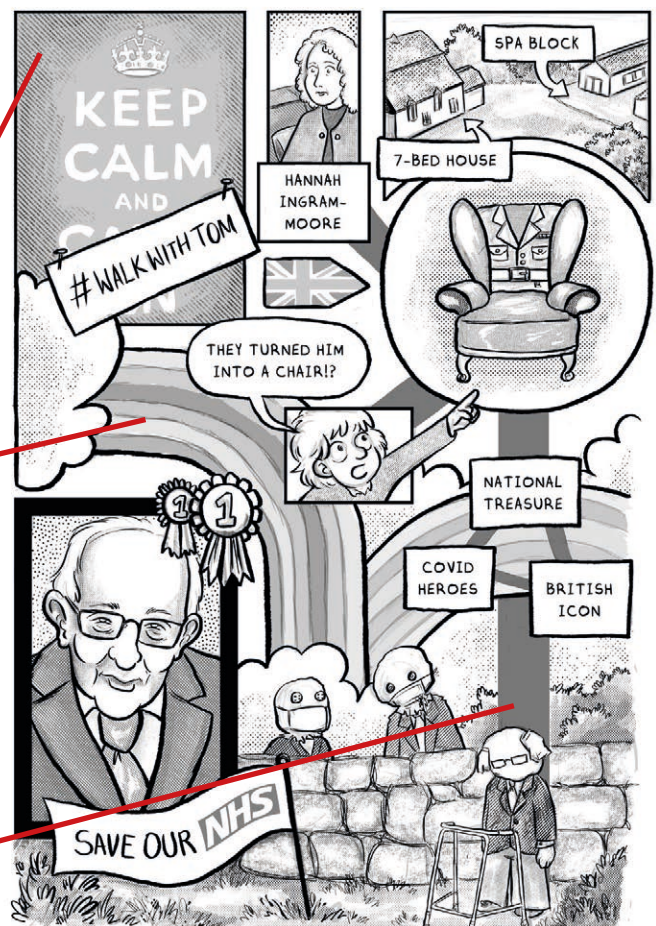
This case study proved to be the most difficult to write and edit, and it was through illustrating it and establishing the key visual identity that I was able to establish a better flow of argument and angle to the analysis.

This demonstrates the value of comics as a reflexive and generative method of cognitively engaging in academic inquiry.

"Keep Calm and Carry On," poster, popularised during World War II, superimposed with a #WalkWithTom note. This symbolises the appropriation of wartime nostalgia and "stiff upper lip" attitude by the public image of Captain Tom.

Rainbows, which were adopted as a symbol of giving thanks to the NHS during the pandemic.

Scarecrow effigies of Captain Tom, popular in scarecrow festivals and public displays. A grey column connects one scarecrow to the chair designed with Captain Tom's uniform and insignia, centralising his broader role as an objectified effigy of hope and patriotism.



Discarded original version and final artwork for the Captain Tom case study comic (Figure 4)

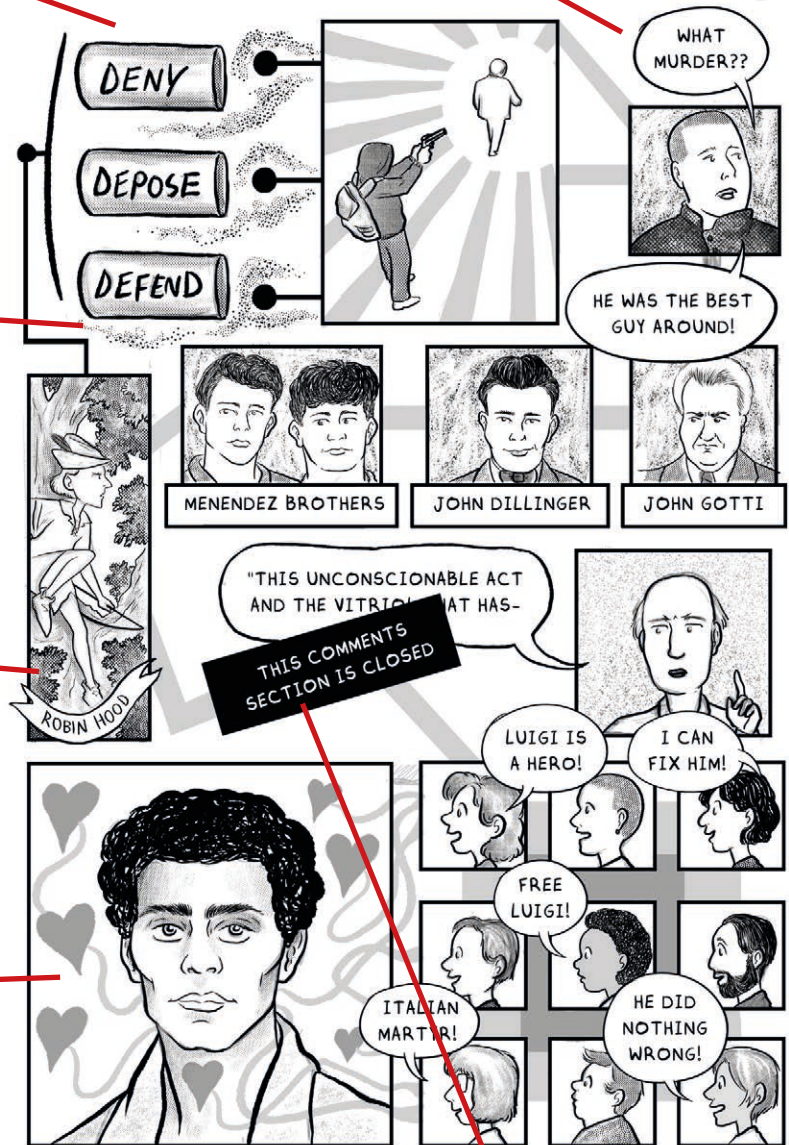
“Deny, Depose, Defend,” bullet casings found at the scene of Brian Thompson’s death. The surrounding bracket diagrams and descending lines are meant to emulate the graphics used in medical analysis studies.

“He was the best guy around!” meme showing a man expressing support for John Gotti, a member of the Italian-American mafia. Below are portraits of Gotti, John Dillinger and the Menendez brothers, other criminals perceived as attractive and worthy of support.

Nebulous/illusionistic pattern leitmotif showing the passage of information is used here to show how the bullet casings were used to carry a key message against the health insurance industry.

Portrait of Robin Hood, the outlaw hero who gave to the poor, is linked to a series of panels depicting avid supporters of Mangione, demonstrating the thematic link between the folk hero and this contemporary figure.

“Vines” of love hearts emitted from the throng of online supporters envelop a portrait of Mangione.



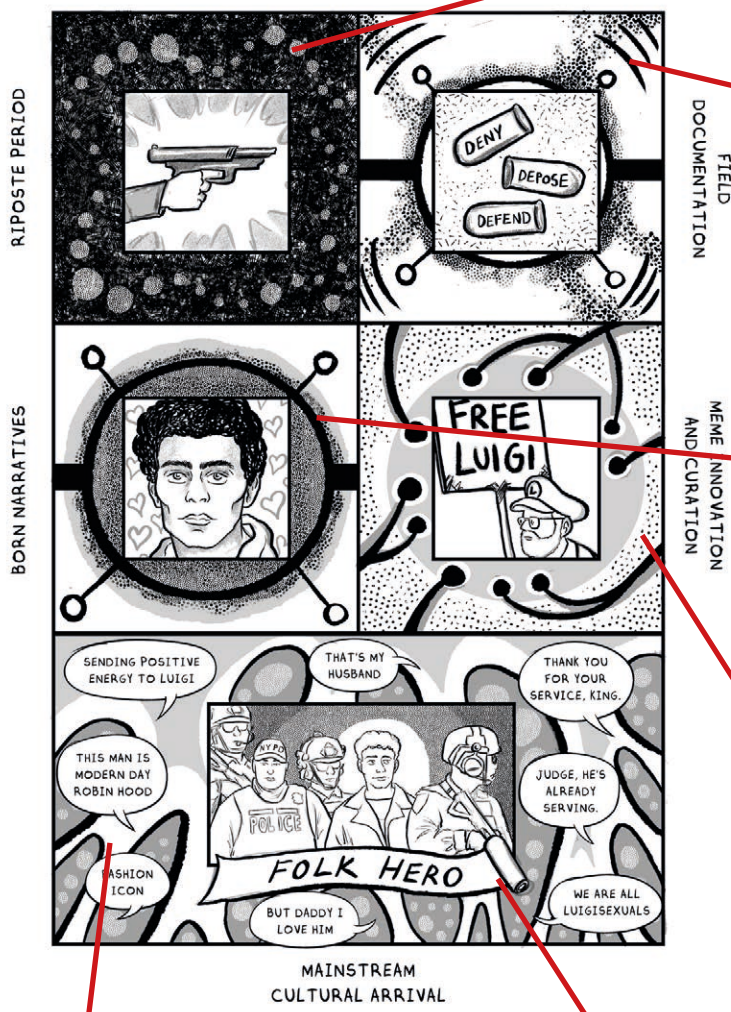
This censor bar intersects with the link between Robin Hood and the Mangione supporters, referencing the closing down of the comments section of an article written by Andrew Whitty, CEO of UnitedHealth Group, decrying the death of Thompson. This is to demonstrate the gulf between mainstream media outlets’ perspective of the shooting, and those of online commentators.

Discarded original version and final artwork for the Captain Tom case study comic (Figure 4)

This comic combines the imagery used in the SCE model comic (such as the mechanical eyes, connecting strands and nebulous fields of dots), with that of the Luigi Mangione case study comic. This is to demonstrate how this chapter “builds upon the SCE model’s findings by demonstrating that folkloric human objects are deeply influenced by the media technology affordances that instrumentalise them.”

The Riposte Period panel shows the gun wielded by an anonymous hand, as this phase is defined by immediate reactions to an event with little defining information from the get-go.

THE SEISMIC CULTURAL EVENT MODEL-
LUIGI MANGIONE



The Field Documentation phase shows the “Deny, Depose, Defend,” bullet casings, as online commentators reporting on the event would focus heavily on this detail as a focus of the narrative’s trajectory- that of disgruntlement against the US healthcare system.

The Born Narratives phase shows Mangione surrounded by hearts. The phase is where commentators begin to share more contemplative reactions and establish key imagery and cultural mascots; focusing on Mangione’s attractiveness and aura is an example of this.

One of the protestors outside Blair County Courthouse ahead of Mangione’s extradition hearing wore a green hat based on the character Luigi from the Mario video games. This illustrates the Meme Innovation and Curation phase as it constitutes the subversion of preexisting cultural imagery to further develop the narrative.

Speech bubbles containing various statements by social media commentators praising Mangione. These emphasise the cultural ubiquity Mangione’s image has achieved as a contemporary Robin Hood figure.

Following Mangione’s extradition, he was escorted through New York by NYPD, FBI agents and other officials. The resulting photo went viral and marked the Mainstream Cultural Arrival of the Mangione story, as it solidified his status as an attractive, beloved folk hero admired by the masses.