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From Meme to Coin to Government Body:
DOGE, a Case of Cruel Irony in Contemporary Politics

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Abstract

This article traces the cultural biography of the Doge meme – from a trivial Internet meme to a meme coin and the acronym of an unofficial U.S. government body, the Department of Government Efficiency – to show how irony emerges and operates in contemporary politics. It argues that DOGE is cruelly ironic in the way its trajectory exemplifies the co-optation of collectively produced vernacular signifiers by financial and political discourses, revealing the deep entanglement of capital and political power in platform capitalism. At the same time, the article reads the DOGE trajectory as representative of a top-down memeification of politics and governance, in which memes and vernacular aesthetics migrate into institutional identity and into the relation between institutions and citizens to obscure damaging politics. In the case of DOGE, an ironic dissonance emerges between the playful memetic signifiers used in the department's identity design and the gravity of its austerity-driven agenda. This dissonance is cruel in its effects: it generates ambiguity, dilutes institutional accountability, and creates an illusion of populist transparency while the department's opaque operations have harmful material consequences for American bureaucracy and democracy. This cruel irony further interpellates citizens to take part in memetic humor and unseriousness while hiding that they are the victims of this humor: its delegitimizing effects on governance ultimately harm supporters and critics alike.

Keywords: affect, cruel optimism, Doge, governance, irony, meme, online vernacular, poor images, politics, United States

We are living in a time of crisis spanning multiple domains of life, including the economic and political. American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant has described it since 2011 as an impasse, a present of crisis that characterizes life in a decaying liberal-capitalist Western order, increasingly unable to sustain its post-World War II promises of justice, growth, opportunity, social security, meritocracy, and prosperity. More recently, feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser refers to a “crisis of democracy” embedded in a “general crisis that is engulfing our societal order in its entirety” (115). According to Fraser, the origins of this current crisis are found in the realm between politics and capitalism, specifically in the ‘cannibalistic’ workings of an economic regime that tends to subsume and consume the very (democratic) political powers that make possible and sustain its continuous growth.

What Fraser calls “*inter-realm contradictions*” between “capitalism’s economic imperatives and other ‘non-economic realms,’ like social reproduction and the “public power” necessary for its existence (Fraser 118), are plainly visible in the current entanglement of capitalist forces and politics in American society. This entanglement is literally embodied by businessmen turned political actors like Donald Trump and Elon Musk, who have vested interests in both domains. However, the “inter-real” contradictions are also becoming more apparent in how politics is shaped as public discourse within an environment that is influenced by and reliant on capitalist forces, particularly in what Stefan Baghiu refers to as “platform politics,” a combination of platform capitalism and politics (235).

As Baghiu argues, in this present time of crisis, the realm of politics is no longer defined by interactions between citizens and political leaders or representatives: it is now structured by a third economic element – the platform – an interactive entity even less neutral than traditional media (237). Platform politics mirrors what Nick Srnicek has dubbed “platform capitalism,” an economic model based on extraction, manipulation of vast quantities of

citizen data and unremunerated labor (user generated content and interactions), but also constant engagement. In this new paradigm, political debate gets perverted into a sort of memeified communication and memeified political performances meant to be propagated on the platform; together with an unpaid stream of user-generated political content and reactions to political content, this mechanism sustains an algorithmically conditioned spectacle (Baghiu 247).

This article posits that the heavy presence of memeified content in political communication and debate is a symptom of a political mode enabled by platform politics: one that fuses humor, informality, irony, and general unseriousness and that increasingly spills into practices of governance.¹ In what follows, I examine the case of the Doge meme – one of the most famous memes of all time, later turned into a meme coin and then the acronym of a United States unofficial governmental body (Department of Government Efficiency) – and argue that it is emblematic of a mode of governance that can be called *cruel irony*.

Drawing on Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" and Linda Hutcheon's work on the political and affective dimensions of irony, cruel irony refers to a discursive strategy of co-optation through which Doge and other vernacular digital signifiers are repurposed as instruments of governance, insofar as communication between state actors and citizens is itself understood as an element of governance even when it is mediated by (social) platforms. The term designates the cruel confusion created through the introduction of informal signs into these communicative relations and the way they signal accessibility and populism while diluting the damaging effects of a project proposing efficiency and trivializing the act of governance itself.

Method

The article brings together insights from digital media and visual and cultural theory and draws from media coverage, political communication, and Doge's circulation as a visual and linguistic signifier across social media and public discourse. These materials

are treated as part of a larger archive that traces Doge's journey from online joke to symbol of governance.

The selection on which this analysis is based is subjective, consisting of news stories, social media posts, official government communications and public performances of political leaders, all having stood out to me as pivotal moments in Doge's instrumentalization and representative of larger discourse practices performed by American political actors during Donald Trump's second presidency. Therefore, the analysis does not seek to be exhaustive; instead, it focuses on instances that highlight shifts in Doge's affective and discursive use within the context of an increasingly memeified and spectacularized political landscape.

Furthermore, what I propose is an interpretation of one way in which vernacular signifiers in Internet culture enter finance and governance, among the many possible trajectories, lives, and deaths available to any online meme or to any other type of digital artifact. To develop my argument, I will first explain what the signifier DOGE designates institutionally and why this unofficial government body is relevant in today's American political context. I will then trace the financial history of Doge as a meme coin and its origins as a "cute" but kitschy Internet meme. Next, I will explain what memes are and how they influence political discourse. Lastly, I will argue that the DOGE trajectory and its co-option represent an extreme case of the memeification of politics by political elites, a memeification that amounts to a cruelly ironic mode of governance.

DOGE, the Unofficial Government Body Targeting Bureaucracy

At the beginning of 2025, when Donald Trump embarked on a second term as United States president, the name of a newly created department was on everyone's lips and on everyone's screens: the Department of Government Efficiency, best known as DOGE.² It was officially established by the president's order on his first day in office, in his "deregulatory" mission to "shrink" the federal

government but also “streamline” and increase its “efficiency” and “productivity,” among other goals (“Presidential Actions. Establishing and Implementing the President’s “Department of Government Efficiency”; Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Reduces the Federal Bureaucracy; “Presidential Actions. Ensuring Lawful Governance”; Department of Government Efficiency).

Despite not being an official government department or agency, DOGE has had material effects on administration and the functioning of American bureaucracy while producing little in the way of actual savings or efficiency (Leparmentier; Williamson). It is reported to have contributed to haphazard reduction of the federal workforce in crucial public services, such as Veterans Affairs (Glantz), the Health and Human Services Department (Stolberg and Jewett), and the Internal Revenue Service (Kroll), and to have damaged government-funded research, social security programs, humanitarian aid programs, economic activity, consumer protection, anti-fraud safeguards, tax collection (Powell and Frank-Stempe) and health (Greer et al.).

For several political scientists, DOGE is part of a broader process of democratic deterioration, accelerated during Trump’s second term and following illiberal recipes already applied in countries with autocratic characteristics. Kohei Suzuki and Maximilian Schiffrers argue that the second Trump administration mounted an attack on the bureaucracy and the administrative apparatus – institutions that, as Schiffrers notes, can offer a degree of resilience in the face of authoritarian pushes by those in power (547). Suzuki compares the cuts and reforms implemented in the United States at the beginning of 2025 with those enacted in countries such as Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro’s Brazil, Venezuela, or Turkey (93), while Schiffer likens Trump’s “chainsaw policies against bureaucracy” to Javier Milei’s ultraliberal policies in Argentina and Nayib Bukele’s authoritarian tendencies in El Salvador (542).³

The two authors foresee similar dangers if the current tendencies of the Trump administration are maintained, but they differ in the breadth of their conceptual focus. Suzuki zooms in on

the signs of a specifically “administrative backsliding” involving “weakening bureaucratic autonomy, concentrating executive power, and undermining administrative institutions through budget cuts, personnel changes, and information control” (93).⁴ Schiffers identifies the traces of a broader “democratic backsliding,” a form of gradual erosion of democracy, with its attacks on bureaucracy exemplifying “illiberal policy change and administrative deformation” (542). Furthermore, Schiffers regards DOGE as one example of “sidelining” conventional bureaucratic hierarchies, among several strategies of bureaucratic instrumentalization employed by populists in power (542).

Daniel Stockemer goes a step further, situating the democratic erosion currently experienced by the United States in the fourth of six stages of incremental autocratization. He argues that DOGE’s efforts to swiftly and drastically downsize the bureaucratic apparatus, together with the politicization of the administration, the excessive use of executive orders, and Trump’s attacks on the press, amount to a “reconfiguration of the balance of power/dismantling of the checks and balances” of the state, a process that may or may not be followed by a phase of “securitization of power” (3-4).⁵

DOGE and its operations were led, for the first 130 days of 2025, by Elon Musk – Trump’s political ally and campaign supporter, as well as the world’s wealthiest man and the head of the social platform *X* – as a “special government employee” with no official rank within the government (Bose and Holland; Faguy and FitzGerald; Wallace-Well). According to *The New York Times* and to Elon Musk’s own *X* posts, Musk himself named the body Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) as a derivative of a meme coin (Dogecoin), following the suggestion a user made on the *X* platform in August 2024.

DOGE keeps a record of its activity on the *X* platform (controlled by the same Elon Musk), with an *X* feed also embedded in the official website. The official logo of DOGE features a two-line golden dollar sign enclosed within a golden circle on a black background, visually echoing cryptocurrency emblems. The

website is also designed in black and gold and greets visitors with real-time “savings boards” and live rankings of “agency efficiency” (Department of Government Efficiency). Its structure and aesthetic resemble a trading platform far more than they do established channels of institutional communication. In this sense, DOGE materializes aesthetically the inter-realm conflict between capitalism and public powers that Fraser theorizes: the logics and aesthetics of financial capitalism seep into a governing body that formally operates outside the financial market and platform capitalism and is meant to serve the public interest rather than aim for financial returns.

DOGE’s Cultural History: A Cryptocurrency before a Political Body

Before designating an unofficial government body, Doge was the name of a digital coin, itself named after the famous Doge Internet meme. In fact, my first memory related to Doge dates to 2013, when *The Guardian* declared it the “best meme” of the year, while calling Elon Musk “arguably the greatest innovator of his generation” (Hern, Gibbs and Datto). That same year saw the launch of Dogecoin, the first “satirical coin” (Katje), created as a reaction to Bitcoin, which was released four years earlier. The Dogecoin has a stylized design inspired by the original meme: it includes the cute Shiba Inu dog from the meme, as well as its gold-toned color palette.

Over the years following the Dogecoin creation, Musk developed a keen interest in it and promoted it on his platform *X* between 2019 and 2021 to such an extent that his actions allegedly influenced its trading volume and price (Ante). The entrepreneur even began referring to himself as the “Doge father” in a comedic sketch on *Saturday Night Live* in 2021. He continued to do so during his time at the helm of the DOGE department, through memes posted or reposted on *X*, as well as through branded clothing items – accidentally or intentionally conflating the two realities designated by the name.⁶

Dogecoin paved the way for other joke coins to capitalize on media hype and Internet icons. The myriad meme coins available today are likewise based on online humor and popular culture references (Yousaf, Pham, and Goodell). Volatile and highly fluctuating in price (Yousaf, Pham, and Goodell), they are generally viewed as risky investments due to their lack of intrinsic value or immediate utility (Ledger Academy). Recently, many public personalities and celebrities have turned to meme coins to monetize their fame and followership (Kushner), contributing to increased suspicion of crypto coins and the dissipation of their promises of inclusivity and transparent decentralization of financial transactions. One day before his second inauguration, Donald Trump endorsed one such meme coin (\$TRUMP), while his wife, Melania Trump, endorsed a \$MELANIA meme coin (Hoskins and Tidy). According to some news outlets, the launch of the two coins raised moral concerns (Harty) and accusations of conflict of interest among journalists and watchdogs (Stone, “Roadmap for Corruption,” “I have never seen”), especially given President Trump's support for cryptocurrencies and his desire to turn the US into the “crypto capital of the world” (“Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Establishes the Strategic Bitcoin Reserve”).

A Meme before a Meme Coin

The image that started the trajectory of Doge as a visual and linguistic signifier through the financial and political realm was first circulated online as a meme. Internet memes are “groups of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance” that are “created with awareness of each other” and propagated, copied and remixed by many Internet users, as Limor Shifman puts it in one of the earlier volumes on the topic (41).

Similarly, Doge does not refer to a single meme but to a group of memes changing form, meanings and contexts through copying and remixing. As a recognizable group of visual signifiers, Doge has survived fluctuations in circulation and popularity. In its original form, it shows the well-groomed face of a Japanese dog (*Kabosu*), giving the camera a puzzled side-eye while lying on a

couch, with her inner thoughts scattered across the image in Comic Sans typeface. The composition stands out for the photograph's gentle yellow tones and the dog's almost human expression, but also for the humorous texts messily arranged on the photograph. In its first iterations, it made use of unconventional and emotionally charged grammar, with words like "wow," "much morning," "very alarms," and "such awake" added on the photos of the dog.

If we are to believe reports coming from the meme community, the "*socially constructed public discourse*" (Shifman 8) of the Doge meme has painted what artist and theorist Hito Steyerl calls a "snapshot of the affective condition" of the "contemporary crowd" – of "its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction," but also, increasingly, of its growing "neurosis, paranoia and fear" in a historical present marked by many crises (6). An entry on the *Know your meme* platform describes the Doge meme as becoming increasingly ironic and mean from 2016 onwards (Precious Roy and LiterallyAustin), while the *Fandom* platform distinguishes two phases of its history: an original "Reign of Kabosu" in 2013-2016 and a "Reign of irony" beginning in 2016 ("Dogelore Wiki: 'Kabosu'"). From the initial childish and colorful jokes, the meme appears to have fragmented into darker, gloomier, more cynical, cruel and ironic instantiations. Oftentimes, it propagates hateful, sexist or cynical statements. It is also engaged in current debates about violence and gender violence, hate speech, environmental threats, culture wars, and so on.

This ability of Doge to circulate so many contradictory meanings and stances rests on a "*cultural and aesthetic* logic of participation," like Shifman argues (34). In this logic, a high level of virality, remixing and diversity is achieved when a piece of content exhibits features such as semantic simplicity, humor, repetition, and emotional or affective charge, among others (Shifman 95). Doge memes typically rely on humor (even when ironic, absurd or cruel), repeat one or more visual or linguistic anchors (the name, the dog's expression, the color palette—elements also co-opted by Dogecoin and Elon Musk's DOGE), and have an affective charge of their own, from more positive feelings to ambivalent or negative ones.

This last affective element, however, derives not only from a meme's content or its stance toward that content, but also from the popular, vernacular aesthetics through which its content is expressed. As Dominic Pettman argues in his theses on memetic desire, aesthetic form and affect are inherently entangled in an object: each new "technological object" produces new aesthetic configurations out of the remains of earlier materials, thereby "fostering new affects" (26), new types of affective responses. One reason Doge and other memes can circulate such mixed feelings may lie in their deliberately messy and low-stakes visual style, which can be made to convey a wide range of quotidian emotions under a screen of unpretentious humor.

Like the disorderly design of the Doge iterations, memes generally adopt a "sloppy" and "amateurish" look that contradicts or outwardly mocks established aesthetic norms of professional design and high-brow taste (Douglas 315). Their aesthetic, a collective and eclectic style that distinguishes digital production from other media which Nick Douglas refers to as "Internet Ugly," expresses their democratic origins, their anti-elitist ethos and ironic inclinations at their core. However, this vernacular feature also makes memes more susceptible to being appropriated by political or economic agents that want to appear 'of the people,' while potentially pursuing purposes that run counter to the interests of most Internet citizens, as Douglas himself suggests (334-336).

In the case of the Doge meme, it is a specific subtype of vernacular aesthetic that has proven especially appealing. The kitschy, "cute aesthetics" of the initial *Kabosu* meme have been heavily appropriated by financial and political actors (Ngai): as noted, Dogecoin has adopted the dog's expression in its branding, while Elon Musk has used the same dog image to comment on the coin and reportedly even included it for a short period on the official DOGE website (Hunt). This cute affect of the initial Doge meme, which sticks to its name as an affective resonance, is an example of what Sianne Ngai identifies as an aesthetic category of "hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism," including platform capitalism (1). Doge's cuteness evokes "warm and fuzzy" ordinary affects,

encouraging its appropriation and consumption, but also its use in aestheticization processes that help render certain entities or objects less powerful, more familiar, and “unthreatening” – as in the case of a meme coin (Ngai 5).

The vernacular aesthetics and the vulnerability of memes in the face of elitist interests that Douglas identifies also link them to the digital artifacts that Steyerl famously calls “poor images”: a category of low-quality, low-value images that dissolve the borders between creators and consumers; creation and critique; originality and remix; and, I would add, serious and unserious/ironic discourse. Unlike memes, Steyerl’s images are poor not because of an intentional aesthetic they employ, but due to a loss in information and resolution as they circulate swiftly across the Internet.⁷ It is this distinction that makes Lucie Chateau posit that “most memes *are* also poor images” because of their formal qualities, but the inverse does not apply (180).

According to Chateau, most memes are “purposefully-poor images” intentionally and ironically reproducing ugliness (or kitsch, in the case of Doge) in a political gesture signaling subversion (181-182). Chateau also argues that, whereas a poor image is controlled by no one and sits outside the “class society of images” (Steyerl 3), a “purposefully-poor image” is the result of an intentional gesture within a “cultural politics of irony,” and therefore finds its own place and meaning within the image hierarchy (176-177). Still, even if they do not lack cultural capital in the way that poor images do, memes remain far below the institutionalized, high-value images at the top of the contemporary hierarchy of images.

The long subversive tradition of the memetic “vernacular,” its ordinary affects and aesthetics – and the continual replenishment of the memetic digital economy by online subcultures – helps preserve an ironic and transgressive edge in these images, even when they are used as “purposefully” vernacular, informal signifiers in other domains. Their marginal position allows them to maintain both a capacity for cultural and political resistance (Steyerl) and a vulnerability to conformity, spam, hate, and the reproduction of political agendas (Steyerl 6). In what follows, I will

mainly focus on their inclusion in this last domain, which grew in intensity especially in right-wing political discourse.

Poor Memes, More Politically Significant than Ever

The political co-optation of memes has become increasingly visible since the mid-2010s, when political propaganda, campaign funding, and public debate were progressively reconfigured by the logics of platform politics, as Baghiu notes. Political memetic content has played a significant role in diverse contexts and has been particularly salient as an instrument of support for – or attack against – political candidates during electoral campaigns, from the 2016 US elections and the 2018 Russian presidential elections (Wiggins) to the 2017 UK general election (Dean; McLoughlin and Southern) and Romania's 2019 and 2024 presidential elections, to name just a few (Cistelean et al.; Stancea, Călin, and Ciocîrlan).

More generally, memes have been interpreted as a democratic and accessible form of political satire and critique (Mihăilescu), manifestations of affiliation and solidarity in polarized contexts (Stancea, Călin, and Ciocîrlan 8), tools of identity politics (Mortensen and Neumayer), or instruments for the propagation of certain ideologies (Cistelean et al.; Stancea et al.). Unlike other forms of political expression, they require fewer resources, time, and knowledge (McLoughlin and Southern) to help shape political discourse (Dean; Mihăilescu). These diverse uses of memes in the political realm suggest that they function as a highly fluid “everyday vernacular of politics,” as Jonathan Dean argues (260), paralleling Shifman's broader account of memes as vernacular expressions representative of online culture.

Dean sees in the proliferation of memes within the political domain the signs of a “memeification of politics” (256). In this process, the fabric of political engagement is being reshaped as social media becomes “constitutive of the texture and practice of politics” (257), and everyday political affect and political engagement are being expressed through shareable visual content. Dean's definition emphasizes how memes can shape the citizens' vernacular political discourse through their strong affective charge,

by encouraging audiences to identify with or reject different political stances (259–60). However, because his focus remains on bottom-up political activity, it does not account for the transformations produced recently by the increasingly tight entanglement of right-wing populism and platform politics.

There is another sense in which politics can be understood as undergoing a process of memeification: the playful, ironic, emotional, and transgressive qualities of memes have profoundly reshaped both the online and offline discourse of political actors and even that of official institutions. It is not only that candidates attack each other through memes during elections or that citizens manifest their political allegiances and creed through memes. As Baghiu has shown in the case of the Romanian elections of 2024, the dynamics of platform politics have engendered new forms of political behavior online but also in real life: continuous “performances of virality,” sustained by algorithms and the free content that users feed them with, memes included (Baghiu 247).

The memeification of political behavior is prominent in the ironic or playful gestures, noncommittal statements, cynical remarks, and spectacle-oriented performative behavior of right-wing politicians, especially Donald Trump. Trump entered politics as a well-established disruptive showman, unfazed by the occasional perception of him as a clown, as a *New Yorker* article notes (Malone). Both he and collaborators, such as Elon Musk, engaged in “performances of virality” in their official capacities, shaping not only their public personas, but also the ways the institutions they led presented themselves to the public.

As already noted, Elon Musk employed memes while serving as head of the Department of Government Efficiency, albeit through his personal *X* account. Not only did he present himself as a tough “Dogefather” and share at least one post featuring the Doge dog (Musk, “Theme of the Day”) – further blurring the lines between the meme, the meme coin, and the department – but he also used memes to comment on the department’s activities.⁸

Some institutional social media channels have also started employing memes to communicate national agendas and goals to the public. For example, the social media channels of the White

House (particularly Instagram) use irony, humor, and play to visually and affectively mediate the relationship between the presidency and its audiences. A quick browse through the White House's official Instagram content in the past few months reveals plenty of meme-based communications about pressing social issues, like immigration and the treatment of undocumented individuals, the state of the economy, and the federal budget. Among more neutral posts about the Trump presidency and the activity of the White House, one finds memes depicting a morning coffee meme or a Sun Baby meme overlaid with the face of Tom Homan, the White House 'Border Czar,' announcing the deportations of "criminal illegal aliens" (The White House, "Good Morning"; The White House, "Good Sunday Morning"); a Train Hitting School Bus meme illustrating the cancellation of free tuition for undocumented individuals (The White House, "Hard-working Americans shouldn't pay"); or a meme with Democrat Chuck Schumer photoshopped as a person wearing a Hot dog costume (The White House, "Dems Right Now").

In all these cases, memes introduce a purposefully cute, kitsch or low-brow aesthetic into institutional and political registers, amounting to a new wave of aestheticization of the political (Groys; Benjamin), in vernacular terms. Boris Groys conceptualizes the aestheticization of politics as a dialectical relation between a suspicion about a displeasing reality hidden beneath the aesthetic appearance and a production of sincerity through the occasional revealing of that ugliness (14). The White House communication follows a similar dialectic. On the one hand, it generates suspicions about the dangers and unpleasant aspects of the reality of governing (such as deportations) that the aesthetic surface of the meme distances itself from. On the other hand, it creates an effect of authenticity by delivering painful or hateful comments on its own governing activity through performances of cynicism and dark humor.

Furthermore, the intertextuality of memetic content – all the "longitudinal jokes" that famous memes like Train Hitting School Bus and Doge have acquired through circulation and replication (Mitman and Denham 3476) – helps in preserving an

ironic charge even in their appropriation by the political. This façade of lightness and humor that memetic content puts up further distances the person or institution in question from the seriousness of the issues being discussed, or at the very least, makes it more difficult to discern between humorous exaggerations, manufactured sincerity and facts. All this leads to governance itself becoming an exercise in (self) mockery, with diluted accountability in its governing acts and their relation to the real (Grimwood 350).

The fact that earlier humorous associations adhere to a memetic signifier to create ambiguity and a sense of triviality is evident in the way mainstream media reports on the Department of Government Efficiency, consistently mentioning that the acronym was inspired by Dogecoin and the Doge meme. For example, one commentator described DOGE as a “name that ironically telegraphs redundancy and is an exercise in self-mockery” of a body that “wreaked havoc with the federal government and the people who work in it” (Shoop), while a Reddit contributor went as far as dubbing it a “meme organization” in a community dedicated to political debates (Material_Policy6327). The linguistic signifier “DOGE” inevitably echoes the other two entities it refers back to: the coin and the meme, perpetually creating semantic confusion about its referent and subverting its own seriousness as an entity with material consequences in the world.

DOGE: A Case of Cruel Irony

So far, I have shown that Internet memes are digital artifacts with little to no power and value, capable nevertheless of sustaining both platform capitalism and platform politics. On the one hand, they feed the mechanism of platform capitalism through their participation in the production of “continuously unpaid discourse” and the user data that other entities monetize (Baghiu 237). On the other hand, once co-opted by political discourse, they also become a part of platform politics. Specifically, I am referring to a top-down memeification of politics, through which memes contribute to the banalization and aestheticization of the political discourse in

vernacular terms, using cute, ugly, or playful aesthetics that impart a populist appearance to what is being said. At the same time, memeification extends to real life, to the theatrical and “outlandish performances” that political actors stage specifically to become viral and gain traction on social platforms (Baghiu 241).

But most importantly, memes have also penetrated governance, becoming an instrument in the relationship between state institutions and citizens, creating ambiguity, diluting accountability and obscuring the gravity of institutional actions behind a screen of trivial humor, (self)irony and vernacular aesthetics. DOGE is an paradigmatic case of this memeification tendency at multiple levels. Firstly, its entire official identity is based on the name of a meme and a meme coin, conjuring both these referents every time the name of the department is brought up. Secondly, it demonstrates how financial and platform capitalism influences governance, both aesthetically through its identity and web design and through the actions of Elon Musk, the self-proclaimed “Dogefather,” who was tasked with increasing “government efficiency” without any democratic oversight.

DOGE embodies a cruel irony that operates both as a feature of and an instrument in a self-mocking mode of governance. As a feature, it appears in what cultural theorist Hutcheon described as the effect of changing contexts. The cultural trajectory of Doge as a signifier across vernacular, financial, and political contexts is cruelly ironic in the way it points to the extractive functioning of platform capitalism and platform politics and their reliance on user labor and user creativity both for monetization and for promotional purposes.

DOGE also symbolizes an ironic mode of governance – one that operates discursively and mobilizes vernacular signs, spectacularized performances, and humor to distance itself from, and thus dilute responsibility for, the harms it enacts in real life. It is ironic insofar as it sustains a dissonance between the signs it uses and the contexts of their deployment and cruel because this dissonance trivializes material harm inflicted upon the very citizens it interpellates through humor and self-irony.

Hutcheon reminds us not only that irony contains an “affective edge” that is frequently “cutting” (27), but also that it is applicable to any ideology, rather than solely an instrument of subversiveness or radical politics, as it is often read. It can serve politics of resistance, as well as “conservative” and “authoritarian” politics (Hutcheon, 27), just like memes themselves. This “transideological” feature of irony is what makes it suitable as a discursive strategy for political actors such as Donald Trump or Elon Musk (White qtd. in Hutcheon 24). It aids them in positioning themselves as populist disruptors acting against an old political elite or a rigid cultural status quo, while actually implementing unpopular austerity policies and backsliding the American democracy through concentration of power, the weakening of welfare agencies and institutional dismantling.

At the discursive level, DOGE’s irony operates in the way its identity combines a signifier (the name of a meme and a meme coin), an aesthetic (the crypto-inspired branding) and affective resonances (the cuteness of the initial meme, the democratic promise and suspicion raised by crypto coins, and the whimsical and humorous public performances of its leader) in a context (governance) that makes them seem “out of place or unconventional” (Colebrook 16) or, more specifically, “incongruous with their context” (10).

It is difficult to know the true intent of the unconventional name and the branding, but it seems they may have been meant to offer a laugh to those aware of the financial and vernacular meanings they imply. Since Musk himself created the name based on a suggestion from one of his followers, we can infer that his followers on *X* were, at least in part, members of what Hutcheon refers to as the “discursive community” that is expected to understand and be entertained by the irony of naming an official institution after digital artifacts from Internet culture (28).

However, if we are to read DOGE through the lens of what Hutcheon calls the “inclusive” and “simultaneous” character of ironic meaning, then its irony must be located in the “superimposition of meanings,” of the said (the government body) and the unsaid (the meme and the meme coin) that coexist at the

same time in the mind of most people. Hutcheon represents visually this superimposition of meanings through the famous rabbit-duck illusion, conceptualizing ironic meaning as occurring in the “rapid oscillation” between the perception of a duck and the perception of a rabbit (59).

In the case of DOGE, the signs and their potential meanings are so diverse that its third ironic meaning can only be a cruel confusion, one that grows as one’s knowledge of the “unsaid” becomes more significant. The more one understands these signifiers, the more ambiguity one sees in them when taken together, possibly even for Musk’s followers. It is impossible to derive a clear meaning and intention from online memes or public performances in which Musk refers to himself as the “Dogefather” while leading the Department of Government Efficiency: is it just an innocent joke or is his intention to influence the Dogecoin trading levels (again)? Is he self-ironic or signaling the financial and political power he has amassed?⁹ Likewise, one can assume that even a serious knowledge about cryptocurrency gives one little indication on how to grasp the meaning of the Department’s use of an aesthetic borrowed from the financial domain; it might be anything from a humorous move for the digitally savvy or an intentional act to promote the other financial endeavors of its leader. None of these questions can be offered a satisfying answer, beyond the recognition that the entire discourse surrounding DOGE is (self)ironic.

What is cruel here is the effect of the confusion. A plethora of diverse vernacular and financial signifiers and confusing aesthetics are mobilized to signal populism, informality, popular cultural capital and accessibility, while the actual material consequences of the agency in question have no congressional supervision, like other institutions with so much power do (Stockemer 4). Similarly, the heavy use of *X* posts to report on the department’s activities and results and Musk’s constant presence in the public eye create a misleading impression of populist transparency and sincerity, masking the reality that DOGE lacks genuine neutral oversight.

The “excessive” use of informal or Internet-vernacular signifiers and even Elon Musk’s irreverent and meme-inclined *X* communication on the department’s activity might also serve to divert attention from the anti-popular goal of the agency, whose entire reason to exist is to institute austerity in government (Colebrook 11). It is the same tendency to use popular signifiers to communicate consequential and controversial measures that the White House mobilized in the case of deportations. This suggests that it is precisely the “trivial aesthetics” and the “weak” ordinary affects these signs evoke that can be instrumentalized to tone down the seriousness of what is being communicated while also disclosing that something “ugly” and “cruel” is taking place (Ngai 21).

Certainly, a noticeable degree of cruelty is directly evident at the discursive level. In his position as ‘special government employee,’ Musk promoted a rhetoric of distrust and fear against the ‘deep state’ of bureaucracy, using memes to ridicule its critics. On one occasion, he posted an image of himself standing behind a golden “D.O.G.E.” sign and calling himself the “Dogefather” to ridicule a U.S. Representative who was announcing a protest against DOGE’s gaining access to the systems of the Department of the Treasury.¹⁰ These “meme conflicts” divert attention from the material effects of the DOGE operations in a platform spectacle created just for the sake of controversy. Citizens are invited to take a side, and the material harm happening outside the platform is diluted in an ongoing stream of social media actions and reactions. It does not matter who the ironic jokes target or who is in the “discursive community” that ‘gets’ it. Overall, even those who laugh at Elon Musk’s jokes about DOGE are also victims. They are invited to join the self-ironic performance of an institution and its leader, while they are victims of DOGE’s bureaucratic dismantling.

More widely, the humor, populism, and irony that the Trump administration introduced into governance and institutional communication have cruelty and hate at their core because they target individuals or groups perceived as “others” or “enemies” within American society – from left-leaning individuals to political opponents, journalists, queer people, immigrants, and so on. In its

treatment of dissenting individuals and groups, the Trump administration has “mainstreamed cruelty as a daily political strategy” and transformed it into an “affective and discursive force that permeates the national imaginary” (Levina and Silva 70).

In this affective sense, DOGE is cruel not only in the strategies of “self-design” (Groys 14) used to distance itself from the seriousness of its operations, but also in the unrealizable promises it maintains: it presents itself as a bearer of efficiency and transparency while delivering fast, corporate-style cuts with harmful consequences on the functioning of the bureaucratic apparatus in charge of implementing governmental policies. But even its promise of efficiency is cruel in and of itself since it announces the arrival of what American theorist Berlant calls an “austerity state” that presents people as “too expensive for their own maintenance” so that they have to accept “resource shrinkage *and* a transformation of the fantasy of the state” (“Austerity” 1). While inequality increases, precarity emerges as a continuous material and affective condition within a capitalist state incapable of sustaining any type of welfare, as Berlant herself has argued.

Furthermore, DOGE is part of Donald Trump’s larger *Make America Great Again* vision, a reiteration of a Reaganite era of conservatism, deregulation and state shrinkage that has already failed to deliver the good life it promised. In this respect, DOGE entertains a “cruel optimism” – an optimism that keeps people connected to a political project that promises a good life but ends up hurting them (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*). As in Berlant’s definition, both DOGE and MAGA create an emotional attachment to a “fantasy of the good life” amid a precarious neoliberal present that fails to fulfill its promises of well-being (*Cruel Optimism* 2). This failure is most visible in the system’s repeated reliance on austerity policies that damage the most vulnerable citizens. The attachment is cruel because it both harms the citizens’ lives it promises to improve and, paradoxically, makes them more bearable (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*), through the illusion it maintains of a better America to come, always deferred to the future.

Finally, the absurdity and cruel ironies of contemporary politics and governance are most clearly revealed by none other

than Elon Musk himself. In a now-iconic performance at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) taking place near Washington, D.C., in February 2025, Musk received the “chainsaw for bureaucracy” from Javier Milei, a symbol of radical neoliberal policies that the self-proclaimed libertarian Argentinean president has often used in his public appearances (Licon; Politi and Biller). At the same event, Musk gave an almost poetic description of the top-down “memeification of politics, reinterpreting the ‘I am become death’ quote by J. Robert Oppenheimer.” *“I am become meme . . . I’m living the meme. There’s living the dream and there’s living the meme . . .”* Musk remarked, referring to Doge’s shift from an old Internet meme to a “reality” of governance.

Leaving aside the cruelty symbolized by the chainsaw and the violence of its use in a threatening gesture towards the bureaucratic apparatus,¹¹ Musk’s statement points to a desire to turn his power into a visual sign and gain control over a segment of the platform capitalism that not even him, as owner of X, can fully dominate: the collectively built discourse of the participatory logic of the meme culture. Guy Debord once observed in his “Thesis 34” on *The Society of the Spectacle* that “the spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image,” referring to the visually mediated world of the twentieth century. In Musk’s case, his capital and power have reached such a degree that he has been able to claim the ability to transform both governance and himself into dematerialized, memeified spectacles – spectacles that, in turn, feed back into the wheels of platform capitalism that sustain his notoriety and financial worth in the first place.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has traced the metamorphoses of a visual and linguistic signifier that began as an inconsequential joke, only for its cute vernacular aesthetics to be appropriated into financial branding and institutional identity design. In its current materialization as the acronym for the Department of Government Efficiency, DOGE produces an ironic mismatch between its

affective and semiotic resonances and the official context of its deployment. This results in a cruel ambiguity that obscures the real material consequences of DOGE's actions and the conflicts of interest embodied by its leader, Elon Musk, within a continuous spectacle of humor, performative unseriousness, and even declarative cruelty toward certain people or groups. What makes this even more cruel is that it harms even those supporters who believe they understand DOGE's irony: everyone is affected by its negative consequences, contributing to what political scientists identify as "democratic backsliding," but also to a weakening of institutional legitimacy. In the end, DOGE's cruel irony is not only representative of a top-down memeification of politics for the sake of platform engagement but also symptomatic of the impossibility of the Trump administration's promises – a revival of an American dream of the "good life" that had already failed in the Reaganite era of deregulation and downsizing from which the current president draws inspiration.

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Notes:

¹ Here, I use *governance* in a broad sense, referring both to public administration and the implementation of policy (Fukuyama) and to relationships between "governmental and non-governmental actors in the governing process," citizens included (Howlett and Ramesh 318). In the current context of platform politics, both are, to some degree, mediated and structured by the platform itself.

² Throughout the article, DOGE (uppercase) refers specifically to the Department of Government Efficiency, as opposed to Dogecoin or the Doge meme.

³ As I will detail later in the article, the “chainsaw for bureaucracy” is a symbol used by Argentina’s president, Javier Milei, to refer to his right-wing program of government reduction and spending cuts aimed at curbing inflation. Milei and other people in his administration have claimed that the Argentinian Ministry of Deregulation and State Transformation has served as an inspiration for DOGE’s activities in the United States (Molina and Pinzón).

⁴ Suzuki adopts the concept of “administrative backsliding” from Michael W. Bauer (2024).

⁵ The theory of incremental autocratization used by Daniel Stockemer is adapted from Marianne Kneuer (2021) and is comprised of six stages: social turmoil, mobilization through a project of radical change, an electoral victory, changes in the checks and balances of power, securing power and limitations in freedoms and civil rights (Stockemer 2).

⁶ In one such image post from April 29, 2025, possibly AI-generated, Elon Musk appears holding a badge with the text “THE DOGEFATHER - DOGE” (Musk, “Knock, Knock . . . It’s @Doge”).

⁷ Hito Steyerl primarily refers to digital, low-resolution, often pirated copies of cinema and video art circulating online.

⁸ In one such post, Elon Musk shared a triptych in which a cartoonish version of himself orders an overweight person wearing a Twitter-branded T-shirt to exercise until she becomes a slender woman wearing an X T-shirt, followed by a final scene in which this woman and the cartoon Musk – now with a DOGE-branded suitcase at his feet – confront a “fat government” represented by another overweight man (Musk). The meme is problematic on several levels, but, for present purposes, it suffices to note that it draws a parallel between Musk’s 2022 restructuring of the former *Twitter* and his plans for government downsizing as leader of DOGE.

⁹ At a White House conference on the outcomes of the Department of Government Efficiency and the national economy, Elon Musk was seemingly wearing a T-shirt reading “The Dogefather,” the nickname he had jokingly proposed four years earlier in reference to Dogecoin (“President Trump Participates in a Press Conference”).

¹⁰ Elon Musk posted with a photo of himself dressed in black and standing behind a golden “D.O.G.E.” sign, with the accompanying text inspired by *The Godfather*: “But does she call me The DOGEfather? Is she even a friend?” to ridicule a video in which Melanie Stansbury, U.S. Representative for New Mexico, was protesting DOGE’s activity at the

U.S. Department of the Treasury (Musk, “She Comes to Me on This Day of My Doge’s Wedding”).

¹¹ The cruelty signaled by the chainsaw symbol is reinforced by its maker, Mariano Ditro – a mechanic who says his fascination with the instrument was inspired by *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* film (“From Villa”).

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