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Writing 105R

Playboi Carti's Landslide: Cynicism and Meme Culture in 2020



Rhetoric is inextricably linked to its context. If, for example, a teacher sought to introduce their students to a historically significant speech, like Jimmy Carter's 1979 "Crisis of Confidence" speech, they would be doing a great disservice to simply hand out a transcript of Carter's words without first examining their context. Although his language is stirring, its impact is vastly diminished if observed separately from the state of the nation that produced it – the energy crisis and struggling economy which likely lost Carter's reelection campaign, and the growing distrust of authority amongst American citizens following Vietnam and Watergate. While the critical nature of rhetorical context is perhaps best exemplified by speeches, it applies to all forms of rhetoric, including a form which has been mostly ignored in academic circles since its inception: memes. As a medium that constantly evolves to keep up with new moments in cultural history and ever-changing societal trends, memes can provide a unique glimpse into the time and place from which they're born, and furthermore, they epitomize the ties between rhetoric and the context which creates it.

This brings us to the controversial young rapper Playboi Carti, and the meme pictured above which comically depicts his victory in the 2020 election over (actual candidates) Joe Biden and Donald Trump. This meme is undeniably a product of the days, months, and years which immediately preceded it: an election indicative to many people of the failings of bipartisan electoralism in which countless voters dislike both candidates, situated during a global pandemic representative of the increasing uncertainty and fear which define this country's future. While one could certainly be forgiven for not taking this image as anything more than a simple joke, careful examination of its rhetorical context demonstrates just how effectively it encapsulates the collective experience of cynicism, disillusionment, and angst plaguing America's younger generations.

Before examining this specific meme's context, it is necessary to first understand the format of memes, and to gain a grander sense of their place in modern culture. Although the phrase "meme" predates the average American having internet access and thus didn't originally refer to viral digital images, the connection is rather direct. "Meme" was first coined by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, in which he defined a meme as a unit of cultural evolution, akin to how genes serve as a unit of biological evolution: "just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (Dawkins, 192). Dawkins continues on to give an example that he suggests may be the oldest meme: God. Under the definitions of any religion past or present, the existence of some divine, suprahuman entity who governs the universe is a wholly human concept, created and spread by humans, which is still overwhelmingly popular despite a lack of objective evidence simply because it is

psychologically appealing to believe there is some level of order behind this terrifying, confusing world. Dawkins' analysis helps elucidate the most critical connections between his understanding of memes and ours: memes are made in an iterative, imitative process and born of human desire, whether those desires are deeply philosophical, or something as simple as connecting with like-minded people over humor and shared ideas.

This can be seen quite clearly in the Carti election meme, which manages to create humor in a space of misery (a depressing election in a deeply depressing, pandemic-shaped year) while signalling specific interest in modern hip-hop to a target audience of other young music nerds, all of which is expressed through an iteration of an older image. Just as the concept of God spread along trade routes thousands of years ago and evolved to meet the specific desires of new cultures it reached, this meme is a direct descendant of the more popular "Jeb!" electoral map meme, which mocked the failed presidential campaign of the oft-maligned candidate Jeb Bush:



This perfectly demonstrates the context-driven nature of memes. As little as 5 or 6 years ago, neither of these images would make sense to anybody, but moreover, even with a full understanding of the 2020 election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Playboi Carti's place in pop

culture, the Carti meme doesn't have the same impact without understanding it as a progression of the earlier Jeb! meme, itself a highly contextual product of the 2016 election. Through this lens it becomes evident that memes are (for lack of a better term) a language, which like all languages is constantly undergoing evolution to remain relevant in its expressions of new thoughts and emotions.

Next, it is key to understand the specific thoughts and emotions from which the Carti meme was born, and that requires some recent history. For my parents' generation, the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal marked a momentous transition in perception of, and trust in, the government. That's certainly not to say that all Americans put blind faith in every facet of their governance prior to those events, as this country has always been built upon questioning authority. Instead, it simply means that tens of thousands of young (almost exclusively poor) men being drafted to die in a meaningless foreign war, combined with an administration so brazenly corrupt that its president was forced to resign, left countless Americans with a lasting sense that the government doesn't really govern for all people, just the rich and powerful. Openly questioning and criticizing America's government and electoral politics became a prevailing attitude, rather than a fringe position reserved for so-called dissidents.

Subsequently, Baby Boomers and Generation X passed this attitude onto their Millennial and Generation Z children, who as a result weren't really disillusioned so much as they never had faith in the American political system to begin with, which the beginning of the 21st century only reinforced. It would be painting an incomplete picture to pin this generational shift on any single event, but it was certainly influenced by the "wars" on terror and drugs, which claimed countless lives across the globe and only served to strengthen the military- and prison-industrial complexes, politicians' perennial failure to enact substantive policy to combat climate change,

and most notably the 2008 financial crisis, which destroyed the lives of millions of Americans while those instrumental in that destruction saw no repercussions. As noted in the documentary *Fighting in the Age of Loneliness*, “the pain of seeing a system completely fail never leaves some people. It’s not really part of our national discourse, but a lot of people checked out in 2008 ... it’s the fucked-up 19-year-old who hates himself because he doesn’t feel like he’s good at anything ... who sees his parents who have to work until they die because they got wiped out by the market, and decides that he’s right to give up” (SB Nation). While I don’t wish to minimize the tremendous barriers this country has overcome in generations past, I also don’t think it’s unreasonable to say that Millennials are the first generation in American history to have less hope and more fear than their parents. To much of America’s youth, the utter lack of response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election are merely indicative of the growing sea of uncertainty, built upon consistent political failings and economic instability, in which they find themselves drowning. This manifests itself in the form of depression, anxiety, and cynicism. A 2019 Time Magazine report analyzing CDC data found that “between 2007 and 2017, drug-related deaths increased by 108% among adults ages 18 to 34, while alcohol-related deaths increased by 69% and suicides increased by 35%” (Ducharme). This represents the very real consequences of America’s political failures over the last few decades. Millennials have been forced to adopt coping methods in an attempt to drown out the sheer chaos of the world they inhabit, but it’s not all drugs and alcohol: it’s memes, too. Millennials have co-opted memes not just as a way to find humor in an increasingly bleak world, but also as a means of finding solidarity with their kindred spirits. As demonstrated by the Playboi Carti electoral map, in this light memes are capable of expressing the collective malaise and rejection of the status quo which defines being young in the 21st century U.S.A.

Finally, this brings us to the last piece of the Carti electoral map puzzle: Playboi Carti himself, whose inclusion in this meme is far from coincidental. Carti represents to hip-hop what memes have come to mean for many young Americans: rejection of the status quo. For the first twenty years or so of hip-hop's development, it was defined by simplistic looping beats over which rappers flexed their wit through meticulously crafted rhyme schemes and cunning wordplay. As pointed out by his hip-hop traditionalist detractors, Carti's music has precisely zero of these attributes, yet nonetheless he has amassed an almost cult-like following of millions of adoring young fans. By contrast, Carti's music focuses on provoking feeling rather than thought; his beats are almost monstrous in their sonic density, and it's not uncommon to hear him repeat the same simple phrase dozens of times in a single verse. According to music critic Anthony Fantano, Carti's music feels like "the logical conclusion to everything rap has been trending toward for the last seven years. The hypnotic production, the ad-libs, the repetition, all culminating into this raw, euphoric, psychedelic energy" (Fantano). In bare terms, Carti's music provides an escape. Rather than seeking to give his listeners a new perspective or new ideas, as has long been one of hip-hop's defining characteristics, Carti simply makes music that is infectious as hell, providing his listeners with a moment of pure joy, a brief respite from an inescapable existential nightmare. This is perhaps best encapsulated by the title of the album whose cover provides the image of Carti featured in the electoral map meme: *Die Lit*. To Carti, and an ever-increasing number of young Americans who follow his musical career, living fast and dying young is preferable to enduring eighty years of socioeconomic hardship, just to see the government continually stifle any hopes of reaching a brighter future for later generations.

Ultimately, the Playboi Carti meme is a joke, but it is far more complex and serious than most might assume. It is directly linked to rejection of the status quo, exemplified by both the

music of its central figure and the comical dismissal of the 2020 election, which itself is indicative to many people of a decades-long trend of a government failing to serve its constituents, resulting in millions of young Americans feeling lost and pointless. The sheer amount of weight and history implied by this absurd meme about a rapper serves as an exemplary depiction of just how essential understanding context is when examining rhetoric, regardless of medium. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, it serves as a reminder that hope may be low, but it is not lost. In the coming decades, America (and likely the whole world) will have to reckon with just how prevalent this malaise has become amongst the generations that will soon *be* the government. For now, however, the solidarity young Americans have found through humor and music demonstrates the continual marvel that is humanity's ability to endure tremendous pain through such parlous times.

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