“Cinema Snacks: Movie Memes as Pandemic Catharsis”
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Internet memes encapsulate “some of the most fundamental aspects of contemporary digital culture” (Shifman 2014, 4). They can be readily remixed and shared and as such encourage contemporary forms of intertextuality. Limor Shifman situates memes as a “new arena for bottom-up expression” that mix together “popular culture, politics, and participation in unexpected ways” (Shifman 2014, 4). Significantly memes tend to “underscore the social dynamics” of our online and offline worlds (Shifman 2014). Within this context, it is useful to examine how movie-based memes are remixed with politics and social critique. In what follows I examine pandemic memes that use popular movie referents to reflect some of the new realities and underlying tensions the current moment has produced. Taken together, these seemingly disconnected examples illustrate how memes seek to address different affectively constituted (digital) public spheres (Warner, 2002).

As a form of everyday social media practice, memes are both connective and contextual (Humphries 2018). We use them in our leisure time to connect on affective levels (humour, anger, etc.) with others. What makes memes so popular is that they are relatable acts of communication that frame our quotidian struggles as intelligible when sometimes they are not. In this way memes are also contextual. As our social media experiences are differently curated by algorithms specific to what we engage with online, we get very different sets of memes circulating in our feeds. What memes offer then is a snapshot of “broader social values and systems that shape the human condition” (Humphreys 2018, pp. 6), that are also equally particular to the social circles we move within. How movies are operationalized as short hand signifiers for different kinds of experience and cultural in-groups deserves more consideration from film and media scholars.
Within this framing of connectivity and context, I wish to briefly look at three pandemic movie memes that draw on popular ‘women’s cinema’ texts including *Mary Poppins* (Robert Stevenson, 1964), *Annie* (John Huston, Ian Toynton, 1982), *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), and *Sex and the City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008). These memes circulated in the first three months of the pandemic and all were featured on *Elle UK*’s round up of “125 Coronavirus Memes To Get You Through Self-Isolation and Social Distancing” (Blair 2020). The title of the *Elle* article suggests that the function of pandemic memes is to get you ‘through’ these challenging times through a relatable brand of humour. Whom they are relatable to, and to what effect, is the question.

![Mean Girls meme](image)

*Figure 1*

Taken together, this set of memes shows the gradual breakdown of social respectability via a series of popular women protagonists. Each meme uses our knowledge of those protagonists, or what their images culturally reference for those who do not know the texts, to establish the tone and meaning of the visual-textual interface. In the meme that references *Mean Girls* (Fig. 1), the setting is the ‘mean girl’ lunch table, a space where the popular girls set the standards for beauty and social status for all who surround them. The meme acts as a metaphor for popular femininity as an economy of precariously positioned postfeminist influencers. As such there is great pleasure in seeing the breakdown the restrictive rules for
women’s fashion under quarantine in the meme’s text. The meme suggests that all bets are off for maintaining a socially acceptable feminine veneer in these circumstances. This is further supported by the second meme (Fig. 2) which references the shift in parenting standards between days one and three via a comparison of Mary Poppins as the idealized care giver (day one) to nightmarish orphanage owner Miss Hannigan (day three). In both memes (fig. 1 and fig. 2), there is a subtle critique of the idealized spaces of femininity occupied by mean girl Regina George and motherly saint, Mary Poppins. They are set up as straw figures to critique the impossibility of women’s standards in the first place, let alone in a global health crisis. The popularity of both of these memes are tied to how they refuse the pre-pandemic social constraints of idealized femininity and motherhood. The final meme (fig. 3) offers a collective sense a surrender and acknowledgment that the first three to four months of 2020 have been relentless. It changes the previous two memes’ scripts by situating audiences not as the scorned bride on her wedding day, but as the recipient of her (re: the pandemic’s) wrath. The catharsis of the image is not as much it’s cultural context but how it aptly visualizes our feeling of being met with a seemingly endless set of stressors and bad news cycles.

Figure 2

It is important to point out two final things. First, alongside being bite-sized cinematic snacks that offer pleasure, laughter and relief for a specific audience, what these memes also advance is a white, hetero, upper class version of neoliberal femininity. In doing so they
normalize a particular brand of pandemic experience that glosses over the forms of structural inequities the pandemic has produced. Only certain people in certain social locations have the luxury of switching to sweatpants and bemoaning their new challenges of working with children from home. Second, while such cinematic memes offered a certain space of distraction in the early months of the pandemic, they seem less equipped and even inappropriate in the current global reckoning of anti-Black police and governmental brutality. This suggests that the memes considered here cater well to our entertainment focused, short attention span, social media economy, but are perhaps more limited in their ability to contribute meaningfully to political social movements in the way that the equally brief, but largely mobilizing social activist hashtag can.

Works Cited


