

## **Distracted Boyfriend: Close-Reading A Meme**

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This long paper is a case study of Distracted Boyfriend, a three-figure object-labeling image-macro meme format which first became popular in 2017 on platforms like Twitter, Reddit, and Instagram. The Distracted Boyfriend meme format is a prefabricated rhetorical structure usually representing an agent and a morally-weighted choice between two options. Posters take this meme format and mobilize it to carry their own messages, applying its structure to many different contexts.

By doing a formal analysis of what makes Distracted Boyfriend memes work as a rhetorical and artistic form, as well as a historical analysis of the contexts and platforms they moved through in 2017, I hope to better understand the modes of creative production, distribution, and reception which bring memes into play.

Memes are most often discussed as evidence or instrument of some other trend – typically far-right radicalization. The techniques applied to the reading of memes tend to come from the tool set of data analysis and sociological study rather than aesthetic theory. Performing a close reading of one meme format in particular offers a chance to access insights that we might miss when addressing memes in aggregate. This approach is necessary because our comprehension of the movements and discourses which make use of memes remains inadequate without a theory of how memes work in the world as rhetorical and aesthetic objects.

Taking account of a meme's status as image, text, and performance, this paper first seeks to catalog what a given meme format's structure allows users to express visually and textually. Distracted Boyfriend can be used in a variety of ways to narrate a situation, to accuse an agent of making the wrong choice, or to encourage a viewer towards a particular choice. Like a rigid poetic form (for example, a sonnet) the meme format has both fixed components and components which a user can change. The play between what is fixed and what is altered between postings animates the meme.

A Distracted Boyfriend meme works with the figures of boyfriend, girlfriend, and other woman in the same way that a Shakespearean sonnet works with the formal structure of the volta, the quatrain, and the iambic pentameter verse. The kind of signifier which the meme and the poem are is a spatiotemporal frame (in the poem, the edges of that frame are prosody, the page, grammar; in the meme the edges of that frame are the post, the screen, and the format) that combines several different types of sense-making. The meme is an image you look at, but it is also a text you read and a post you share or like. The sonnet is a collection of sentences but also a collection of verses and a collection of verbal imageries. As scholars like Veronica Forest-Thomson describe, poetry works by running these several types of sense-making side-by-side, and crossing them.

But the meme isn't just image and text, it is also a post – an act performed in front of a public and then received by that public. By analyzing the paratext of a meme – especially its framing on social media platforms and the comments/audience interactions which record its

reception – I want to paint a better picture of the performance’s context and how it spins the meme. I also want to historically root the meme in 2017 and use it to reflect on how the social internet was structured at that moment in time. A meme moves through the world, bumping into things and following cues. Specific institutions and communities appropriate memes, while specific traditions influence them. Distracted Boyfriend’s trajectory can tell us a lot about how the space it transited was structured, and writing the biography of one meme, its reception and movement, can offer insight into the internet at that time.

Drawing from Robert Weimann’s writer on Shakespeare and Early Modern theater, I want to identify how the meme’s performance contains different moments of interpretation and authority. For Weimann, there’s the locus (plot action within the play, etc.) and the platea (live audience responses, the “process of authorization on the platform stage.”). These onstage spaces correspond to (and represent) types of discourse which legitimize the spectacle happening in front of you, and also types of authority. A Distracted Boyfriend meme can be both a picture of a guy looking at a girl’s butt (platea) and a text commentary on an election (locus) just as a stage can be both the Globe Theater (platea) and the court of Denmark (locus). These layers are anchored spatially, one nearer to the viewer and one further from them. The meme format and image functions like the platea stage, authorizing the expression of the locus. Unlike the Elizabethan theater stage, however, the locus part of the meme (the text) is closest to the viewer while the platea (the image) is further.

This double authorization brings the meme to life. The image of Distracted Boyfriend represents people judging other people, and then the text added by memers invites us to judge those judgments, as the device and platform we find it on judges us (by recording and classifying our interactions).

Through a close-reading of Distracted Boyfriend, I seek to understand dynamics which I believe are more generalizable across memes and online content. But I also think this meme has its own particularities, which are worth dissecting and studying. Close-reading a meme and inviting it to speak can be just as instructive as close-reading a novel and inviting it to speak. What I want to do is sketch out a way of paying a literary kind of attention to memes and treating them seriously as an object of study.