

“It was funny at first”

Exploring tensions in human-animal relations through Internet memes with university students

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Abstract

Because of their mostly upbeat everyday presence in most people’s lives globally, Internet memes have gained attention as tools in spreading information and enacting attitudinal change in the face of environmental troubles. The reappropriation of memes for classroom purposes is not straightforward, however. We focus our exploration of Internet memes in environmental education to questions of human-animal relations. The context is a higher education course on multispecies childhood studies. The question we pose is whether and how Internet memes can bring forth tensions in human-animal relations. First we review literature mapping what Internet memes are and how they relate to humour and laughter. Then we explore what memes (can) do by creating Internet memes with university students of education. And finally we turn to affect theory and suggest that the potential for environmental education that Internet memes hold, may lie in understanding and using them as *feral pedagogical creatures*.

Keywords

Internet memes, laughter, humour, human-animal relations, higher education

Introduction

The doom and gloom narratives and the emotional contagions of guilt seem to dominate much of the current debates on the ongoing environmental concerns, while the usefulness of invoking these has been questioned (e.g., Wonneberger, 2017). To take a different route, and to follow the call of this Special Issue, we turn to the more humoristic registers of popular culture that are circulated in the form of Internet memes.

The empirical starting point of this paper is a university course “Multispecies childhood studies – challenging anthropocentrism in education” that was held during spring 2020 for undergraduate students of education. The educational rationale behind the course was that while it is crucial to equip future teachers with recent knowledge related to environmental crises in the Anthropocene and to distract the anthropocentric gaze more cognitively, it is equally important that the explanatory approaches are supplemented with affective and feral pedagogies to pragmatically disrupt any simplistic idea of human agency and control. The course in question focuses on human relations to other animals as a case example of core areas in environmental education in which disrupting practices of hierarchical anthropocentrism is taking place (e.g., Spannring, 2016; Lloro-Bidart & Bansbach, 2019). The selection of internet memes as a core exercise was chosen to explore the pedagogical relevance of a mode of humor that is affective and feral and an existing part of cultural communication in the daily lives of the teacher students.

Internet memes, along with other more situated modes of humor and satire (e.g., standup comedy; Boykoff & Osnes, 2019), have gained attention as tools in both spreading information and enacting attitudinal change in the face of current environmental troubles (e.g., Wells, 2018). This is largely because of their mostly upbeat, pervasive, everyday presence in most people’s lives globally. Although simple in format, the reappropriation of memes for classroom purposes is not straightforward. Part of the essence and allure of Internet memes is their rather uncontrollable existence: they proliferate and transform through rapid and contagious, often unpredictable horizontal and intercontextual processes (Davison, 2012). Through affective contagion, of which laughter is one important materialization (Emmerson, 2017; Massumi, 1995; Weeks, 2020), internet memes may hold potentiality for disrupting embodied experience and cracking the subject open for novel responses (Stengler, 2014). Further, affects are also generative of spaces and atmospheres through their indeterminate, contingent and multiple capacities (Emmerson, 2017).

We focus our exploration of Internet memes in environmental education to questions of human-animal relations. The question we pose is whether and how Internet memes, when used in the context of education, can bring forth tensions in human-animal relations and help questioning hierarchical anthropocentrism.

To address this question, this paper unfolds in three parts. First, we review literature mapping what Internet memes are and how they relate to humour and laughter. Then we explore what

memes (can) do by creating Internet memes with university students of education in the attempt of articulating tensions in human-animal relations and troubling the idea of anthropocentrism or human supremacy. Finally, in light of the previous two phases of the paper, we turn to affect theory and conclude by suggesting that the potential for environmental education that Internet memes hold, may lie in understanding and using them as *feral pedagogical creatures*: indeterminate in their affective capacities, engendering multiplicity of meaning, generative of the spaces, temporalities and atmospheres.

Conceptual frame: Internet memes, humour and laughter

“An Internet meme is a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission.” (Davison 2012, 122)

A short overview of the history of internet memes (e.g., Davison, 2012) and the current studies on them in various fields makes clear that memes are upbeat and “easy” on the surface but carry a potential for being vehicles of powerful communication. In semiotics, internet memes have been understood as speech acts (Grundlingh, 2018) or collective, emerging expressions (Jenkins, 2014); in political studies and critical youth studies, they have been argued to serve as building blocks of ideological meaning and propaganda (DeCook, 2018), while in leisure studies they have been viewed as spaces for collectively bringing differing experiences and perspectives into contingent, shifting and affectively constituted public sphere (MacDonald, 2020). Moreover, some authors have explored internet memes through their potentiality for addressing uneasy political topics such as rape, abuse and addiction (Vickery, 2014), as tools for developing critical thinking (Wells, 2018) and civic literacies (Mihailidis, 2020), and as articulations of the mood of a specific era, a memescape (Glitsos & Hall, 2019). In their review of contents of various Internet memes, Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007) found that most are, however, intended to provide humor or social commentary.

Internet memes, while definitely discursive, are also material in how they participate in animating both human bodies and social movements, in how they are situated within and evolve with developments of technologies (smartphones, satellites, hard drives, servers), and in how they are organized through algorithms and AI. They can be considered as circuits of affective transfer and contagion capable of disrupting embodied experience, and generating spaces, atmospheres and subjectivities (Emmerson, 2017). This has consequences of how we view the human subject. As Dominic Pettman (2019) suggests: “the subject is less an ape of established ideological patterns, and more the reflex, medium, or host, through which memetic currents flow or grow” or diminish. Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 199) identify a similar agentic force of memes in describing them as “contagious patterns of ‘cultural information’ that [...] directly generate and shape the mindsets [...] of a social group”. As hosts to memes, rather than the masters of them, the important materializations through which we come to know with and through these flows are laughter and other modes of affective communication and response.

In studying human laughter¹ Sasha Winkler and Gregory Bryant (2021) identify spontaneous colaughter as a signal of mutual knowledge, of being able to encrypt and decrypt a humorous communication, or “getting it” and thus belonging to a shared group (also Flamson and Bryant, 2013). The positive impacts of colaughter are both physical and emotional but importantly also socio-evolutionary, conveying a signal of affiliation to a particular group, among larger and more complex social networks (Winkler & Bryant 2021, 19). Having said this, the existence of colaughter with ensuing positive group bonding, does not necessarily translate to a positive or desirable content. Much research has gone to the darker side of laughter, in connection with bullying, and laughing at someone’s expense (e.g., Provine, 2000). Strong bonding and cohesion of certain socially undesirable groups such as violent organisations, are also upheld in part with colaughter.

While in the context of Internet memes spontaneous colaughter is not a face-to-face occurrence, existing research on computer mediated communication suggests that the power of laughter as a social cohesive can be applied to online communication also. Tatiana Vlahovic and colleagues (2012) conclude that in an online text-based communication, in the absence of colocation or synchronous audio connection, the role of symbolic laughter (e.g., emoticons and other signs indicating humour) function to increase social bonding and knowledge exchange. An interesting feature that colaughter face-to-face and certain online content such as memes share, is emotional or affective contagion.

In exploring what makes internet videos or memes “go viral”, or rapidly spread across the Internet, Rosanna Guadagno and colleagues (2013) focus on the notions of emotional contagion and social validation. On reception, successful Internet memes elicit amusement or even out loud laughter, and enforce or create group affiliations through exchange of shared knowledge. This connection of laughter and knowledge is powerful when received but can be poorly controlled when attempted to set in motion intentionally; Internet Memes have a life of “their own” and seem to suit intentional communication poorly. Guadagno and colleagues (2013) identify this as well and suggest that regardless of the intentions or plans of the people who have created and uploaded material such as memes, the visceral characteristics of the materials in themselves contribute to why some memes spread fast and wide and others are soon forgotten. Affective contagions are found to be dependent on the “angle of arrival” (Ahmed, 2008) and the arrival of the new body into the given atmosphere insists on a creative recomposition either to destroy or incorporate that body’s forces (Emmerson, 2017).

It has been argued that in Western culture, deriving from Greek philosophy and Christian thought, humour and laughter has traditionally been viewed as an excess to be avoided rather than something potentially positive, liberatory and generative (Morreall, 2014). While humour and laughter can reinforce structures of control and discipline, they can also engender bodies with capacities to exceed such control (Emmerson, 2017). We laugh both at the face of the

¹ Laughter and other “play vocalizations” have been found to be spread throughout the animals worlds (Alter & Wildgruber, 2018)

hilarious as well as difficult (Stengler, 2014), sometimes due to contagion not necessarily preceded by either (Emmerson, 2017). The social aspects (e.g., bonding, affection, dynamics of group hierarchy, as well as sustenance and transformation of norms), individual expressions (of emotional states, sexual attraction, intentions), level of cognitive processing (e.g., getting a joke) and laughter's therapeutic functions (e.g., release of the tension and stress) are often emphasized in relation to laughter (e.g., Alter & Wildgruber, 2018). Scholars working from non-representational and affect theories have, on the other hand, attempted to theorize laughter as relatively autonomous from its signification. Laughter is approached as a transpersonal affect, exceeding bodily boundaries and control (e.g., sometimes laughter cannot be stopped by decision), noting its power to interrupt a situation and linear narrative of time, and generative to transpersonal and atmospheric spatialities (Ahmed, 2008; Emmerson, 2017; Massumi, 1995; Weeks, 2020). Thus, as laughter itself is a process of mattering arising from environmental immersion, meaning is not the only outcome of it.

Methodological approach: Make a meme

We now move on to our educational exercise: a course-assignment of an undergraduate university course at the faculty of education, covering child-animal relations and multispecies childhoods. As human-animal studies scholars, our interest in Internet memes started from an observation that the majority of memes that circulated through us, tended to reproduce "nonhuman charisma" (Lorimer, 2007) of a few selected species (cats and dogs, primarily). These memes utilized images of animals anthropomorphically: to express and articulate aspects of human social life, thus resembling a common portrayal of animals in schools, children's books, cartoons and animations (Authors, 2020). To trouble this evident anthropocentrism, as teachers of an undergraduate course, we decided to experiment with memes pedagogically, letting humour and satire flow in and out of the online classroom². The students (N=20)³ engaged with meme ecologies, transforming and transmitting internet memes on a perceived tension within human-animal relations.

The course involved two online meetings with the whole class in the beginning of the course, and two meetings in the end. The first two meetings acquainted students with some central tenets of the animal turn, feminist posthumanism, (critical) human-animal studies, and multispecies ethnographies, as linked with child-animal studies. As part of the course, the students were asked to produce two internet memes to explore ethico-political tensions of human-animal relations. One of the memes could be made using an app or template (e.g., makeameme.org) while with the other we asked them to have more effort. The students were also asked to find an internet meme on the same topic online and find out what kind of discussion and movement they circulate and amplify. This way we sought to explore the

² The course took place during the covid-19 pandemic due to which all physical gatherings at the university were prohibited and courses were held through video conferencing platforms.

³ The participating students have consented in writing. Consistent with national ethical guidelines by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, The University of Oulu ethical guidelines did not require this study to seek a further ethics permit.

potentialities of humor and amusement in context of the ethico-political troubles in human-animal relations. The memes were shared on our closed online course platform and the students were asked to respond to each others' memes on a discussion forum. The students then wrote short essays on their observations.

The materials focused on in this paper are the memes produced, the essays written, and the classroom (online) discussions that followed. We were initially interested in and anticipated this material to connect us to ways of laughing in relation to a variety of difficult topics such as commodification and commercialization of life, appetites, breeding and genetic modification, ways of defining intelligence, and zoonoses. **The materials were first analysed with simple thematic analysis leaning on the existing typology by Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 218) who highlight the two most common types of memes as social commentary and absurd humor. All of the materials were identified clearly as produced for the purpose of social commentary, as expected due to the topic of the course. They were then further divided into sub-categories of social commentary according to their intended purpose: descriptive-informative, empathy-seeking, and moralising. This categorization did not seem to reach the peculiar ferality of the memes, however: while the concrete contents of the memes could be straightforwardly categorized (what is depicted, what is written), the impact of the meme (what was sought, what was discussed, what affects it circulated) escaped neat categories. In the next section we describe how this simple thematic categorization turned into a more dynamic identification of *dimensions of discussion*.**

Furthermore, what the exercise produced was thematically aligned with our expectations but with much simpler, subtler and open-ended modes of delivery and reception, as well as with less laughing-out-loud than we had expected. We are aware, however, that due to the online mode of teaching we did not have the possibility to be present when the students viewed and responded to the memes, or when they worked with them in groups. We have had to rely on their essays and on our discussions online, as well as to interpret and sometimes speculate towards when and how amusement or laughter took place. It also seems that unlike jokes which quickly lose their power when explained too much, memes only get better the more explanations, reflections and iterations are attached to them. In a sense, affects and meanings can feed into each other and overlap, producing loops with minor differences. This, we found, calls for focus on dynamic dimensions rather than more categorical themes.

“It was funny at first”. Thinking with student’s internet memes

In general, the students felt that the meme assignment was fun and pleasant and broke the traditional ways of university teaching and learning, suggesting it having importance for making the atmosphere more “enjoyable”. As a pedagogical event, constructing and thinking with memes with students proved to be open enough for allowing rich discussions, yet defined

enough as a communication mode that it structured and focused the students' work. Instead of being explicitly humorous, many memes were found by the students to "appeal to emotions". While no particular emotions were named, this "appealing" capacity invested in the memes suggests an affective transfer and thus a potentially generative disruption of experience, and/or alteration of the atmosphere. **To highlight this potential, instead of categorising here thematically the memes that the students presented and created, we account for dimensions of the discussions that took place: the affective/atmospheric (*this does/makes*), the descriptive (*this is*), and the speculative (*what if*).**

The students found it difficult to construct memes with clear and direct moral advice or commentary. The issues they wished to raise with these memes ranged from overbreeding of dogs (brachycephalic syndrome, **picture 1**) to melting of the Polar ice cap. In the follow-up discussions and written reflections these memes were found to "leave you cold" and to "not work". **This kind of confrontational memes were seldom humorous or even light, but often quite bleak and moralising. The moralising laughter can be regarded as intentional and directed at those less aware or less knowledgeable, creating a division of the morally upright "us" and the suspicious "them", having resonance with the superiority theory of humour (see e.g., Banas et al., 2011; Moreall, 2014). While also affective (e.g., "leaving you cold"), these memes seemed to narrow the descriptive dimension into either-or questions.**



Picture 1. "Oh, so cute carrying the toy",
"In reality only trying to breathe better"

The more the students moved to the direction of situated phenomena, widely recognisable but highly particular, the more the memes seemed "to work", which for the students meant that they were "appealing to emotions" or elicited a response. An example of such a meme is a dog on the couch/bed (see Picture 2).



Picture 2. "A dog's place is not on the couch", "You don't say?????"

As simple as this meme is - usually a dog pictured lying on a bed or on a couch, looking either guilty or defiant (as interpreted anthropomorphically) with a text commenting the friction in this scene - the discussions with the students prove that they function well for quite complex thinking about human-animal relations. The context of these memes is a home, and the students point out that not only is the phenomenon of dogs not allowed on beds a commonly recognized one, but the experience of having to negotiate this with your dog, on a daily basis sometimes, is as common. Another example of memes where other animals posed challenges on human made rules and ownership was that of a cute rabbit looking at the camera, accompanied by the text: "play it cool, the human will never know you ate the apple tree". In their written reflections they state "It was funny at first" but then move on to critically addressing the conventions of showing other animals their allowed spaces, pointing out the power relations within the home and moving on to culturally specific ideas of "the right places for animals" both inside homes but also more widely in societies: noting that animals seem to ongoingly pose a problem of territory and property, and need to be managed when they are misplaced. **Thus, on the descriptive dimension such memes seemed to call for multiple explanations, iterations and versions.**

Students were able to both be amused and critical when working with and reflecting on the memes. The discussions evidenced an understanding of the many layers and interpretations a

meme can take, as well as the dimensions that this unpredictability opens up for critical questioning: of own position, of the meme content, of the comments it attracts. A group of students write about a meme they selected from online in which a cat is depicted with a mouse, described as sad because they brought a mouse to their owner as a thank you but the owner doesn't care. They write in their written reflection: "Already the first response in the comment section sets the meme straight as it states that cats don't bring catch to humans to thank them but to feed them [...] Then further comments joke about this twist turning the meme upside down: now the cat is the provider [owner] of the human, bringing them food."

A popular discussion around animal memes both found and interpreted and intentionally attempted in the memes made by the students, was to critically address our dominant and stereotypical ideas of what other animals are like. Memes positioning cats as the bosses and rulers and dogs as the dumb, always hungry subordinates were found to be common and while funny, the students were concerned that they enforce our patterned behaviours rather than broaden up our thinking about other species' alterities. The ways in which the students contested this popular meme category was for example to come up with alternative representations of 'cat', such as a raggedy abandoned one who is clearly vulnerable and powerless in relation to humans, positioned next to a picture of a cute kitten (see Picture 3).



Picture 3. "Expectations of a cat for the summer", "Reality when summer is over"

Another discussion circled around anthropomorphism often crystallizing in memes that deal with (mis)communication between humans and other animals, or human interpretations of the behaviour of another species as if human. The students were wary of cute human-like portrayals of other animals and instead discussed and produced nuanced commentary, often self-ironic, about this issue (see Picture 4). The makers of a meme on a dog dressed as an Easter witch expressed their concern on "laughing at the dog's detriment" while amusing the relatives with

a funny Easter greeting. The comments on the meme discussed cues of animal's emotions (such as anxiousness) in clothing situations. Laughter in such cases seemed to affirm the multiple uncertainties related to human-animal communication thus partly resembling the incongruity theory of humour where surprise or contradiction is essential, but not necessarily resolved (Weeks, 2020; cf. Banas et al., 2011). **We have named this dimension, where a meme leads us to uncertainties and multiple possibilities, as speculative. The affective, descriptive and speculative dimensions were often overlapping, as was the case in trying to speak cat -meme that enacted amusement, called for thinking about the (im)possibilities of interspecies communication, and provided opportunities to reflect on world politics of climate change ("First of all, how dare you?").**



Picture 4. Self-irony about communication

According to an Internet meme typology, devised by Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 218) the two most common types of meme purpose are social commentary and absurd humour. The sub-categories of the social commentary memes included descriptive concerns, tongue-in-cheek

commentaries and direct activism. The memes and discussions by and with our students can easily be identified as social commentary rather than absurd humour; our assignment to explicitly consider tensions clearly weighed in. Knobel and Lankshear (2007, 201) continue: “The varying accounts of memes that can be found in the literature convey a sense of discreteness and boundedness attaching to memes”. This was also clear in our exercise: the students produced and reflected subtle tensions and brought forward “minor gestures” (Manning, 2016) situated in familiar everyday life contexts while finding broader ecological destructions more difficult to be discussed with the meme format. The memes that were found to work generatively, or to “appeal to emotions”, as the students expressed it, moved discussions towards many different directions but only by a nudge.

In an extensive review of the role of humour in education, John Banas and colleagues (2011) present three theories of humour: the incongruity theory, the superiority theory, and the arousal theory. The differences between these theories are located in whether they operate mainly on the level of cognition (incongruity: resolving a cognitive contradiction is funny) or emotion (superiority: disparaging others is funny as it elevates you) or both (arousal: laughing to relax and to unwind). Humour in educational settings, or instructional humour, is identified by Banas and colleagues (2011) mostly as entailing incongruities – surprising or contradictory elements – that the learner is able to resolve cognitively and find the situation both humorous and educational. For pedagogical impact, the tone and content of the humorous materials, they add, should be positive, however. In our introductory review of what memes are, in the beginning of this paper, and in the memes that the students created, shared and discussed, the tone of the contents was not always positive. Many memes were challenging or some even outright confrontational, they not only circulated amusement, open-ended humour and laughter, but also sadness, anxiety and moral statements. In one essay two students described a sentiment that many others shared in our discussion: “It was funny at first...”. Indicating that meme responses also came in layers where you first laugh, then pause to think about what you’re laughing at, and then maybe laugh differently or stop laughing altogether.

Memes were multiple in the affects and meanings they circulated but still, or maybe precisely because of this, they seemed to work well as pedagogical creatures. Next, we will turn to these observations in order to think about how internet memes could be engaged with in environmental education.

Conclusion: Slowing down with internet memes in environmental education

Humour and laughter have been treated with suspicion in traditional educational philosophy (Morreall, 2014). When humour and education are explored together, much emphasis is put on instructional humour, i.e., the ways in which a teacher can use humour as a tool to facilitate learning outcomes, and one of the core future venues of research identified is that which deals with ways of teaching humour to teachers (Banas et al., 2011). Another emphasis is on

positivity of the kind of humour used, and a third emphasis is on resolution: the students are thought to learn only if they can resolve, or understand, the humorous communication (ibid.).

In light of our meme exercise with students of education we propose that these three emphases don't necessarily hold, at least in the context of higher education and Internet memes as materialisations of humour. First, the ones actively creating and using humour and humorous materials were the students, not us as the course instructors; second, most of the materials produced were critical social commentary and not only positive or laugh-out-loud humor; and third, most memes created raised more complex questions than they resolved. Regardless, based on the students' reflections both in their essays and in our discussions, working with memes had been an educational experience that got them thinking about human-animal relations and the deep roots of hierarchical anthropocentrism therein.

We identified three dimensions of discussion that often overlapped when the students produced, encountered and worked with memes. The affective and atmospheric dimension dealt with the ways in which memes worked on a particular body (e.g., appealing to emotions, leaving cold) and the course atmosphere. In the descriptive dimension attention was paid to whether multiple iterations and explanations were sought, or the identified issue was collapsed into an either-or question. The speculative dimension was being enacted when the memes lead the students to attend to uncertainties and (im)possibilities of knowing.

Boykoff & Osnes (2019) suggest that comedy and humour can be belittling and ridiculing, potentially working towards subordination of social groups or undermining scientific findings, for instance, but they can also work to open new routes to knowing and confronting abstract phenomena and their paradoxes, such as climate change. When reading the memes with humour theories, we found resonance with both superiority and incongruity theories. When the memes moved on scales not directly resonating with everyday experience, taking a moralizing stance was often enacted, while memes starting from everyday settings tended to lean on unresolved juxtapositions. Instead of making an argument in favour of the one or the other, we like to think with Emmerson (2017) who builds on Deleuze & Guattari's philosophy and argues that laughter captures a sense of indeterminacy by affirming the idea of multiplicity – the idea of “sometimes”. Sometimes laughter affirmed the ongoing movement of de- and re-territorialization (e.g., dog on the bed/couch -memes), sometimes revealed the multiplicity of meaning and (im)possibilities of communication (e.g., trying to speak cat -meme), while sometimes it elicited moral uncomfot and was sought to be resolved with normative statements and either/or thinking (e.g., overbreeding -meme). **Funnily, as a whole the students' internet memes seemed to make perceptible a central incongruity related to environmental education: the statements of what the world is and what must be done are continuously complexified by situations where humans and other animals meet and become animated; where affect, description and speculation meet.** Through existing alongside one another, the students' memes expressed “the impossibility and the possibility, the absolute necessity” (Baldwin)⁴ of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016).

⁴ As quoted in the film “if Beale Street could talk” directed by Barry Jenkins from 2019

Or perhaps, instead of “staying with” we might say “slowing down with”. In the internet meme platforms we browse, we laugh, perhaps forward the meme to our social networks, but sometimes before we have had time to think, our finger has moved us at the face of another meme, another affective flow. In the documentary film, *The Social Dilemma*, released in 2020, the former developers of social media applications explain how these platforms are often organized to make rapid browsing and simplified response possible and by doing so to work towards accelerating hormonal production, dopamine in particular, to keep the users on their screens. This is why the creators and viewers of Internet memes are critical reflexes, mediums and hosts in the memetic flows (Pettman, 2019). By producing internet memes performing a particular tension in human-animal relations, sharing them with other students and the teachers, and writing and discussing about the experience seemed to slow down the accelerated memetic flow of the internet, move between various scales of human-animal relations and allow critical examination of them. Detaching internet memes from their anarchic, yet algorithmic, ecology to be examined within the temporary and closed classroom community transformed them into explicit educational creatures. As an exercise, it was possible to slow down with the trouble, the trouble being both the meaning and the affect.

Affect theoretical perspective maintains that laughter already marks a differential becoming, an embodied transformation and excess of the body’s perceived boundaries (Massumi, 1995; Emmerson, 2017). Laughter indicates the affect’s capacity to interrupt or at least to suspend the linear progress of the narrative – to disconnect it from meaningful sequencing (Massumi, 1995). In sense, laughter, along with other intensities, indicate trouble that can then become resolved in various directions or dimensions as we have suggested here. Emmerson (2017) further points out that laughter interacts with other forces (material, social, affective) to produce particular power relations. These power relations in turn are capable of transforming the structure and feel of space/atmosphere as well as the relations and capacities of bodies within it (Emmerson, 2017). As our review of research on memes also shows, internet memes are not merely innocent entertainment, but also ethico-political forces flowing through and animating the bodies, while generative to atmospheres.

Beside evoking social commentary, the memes also contributed to the affective and atmospheric qualities of the course. Prior to the make a meme -task, we had equipped the students with recent findings and discussions from research related to human-animal relations. When asking the students to produce internet memes, we opened space for their humour without giving direct examples of what we thought of as funny or as a funny internet meme. The memes were productions of students’ lives as diffracted through the theoretical matters provided, adding affective complexity to theoretical issues, and through this they added substance to the curriculum. The students commented on the make a meme -task as fun and pleasant, generous, creative, motivational for thinking critically about human-animal relations, and refreshingly different from traditional academic work. When we teacher-researchers first encountered the memes and discussed them on a video conferencing platform, the session felt cheerful, yet critical thus interrupting the often quite serious academic worlds. The students’ memes rendered us capable of laughing and thinking, too, confirming that the tensions in

human-animal relations are already spread across the students' worlds and in these worlds many tensions can exist alongside one another.

Banas et al. (2011, 119) insist that incongruity needs to be solved by students in order for humour to facilitate learning. If not resolved, the students may experience confusion instead. We wonder if confusion and unresolved tension can also be generative. Vinciane Despret (2016), for instance, has shown how difficult it is sometimes to understand what other animals are interested in, how troublesome it is sometimes to elaborate how humans and animals effectuate in each other the capacities to become affected, and how important the additive instead of subtractive logic is for robust empirical research. Perhaps the same is true for robust environmental education as well.

After our exercise, we have started to consider internet memes not as straightforward educational tools that can be controlled to serve a particular purpose, but as opportunities for cultivating feeling and thinking in the face of multiplicity of tension related to human-animal relations. We have conceptualized laughter as an affect having spatio-temporal consequences, and as being released into social space, calls for meaning. Still, laughter (or humour) should not be taken innocently beneficial (for health, social bonding) – it also indicates a temporal and spatial rupture, a trouble for the idea of a detached and effusively rational human agent. We thus suggest that Internet memes, because impossible to tame, serve environmental education as *feral pedagogical creatures* in at least in the following ways: resituating the human as a critical tension in affective and complex entanglements, and re-cognizing laughter as one of the forces through which the complexities of environmental issues, such as those in human-animal relations, are propagated through online/offline nexus.

To return to our educational rationale, the exercise with Internet memes made us pay attention to the proximities and overlapping of affective, descriptive and speculative dimensions of discussion and to examine some of the complexities involved. Sometimes memes worked to encourage multiple views and speculations while at other times normative either/or formulations surfaced. Importantly, given that traditional education has aimed at controlling bodies, their utterances and excesses, and taming all things feral and disrupting, allowing (students') internet memes into the classrooms may leave space for bodies to be animated also in unexpected and nuanced ways, and for affect to interrupt and actualize its atmospheric and transpersonal spatialities. Instead of attempting to control such environmental processes, we see potential in pedagogies that view this as trouble that can be slowed down with. While our case certainly does not allow generalizing across all educational contexts, our inquiry has led us to consider slowing down in the face of the feral as one of the means through which the broader aim of disrupting hierarchical anthropocentrism urgent in environmental education can be furthered; this time accompanied by humour.

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