

# Is This a Distracted Boyfriend? The Morphology of Current Object-Labeled Memes

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After the presidential election in November of 2016, the content of many users' Twitter timelines changed overnight. The American left, unexpectedly the opposition party, coped, as it traditionally has, with humor, but its online laughter began to take on a despairing quality. That slightly hysterical quality has continued into 2017 and 2018, as the mere mention of the years in and of *themselves* has become a kind of meme (the deaths of, for example, Prince, Carrie Fisher, and David Bowie were frequently cited as yet more evidence that 2016 had it in for humanity). We now live, as social media users like to say, citing the sitcom *Community*, in the "darkest timeline," per the popular gif which references that episode (in which a stunned Troy Barnes returns from a pizza run only to find that total chaos has erupted in his absence). After collecting and analyzing examples of two memes which gained ascendancy in these years, the "distracted boyfriend" (2017) and "is this a pigeon" (2018) memes, I'd argue that these particular object-labeled (that is, recaptionable) macros take part in that collective dismay, representing and commenting on schism, separation, and their characters' comic failure to recognize and identify others correctly.

Essayist Rebecca Solnit recently argued that rather than arrange the political spectrum along a continuum from left to right, it could be more clearly and accurately organized by whether (or how much) one privileges connection and empathy over separation and individuality. The right, she maintains, values a stance of isolation or disconnection not only with regard to the other, but even on the level of cause and effect: human intervention isn't responsible for climate change, guns don't cause mass shootings, economic systems don't result in poverty which in turn doesn't yield addiction and violence. Since the US presidential election in 2016 and inauguration in 2017, these fundamental distinctions in political philosophy have seemed more clear-cut with every policy decision the current administration makes. The "distracted boyfriend" and "is this a pigeon" memes speak to that same sense of disassociation, even psychological *dissociation*, in the sense of mental separation from reality and/or others; the memes lampoon what news outlets merely report: that the current political climate and its administration's seeming indifference—whether to other humans or to facts and truth themselves—feels, to many American citizens, surreal. These memes reflect this sense of insanity, and give occasion to a disbelieving, almost breathless kind of laughter, one already honed and tooled by social media for using memes as coping mechanisms.

The stock photo's so-called "distracted boyfriend" not only double-takes to check out an attractive woman behind him, but is caught in the act by his apparent girlfriend, who is affronted and outraged not least because the woman being ogled could be her twin sister. At the risk of destroying the joke, the distracted boyfriend meme works on two levels: the boyfriend is both shameless in his misogynist scopophilia, and perhaps not terrifically perceptive, preferring some fugitive concept of novelty to near-identity (cf. the death of "politics as usual"?). Similarly, the "is this a pigeon?" meme (image sourced from Japanese anime *The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird*) also involves confusion around identity and subjectivity: an young alien, Katori, gazes ecstatically upward at a butterfly and wonders if it is a pigeon, something with which it could not possibly be confused.

Perhaps owing to my collection methods and chosen platforms, examining more than a hundred examples of the “distracted boyfriend” meme revealed that their topics (as object-labeled) primarily referenced media fandom, followed by internet- or platform-based humor, literary/historical jokes, or (more rarely) subjects such as politics or gender; the proportions were about the same for the “is this a pigeon” meme, though the sample size was smaller. Overt content aside, the memes speak directly to that cultural sense of disconnect via their rhetorical enacting of misprision (Katori’s dazzled, naive wrongness) and disbelief (the incensed girlfriend). “Is what I think I see happening really what’s happening here?” both posit, illustrating a viewer betrayed by and/or unable to trust in what they perceive, illuminating users’ general sense of epistemological upheaval in a post-truth, fake-news, alternative-fact, Russian-bot-influenced social media landscape.

The trenchancy of both memes, perhaps more so than those without labelling, relies on the fluid celerity of social media in order to be recaptioned, recirculated, and cross-referenced rapidly; labeled memes in specific depend heavily on sheer volume in order to be funny as much as to be successful. Rather than being mere ephemera of a moment, meant to be consumed and forgotten, these particular memes and their overwhelming popularity speak to a more pointed political and sociological morphology, which can and should be catalogued and analyzed in greater detail.