Leprechauns, Cute Cats and Tasty Treats: The Circulation of Irish Images in Online Culture

Leprechauns, Cute Cats and Tasty Treats: The Circulation of Irish Images in Online Culture

Anne Goarzin

Rennes 2 University – UNIR (EA 4451 CRBC)

This paper focuses on the interaction between popular culture and the new media, which sociologist David Beer notes, "have become central in shaping our everyday lives and in ordering our routine experiences".[1] I also want to heed Beer's warning that the "new media" are not all that new, and to avoid the trap of thinking of them as an "endless pursuit of the new" and of change while one needs to equally "think about continuity as well as change, to think about the historical developments and fixity of the materialities of cultures as well as their reshaping, and to think contextually about media and culture as being a part of much broader social processes and forces".[2] I will thus consider a selection of popular images that circulate on the web, focusing in particular on memes and gifs that hint at a fixity in the way images of Ireland are conveyed through screens – from phones to computers to TV. This will lead me to propose a revised definition of what the circulation of images might involve in what has been termed the "Post-Internet" era.

Images of Ireland are now everywhere. Over recent years, the well-ordered ideological visual narrative of the historical and affective bond that was fostered by emigration, or the political assertiveness of the Irish diaspora in the USA seem to be no longer clearly delineated because its representations circulate online in different, less fixed ways. Indeed, artist and critical theorist Hito Steyerl has argued images are no longer circumscribed:[3]

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1. David Beer, *Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, DOI: 10.1057/9781137270061, p. 6
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.
3. Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" in Lauren Cornell & Ed Halter (eds.), *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2015. See also: e-flux journal, 49, 2013, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead (last accessed 7/07/2017), p. 7-8

> The internet is probably not dead. It has rather gone all-out. Or more precisely: it is all over! […] This implies a spatial dimension, but not as one might think. The internet is not everywhere. Even nowadays when networks seem to multiply exponentially, many people have no access to the internet or don't use it at all. And yet, it is expanding in another direction. It has started moving offline. But how does this work?[4]

There is a need here for some theoretical background before moving to illustrations. Hito Steyerl argues that this expansion "offline" has several implications. First, that the image now requires a much broader definition:

> But if images start pouring across screens and invading subject and object matter, the major and quite overlooked consequence is that reality now widely consists of images; or rather, of things, constellations, and processes formerly evident as images. This means one cannot understand reality without understanding cinema, photography, 3D modeling, animation, or other forms of moving or still image. The world is imbued with the shrapnel of former images, as well as images edited, photoshopped, cobbled together from spam and scrap. Reality itself is postproduced and scripted, affect rendered as after-effect. Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other.[5]

The second implication is that we need to move from the simple examination of *how* the image is produced (and circulated) to the notion of postproduction, that is how the images *themselves* serve as means of creation:

> Under these conditions, production morphs into postproduction, meaning the world can be understood but also altered by its tools. The tools of postproduction: editing, color correction, filtering, cutting, and so on are not aimed at achieving representation. They have become means of creation, not only of images but also of the world in their wake. One possible reason: with digital proliferation of all sorts of imagery, suddenly too much world became available. The map, to use the well-known fable by Borges, has not only become equal to the world, but exceeds it by far. A vast quantity of images covers the surface of the world […] in a confusing stack of layers. The map explodes on a material territory, which is increasingly fragmented and also

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4. H. Steyerl, art. cit., p. 440.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 444.

> gets entangled with it: in one instance, Google Maps cartography led to near military conflict.[6]

The final move is therefore one from "circulation" to "circulationism":

> What the Soviet avant-garde of the twentieth century called productivism – the claim that art should enter production and the factory – could now be replaced by circulationism. Circulationism is not about the art of making an image, but of post-producing, launching, and accelerating it. It is about the public relations of images across social networks, about advertisement and alienation, and about being as suavely vacuous as possible.[7]

I hereafter propose to locate these paradigm shifts by illustrating them through several examples which will involve leprechauns, cute cats and tasty treats. I will first examine how "Irish jokes" in online culture are overall marked by fixity and have most recently been conveyed in the form of memes that tend to confirm ethnic and cultural stereotypes. Memes can be defined as "free text […], photo, video, audio clip, or animated gif […]"[8] that circulate online. I will then try and make sense of the ubiquitous gif of the "cute kitten" (here in it variation as "cute cat in a green hat") as a vector of a soft, or positive Irishness. And since it is but a short step from cuteness to tastiness, I will attempt to illustrate a wider trend in popular and online culture, which Hito Steyerl describes as follows:

> As the web spills over into a different dimension, image production moves way beyond the confines of specialized fields. It becomes mass postproduction in an age of crowd creativity. Today, almost everyone is an artist. We are pitching, phishing, spamming, chain-liking or mansplaining. We are twitching, tweeting, and toasting as some form of solo relational art, high on dual processing and a smartphone flat rate.[9]

The last section of this paper will attempt to illustrate this trend by examining some YouTube, Buzzfeed or Facts Videos which focus on the tasting of Irish foods by non-Irish millennial Internet users.

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6.   *Ibid.*
7.   *Ibid.*
8.   Thov Reime, "Memes as Visual Tools for Precise Message Conveying: A Potential in the Future of Online Communication Development", https://www.ntnu.no/documents/10401/1264435841/Design+Theory+Article+-+Final+Article+-+Thov+Reime.pdf (last accessed 6/07/2017), p. 2. An example of free text might be the "Keep Calm and carry on" meme, and "Grumpy cat" is a photo that has become a meme. GIF stands for "Graphic interchange format". It was first developed by CompuServe in 1987 and allows to store multiple images in one file for animation.
9.   H. Steyerl, art. cit.

Leprechauns and Postproduced Images

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In the early 2000s, the circulation of popular culture online took over from the candid "friendship" chain letters (which used to come in paper form) and mutated into chain e-mail. Back in 2007 or 2008, the following image attachment circulated around St Patrick's Day:[10]

Fig. 1 – Irish virus

This visual parody of a scam e-mail[11] courteously asking the receiver to delete his own files is technically a meme insofar as it replicates a "piece of information that evolves according to the environment, yet maintains a core principle"[12] as the principle here is that of the email virus scam. Yet much like the French "mime" or street performer, while "[pretending] to be in contact with invisible objects [*here the virus or, the web*]' […], the core principle is replication, recreation, or synthesis of something else."[13] In other words, a meme might be characterised as a picture template for telling jokes.

However, ten years after the launch of Google, and at a time when other US-based firms such as Dell were firmly settled in the business land-scape of Ireland, the "Irish virus" image comes across as suspiciously tacky. It plays at being a "post-produced" image indebted to the cultural stereotypes which were popular on the web 1.0 – most notably in the shape of "Irish jokes" which circulated via e-mail through computers before the heyday of smartphones. And as such, this real image functions as a *pre*-"Post-Internet" image-object, in that it reflects on the Internet as a tool. As Steyerl writes in a key piece interrogating recent changes in e-culture,

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10. http://joyreactor.com/post/318677 (last accessed 10/07/2017).
11. On memes, see https://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/when-does-a-meme-become-art (last accessed 6/07/2017). See also Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Cambridge (MA), The MIT Press, 2013.
12. T. Reime, art. cit., p. 1. The term was introduced by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 essay *The Selfish Gene*. Reime notes that the meme "is to culture what genes are to biology […] I propose to define a meme as a picture or figure functioning as a template or situational background, to which a specific and related, written content is added." (*ibid.*, p. 2)
13. *Ibid.*

> Image circulation today works by pimping pixels in orbit via strategic sharing of wacky, neo-tribal, and mostly US-American content. Improbable objects, celebrity cat GIFs, and a jumble of unseen anonymous images proliferate and waft through human bodies via Wi-Fi. One could perhaps think of the results as a new and vital form of folk art, that is if one is prepared to completely overhaul one's definition of folk as well as art. A new form of storytelling using emojis and tweeted rape threats is both creating and tearing apart communities loosely linked by shared attention deficit.[14]

With this in mind, let us go back to our virtual leprechaun. It "pimps pixels" (albeit in a rather naive way) by resorting to the image of the St Patrick Day's Irishman-as-drunk-leprechaun, which suggests a certain endearing backwardness as well as an enduring attachment to folkloric images, here confirmed by the use of a rather outmoded font. It also partakes in the "wackiness" of "neo-tribal, and mostly US-American content" referred to by Steyerl. It further conveys an image of the Irish as perceived from outside of Ireland, and predominantly by Americans. However, having heavily invested in Ireland over the boom years, the latter knew well that this "manual virus" was nothing but a concentrate of self-derisive stereotypes bordering on caricature. It most certainly did not reflect the very different truth described by R.F. Foster:

> This illustrates the strange conundrum, whereby Ireland has a greater Gross Domestic Product than Gross National Product – since the former statistic includes all the money made by multinationals such as Hewlett-Packard, Dell and Intel, which then is exported back to the USA, and the latter figure simply adds up what is left for the natives. As the statistics became ever more miraculous in the late 1990s, the distance between these two rising graphs widened accordingly.[15]

If one factors all these elements, this makes the message into an even more improbable hybridised object that is all at once a polite invite, a professional-sounding e-mail message and a visual cliché. It also upholds the idea that the digital economy that furthered Ireland's self-branded "creative economy" was nothing but an Irish joke involving the usual suspects of backwardness (applied to the 21st century area of new technologies); gentle hospitality ("please", "thanks/tanks"); or the oh-so-Irish gift of the gab. All of these stereotypes are conveyed through a request that brims with signs of Irishness similar to the signs of italianity that Roland Barthes recorded

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14.   Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?", e-flux journal, 49, 2013, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead (last accessed 7/07/2017), p. 7-8
15.   R. F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change*, London, Penguin, 2007, p. 9-10.

in his reading of the advertising image by Panzani[16]. To top it all, it bears all the linguistic indicators of "Irishisms" ("that'd be grand"; the eluded [th] in "Tanks", "bejaisus"; and of course the name Paddy O'Hacker).

However, in the context of the economic bust and recession, the whole affirmative enterprise comes across as ironical. Both Claire Lynch and R.F. Foster have pointed out that "From the boom years of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy, during which the manufacture and development of hardware and software in Ireland thrived, through to various government policies to increase domestic access to web technology, cyberculture has been at the core of Ireland's social and cultural identity."[17] But the "miracle of loaves and fishes" (as Roy Foster dubbed the boom)[18] was not to last, and as a result the leprechaun seems to be commanding us with a sense of humor that defies the harshness of the recession. In a sense, the "leprechaun virus" is a practical joke because this friendly figure, which one might consider to embody the Irish at large, also signifies their self-conscious critical distance about the rise and (mostly) fall of the Celtic Tiger.

It is based on the same principles as the scams that jam email users' inboxes nowadays, from the upbeat announcement that "You have won the sweepstakes" to other classic phishing scams such as the older "Nigerian letter scam". I will allow for a digression here as the scam topic allows me to illustrate how "post-internet" art, which we might characterise as art that focuses on the internet as a creative inspiration and not just as a mere medium, embraces the tools of the internet for creative purposes. *The Rumors of the World* (2014) is a video installation by Franco-Lebanese visual artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige which explores the artistic potential of the e-mail scam:

> In the Black Box Gallery, people of various ages and origins, amateur actors, filmed close-up, watch us, speak to us, incarnate a scam, a story. These faces and voices are spread out onto twenty-three screens and one hundred loudspeakers, weaving a network, a visual and virtual architecture that creates an invasive rumor.[19]

16. Roland Barthes, "Rhétorique de l'image", *Communications*, 4 (1), 1964, DOI: 10.3406/comm.1964.1027, p. 40.
17. Claire Lynch, *Cyber Ireland: Text, Image, Culture*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 6-7.
18. R. F. Foster, *op .cit.*, p. 7.
19. Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, *Rumors of the World,* Video installation, 23 screens, 100 loudspeakers, 38 HD films, variable lengths, 2014, http://hadjithomasjoreige.com/the-rumor-of-the-world (last accessed 7/07/2017).

Fig. 2 – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, exhibition view of "The Rumor of the World," at Villa Arson, *Je dois tout d'abord m'excuser / I must first apologise*, 2014. Courtesy of the artists and In Situ – Fabienne Leclerc

Much as the Irish accent suggested by the leprechaun's message appears comically exaggerated, Hadjithomas and Joreige's installation transforms the formal request of the scam e-mails and dramatises them. They are no longer directed at random users but narrated as confidential stories – until the moment when money is brought in the picture:

> An agreement emerges between the mechanism and the spectator, like it does in theater; one subscribes to the actors' performance rather than reality. These monologues seem credible for an instant until the characters start to mention money, thus dissolving faith and blurring the limit between truth and lie, fiction and documentary. Brought together in the exhibition, from one country and one event to the other, from a story, a face and voice to the next, these tales make up the rumor of the world.[20]

Unlike the leprechaun example however, this piece deliberately takes the e-mail scam one step further by making it into an artistic installation.

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20. *Ibid.*

Irish Narratives in Gif Form – but What of Cute Cats?

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The Potato website lists the following meme as one of Ireland's "10 favorites memes ever."[21]

Fig. 3 – "Irish" meme

An overview of this series of images shows that the meme aims at commenting on popular cultural issues related to Ireland mostly as it seen by Americans and Europeans, (and specifically by the British as former imperial ruler). While it is difficult to locate the exact date when this series of vignettes was created and first circulated, it refers to cultural and political moments that can be traced. First and foremost, the images make incursions into issues related to the economy. They go from suggesting that Ireland squandered EU money in the 1990s and is backward (in the Americans' minds) to stressing symbolically its strong renewed connections with the US, with the image of President Obama's official visit in 2011 and the viral image of him having drinks at a pub in Moneygall, Co. Offaly. They also refer to the violent history of the Troubles (with the IRA bombing campaign of the 1980s in England) and to the globalisation of Irish pop music as reflected by U2's quasi-superheroic visual status. The visual narrative ends with a self-derisive hint at past emigration, now reactivated by the recession. However, the series ends on the vindication of Irishness as a form of resistance to other clichés, especially with the last representing emigrants to Canada in the 19th century. This ironical distance is meant to assert the Irish people's sense of pride as well as their ability to withstand crises in this viral narrative. It is also what allows them to put up with global sniggering at their dispendious tendencies and other cultural clichés about their rurality, their rampant alcoholism (also a metaphor of economic dependency), their vanity or their ingrained

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21.   http://www.thepotato.ie/2013/01/24-of-the-best-irish-memes-ever (last accessed 7/07/2017).

violence. Interestingly, what is provided here is a collective narrative that, in its broad reliance on stereotypes, is as much of a scam as the "leprechaun scam".

Yet in the meme of the early 2000s, the image of the Obamas at the pub drinking Guinness seems to provide a new take on the celebration of the camaraderie between Ireland and the United States of America.[22]

In the "Irish" meme (Fig. 3) it is as if the picture had been airbrushed to feature FLOTUS Michelle Obama in a "softer", feminised version of the relationship between the US and Ireland at the turn of the 21st century. What the meme suggests is therefore a refashioned narrative of Irish culture provided by the Irish, for themselves and for others on the web. And while the "Irish" meme pokes fun at what the world thinks of the Irish, and at how they view themselves, it is worth noting there is no equivalent version summing up "The French", or "The Americans"[23], which seems to point to a difficulty when it comes to taking in what other nations think of them.

While the question of the feminine in political representation would require more in-depth examination which cannot be carried out here, the ubiquitous "cute kitten" gif allows for relevant insights into it. The original image comes from a YouTube home video[24] introducing us to an adorable kitten acting a fluffy four-legged leprechaun:

Fig. 4 – "St Patrick's Day Leprechaun March" (Still).

Critical theorist Sianne Ngai has argued that "cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with the

22. The caption reads: "Here's luck to Dear Old Ireland, the cradle of all true and loyal hearts. May her memory ever stay green in the hearts of all sons of Old Erin" (c. 1910): http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/license/658614022 (retrieved 7/07/2017).
23. The "French" versions speak mostly of frustration at the lack of social acknowledgement on part of the groups that they represent (nurse, civil servant, scientific researcher) and the closest equivalent is a comic meme on "French in the USA", or "Being American".
24. "St Patrick's Dat Leprechaun March", https://www.youtube.com/embed/Xcr2FfRgflE (last accessed 8/07/2017).

infantile and the feminine."²⁵ It may indeed be tempting to characterize the "cute cat" image as an offshoot of the alleged femininity of the cute in its roundedness and positiveness, but the critic also stresses that such images may expand "from the unequivocally positive […] to the ambiguous or potentially negative [as potential indecency]."²⁶ She further notes that cuteness is also often identified with a "'twittering' use or style of language, marked as feminine or culturally and nationally other."²⁷ When it comes to visual cross-overs between Ireland and the US in online culture, long before the days of YouTube videos and their derived cute cat-leprechaun gifs, one may argue that the American animated cartoon character of Betty Boop stands as a touchstone of popular images associated with cuteness. Indeed she is linked to both the positive (childish) and negative (sexual) interpretations of cuteness as well as to the feminine "twittering", all of which seem to endure in the numerous Irishised versions of the character in contemporary online culture. She first appeared on screen as an anthropomorphic poodle in the shape of a vivacious French Poodle girl-dog with floppy dog ears and was cast as the girlfriend of Bimbo the dog²⁸ – and one might contend here that the image is not radically different from, or less incongruous than the anthropomorphised cute cat/ leprechaun in a green hat.

Fig. 5 – Betty Boop and Bimbo the dog
in *Dizzy Dishes*, animation, 1930

Betty Boop would sing the "boop-oop-a-doop Girl song", a scat lyric that was originated by the singer Helen Kane (whose mother was

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25. Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde", *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (4), 2005, DOI: 10.1086/444516, p. 814.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. See https://genxpose.blogspot.fr/2015/04/doggone-it-dogs-go-wild-too.html (retrieved 7/07/2017). "*Dizzy Dishes* premiered on August 9, 1930 and stars Bimbo as a waiter who gets into some trouble. This short is also famous as the first appearance of Bimbo's girlfriend, the as-yet-unnamed Betty Boop. In *Dizzy Dishes*, Bimbo and Betty are both anthropomorphic dogs. Bimbo has big dog ears. His girlfriend Betty is a French Poodle with floppy Poodle ears and a Poodle nose. Bimbo is the star and *Dizzy Dishes* focuses on his bumbling and Betty, who is not even given a name in this cartoon, actually has a very limited appearance for a song and some flirting. […] *Dizzy Dishes* runs 6:10."

American-Irish) in the 1920s. The character only lasted from 1930 to 1939 but it was revived in the 1980s and produced an impressive number of Betty Boop animated gifs online.

Fig. 6 – Irish Betty Boop

As the "Irish cute" Betty Boop was revamped and circulated, it retained what Ngai has described as "the formal properties associated with cuteness – smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy – [which] call forth specific affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency."[29] Nevertheless, it seems that *The Guide to United States Popular Culture*'s description of the character borders on plain sexism: "a wide-eyed bosomy ingénue scantily clad in a frilly strapless miniskirt, one trim leg sporting a fancy garter."[30] In more recent memes of the Irish Betty Boop too, the "cute" modest outfit suggesting the moral decency of the Irish woman (Fig. 6) seems to have given in to cuteness that is more sexually connoted and which has spread across images of Irish and non-Irish Betty Boops alike. Here, the "diminutive object […] 'has some sort of imposed-upon aspect or mien' – that is, it bears the look of an object not only easily formed but all too easily de-formed under the subject's feelings or attitudes towards it."[31] As Sianne Ngai writes, "cutification" is close to "objectification" and the Betty Boop of recent years has been amply submitted to eye and leg deformation, her malleable body suggesting a move from charmingness to indecency and sexual arousal. This is further emphasized by the "Keep calm" textual meme, which is itself a reference to Churchill's war-time phrase, making the image below a meme inside a meme.[32]

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29. S. Ngai, art. cit., p. 816.
30. Ray & Pat Browne, *The Guide to United States Popular Culture,* Bowling Green (OH), Popular, 2001, p. 110.
31. S. Ngai, art. cit., p. 816.
32. http://bettybooppicturesarchive.blogspot.fr/2014/03/betty-boop-keep-calm-and-kiss-me-im.html (last accessed 8/07/2017).

Fig. 7 – "Keep Calm and Kiss Me I'm Irish"

As a rule in online culture, Irishness is an accessory to the woman's sexual agency. More often than not, Irish women in gifs are fairy figures, pin-ups with green tight tops or staged selfies of redhead girls with blue eyes; but such figures are not sexually empowered – as if the very idea of a sexualised Irish woman in online culture, from Maureen O'Hara to Mrs Doyle, was still quite problematic.

Tasty Treats

While the cuddliness of the cat with the green hat can hardly be denied, its repetition over and over as a gif makes it potentially threatening or at least "suavely vacuous"[33], Hito Steyerl suggests. In the gif image, it keeps coming towards us and yet disturbingly never goes anywhere. It should be said that this study of memes would not be thorough without a wink and nod at Grumpy Cat[34]. Yet the reference to the popular feline may not be "suavely vacuous" altogether, for from a theoretical perspective and as a taste concept, cuteness also links in to food, whether it is leprechaun relish or consumable men we are talking about here:

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33. H. Steyerl, art. cit., p. 444.
34. For more on viral, commercial-oriented memes, see James Cohen & Thomas Kenny, *Producing New and Digital Media: Your Guide to Savvy Use of the Web*, New York, Focal, 1st edition, 2015, p. 107.
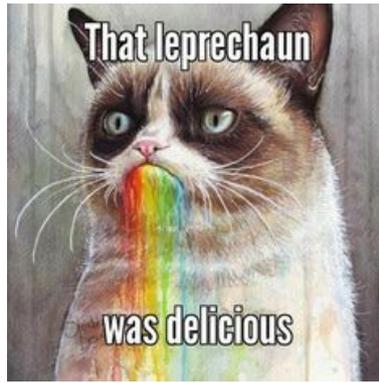
Fig. 8 – Grumpy Cat meme

Ngai suggests in her essay that "[given] all its associations with the pleasures of consumption, including the spectrum of aesthetic experience, running from what Adorno calls 'tasteful savoring' to 'physical devouring' that brings art into an uncomfortable proximity to 'cuisine and pornography', it is fairly easy to understand why critics have actually gone to lengths to avoid the subject of cuteness[…]."[35] It can also be argued that the peculiar face of the diminutive (female) cat with big eyes and rounded softness are non-threatening and the rainbow-colored trace that stands for leprechaun blood does this precisely: personification is avoided, no gaze need be returned and amusement is substituted to embarrassment. These days, it seems that the alternative to the expected cute/tiny leprechaun increasingly are the commodified images of well-known Irish male artists which widely feature on sites such as knowyourmeme.com or giphy.com. The visual stardom of singer Niall Horan from the boys' band One Direction or of Ed Sheeran (complete with sultry looks, guitar, "Galway Girl" and stepdancing) and of model and actor Jamie Dornan (as a serial killer in the TV series *The Fall*[36] or as seducer in the 2015 movie *Fifty Shades of Grey*) are circulated as gifs and memes in which they are endlessly undressing, breaking from sultry pout to sexy smile, or consuming food. What is circulated here is the idea of the sexiness of the men as objects for immediate, lighthearted visual consumption.

Taken to the culinary level, it is also interesting to examine how the notion of taste is now being disseminated online: food has become the subject of many YouTube channels, and it is worth studying how BuzzFeed food videos attempt to convey what is presented as a "real" experience of food tasting through the presentation of regional or national tastes. There is an element of cuteness as the selected foods are often packaged to please, malleable and consumable. But in the end it is not so much the food that

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35.   S. Ngai, art cit., p. 814.
36.   "The Fall" was created and written by Allan Cubitt in 2013, produced by Artists Studio and shown on RTÉ One in the Republic of Ireland and BBC Two in the UK. It stars Gillian Anderson as DSI Stella Gibson and Jamie Dornan as serial killer Paul Spector.

is tasted as the accents of the testers themselves, or their body language as straight or gay couples or as young adults representative of various ethnic groups. Eventually their ability to comment on the culinary merits of the food tasted seems less valuable than their ability to chatter. In addition to this, one may wonder whether the underlying aim of deconstructing food stereotypes may not lead to the elaboration of new clichés regarding gender, or social physical behaviors.

What has made these videos popular is their versatility and the unending possibilities that they offer for a global online culture: there are videos of Irish people tasting American "Twinkies" (the ultimate "cute cake"), of Americans intrigued by Irish snacks (the "cuteness" of the bag of "Taytos") or by the notion of "Saint Patrick's Day food". Of course, there is potential for more specialised variations of this based on the demographics and local population, as in the "Irish people tasting New England treats" video. And as carefully orchestrated short movies both from perspective of ethnicity and gender, these short videos also qualify as memes.

Conclusion

The circulation of images has thus become a circulationism, where images are copied and tampered with. The Irish stereotypes of old seem to rarefy as their multiplication online depletes their potential meaning as signs (Adorno speaks of the "reification of the inert or radically reified object"[37]) but a number of central questions are carefully avoided in the process, most notably concerning issues of gender. But these are not works of art, and art, Adorno says, always runs the risk of being distanced from society, and thus become ineffectual. So while not much is "effectual" in these images of cute kittens, clichéd sexy men, eroticised women and talkative eaters, the very purposelessness of images which are not "for" anything in particular suggests a lack of solemnness and conveys a feeling of pleasure[38]. And indeed, in her study Ngai suggests that "even works with an expression of despair can be lighthearted […] in Beckett's plays the curtain rises the way it rises on the room with the Christmas presents."[39] The circulationalism of images, their repetition and variation thus make for a kind of sociality whereby all users can generate memes that are tweeted and Tumbled in unexpected ways. As a final remark, let us point that an interesting aspect is that online culture conveys overall non-critical and non-political images, thus extracting Ireland from the arena of political action and focusing on inconsequential, or "impotent" images.

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37. S. Ngai, art. cit., p. 838.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 839.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 840.

Paradoxically, the movement of visual or textual GIFs tends towards passivity or inertness. Ngai proposes that they make for a kind of "asocial sociality" in that they are

> *least* social (that is, most ineffectual in a society that transforms human relations into thing-like ones and invests material objects with what Jameson calls a 'strangely spiritual' or 'libidinal sheen' but also […] *most* social (in the sense of most visibly bearing this society's imprint or mark)[40].

Still, the ongoing effort on the part of academics to try and make sense of these images attests to the difficulty to accept that such viral images serve no purpose and do nothing. Ethan Zuckerman elaborated on this in his quite serious (although humorously entitled) "Cute Cat Theory Of Digital Activism", where he argues that

> With web 2.0, we've embraced the idea that people are going to share pictures of their cats, and now we build sophisticated tools to make that easier to do. As a result, we're creating a wealth of tech that's extremely helpful for activists. There are twin revolutions going on – the ease of creating content and the ease of sharing it with local and global audiences[41].

Zuckerman outlines the unexpected effects of images that can reach beyond their apparently initial amusing meaning and bear hidden significations. In so doing, he suggests that there is a new field for the study of unexpected, sometimes less academic objects produced by online culture. This also means that there is a need to envision national cultures and their material productions (here, Ireland's) in their relations to a more global speech environment that is now sustained by digital creativity, communication and networks and to examine the political implications of these paradigmatic changes.

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40. *Ibid.*, p. 844 (Quoting Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society"(1967), *Notes to Literature*).
41. Ethan Zuckerman, "Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression" in Danielle Allen & Jennifer S. Light (eds.), *From Voice to Influence: Understanding Citizenship in a Digital Age*, Chicago, Chicago UP, 2015 (Author's final manuscript: http://hdl.handle. net/1721.1/78899, last accessed 8/11/2020). Designer and Internet theorist An Xio Mina suggests that China represents a speech environment where the only controversial, political speech that's possible is speech that uses image and humor to ensure its spread. Writing in an article that compares speech in Chinese social media to street art, she offers this formulation: "If I understand Zuckerman's Cute Cat Theory correctly, he creates a dichotomy between people who share pictures of their cats and people who engage in political activism. In other words, cute cats and activist messages leverage the same tools, but they're fundamentally different. But with Chinese political memes, the cute cats are the activist message" (in An Xiao Mina, "Social Media Street Art: Censorship, China's Political Memes and the Cute Cat Theory", 2011. See http://anxiaostudio.com/2011/12/28/social-media-street-art-censorship-chinas-political-memes-and-the-cute-cat-theory, last accessed 8/07/2017).