

Italian Brainrot and the Folkloric Violence of AI Memes.

In an age of infinite scrolling and algorithm-driven feeds, a strange new visual language has taken root: AI-generated images. These surreal creations—Donald Trump as a bikini-clad pop star, singers fused with animals, limbs melting into appliances—aren't just absurdist spectacles; they're the emergent folklore of a world unraveling. Like medieval villagers inventing monsters to explain plagues, we now summon digital tricksters to cope with the chaos of our global and technological reality. The democratization of AI image tools has accelerated this phenomenon, rewarding the most bizarre, grotesque, or nonsensical outputs with virality. The weirder the image, the more engagement it earns. Across this rapidly expanding visual landscape, one trait dominates: persistent, algorithmically optimized weirdness. As Lorusso (2024) writes of this aesthetic repetition:

Like with Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*, a painting that was originally very powerful, we start to feel a growing indifference towards its many variations, until what we experience is outright annoyance. TTI services lead to a similar outcome.

As the world around us seems to grow more and more out of control, unpredictable and violent, escapism and distraction are reasonable reactions. The limitless “weird” of AI imagery makes it the perfect tool for escapism, allowing us to attempt to vacate reality entirely through non-sensical and often surreal images. Along with these images comes an opportunity for internet folklore to develop, adding to the appeal. Yalcinkaya (2023) stated in *The Internet Enters Its Age of Aquarius* that:

Per Italian philosopher Federico Campagna, what we understand as reality depends on what society says is possible to imagine; he describes it as a continuous act of mass-scale world-building. Onscreen, narratives emerge, unverifiably and therefore conspiratorially, like fractals out of a memetic hivemind. As the conditions of digital existence become more unreal, hypnagogic even, it's getting harder not to believe that we've entered a period of mass psychosis. Where claiming to see things once got you charged as crazy, fake images are coming to form our collective folklore. All eyes on Rafah, Donald Trump cat memes, the “*Enough is Enough, Kanye*” video – viral images made using AI melt into each other like a bad trip.

Fear-based folklore is not a new phenomenon. BlindBoy in *New Jersey UFO's and a Medieval monastery in Offaly*, compares cryptids and mythical monsters to societal trauma. Monsters in folklore are often manifestations of the fears and confusion felt by the people of the past. This fear would mutate into some folk monster, and beneath that would lie elements of truth or a glimpse at the root of their collective feeling. By externalising and personifying their fears comfort could be found.

The Jersey Devil is a folk monster that exemplifies this process. From the late 1800s through to the late 20th century, people in New Jersey reported sightings of a terrifying creature in the sky. It had giant wings like a bat, a strange long horse-like face, and legs like a bird, with claws. It would fly over New Jersey in the night and let out a chilling scream before attacking. The people of New Jersey became so petrified that there was a \$10,000 reward for killing or capturing the creature. In

New Jersey, there is an area of forest called the Pine Barrens. During the American Revolutionary War in the late 1700s, this area was a British colony. After America gained its independence from Britain, Loyalist ex-soldiers retreated into the forest. These men formed gangs that terrorised passersby, turning the Pine Barrens into a place of real and present danger. Coincidentally—or not so coincidentally—it was around that same time that sightings of the Jersey Devil began to surface. The people of New Jersey had just lived through war and political rupture. As the grand-scale trauma of battle faded, a more ambiguous threat took its place: faceless danger lurking in the woods. That lingering unease took shape in the form of a monster. Fear, once formless, was externalised and embodied.

Just as the Jersey Devil emerged from the anxieties of a postwar society, today's digital culture has begun producing its own monsters—born not of myth or folklore but of content feeds and machine learning. Where the Pine Barrens offered a physical landscape onto which fear could be projected, the modern timeline is a chaotic stream of violence, memes, ads, war, misinformation, and artificial intelligence. These forces have no fixed shape, so we conjure avatars to represent them. AI-generated memes—grotesque, absurd, surreal—have become the new pantheon of collective unease. The “*Italian Brainrot*” trend, with its talking animals, AI-rhymed incantations, and surrealist humour, acts like the Jersey Devil of the TikTok age: an expression of algorithmic trauma, designed to be shared, consumed, and forgotten at high speed. These are not monsters we whisper about—they are pushed to us by the algorithm, disguised in virality and bathed in absurdity. In the essay *AI weird as the new kitsch*, Silvia Lorusso says:

AI art is doubly retrospective. First, in a technical sense, in that synthetic images derive from a pre-existing dataset. To some extent this is true for any image, however, datasets are characterised by a precise threshold: the collection, for example, might have ended in 2021. Second, these images are retrospective in a cultural sense: looking at them, one has the feeling that today's visual trend will be obsolete tomorrow.

This is true not only in terms of AI aesthetics, but the subjects of the images. The visual input may be a little out of date, but the prompts used are current, as is the vitality of the meme. The Italian brain rot is a reflection of a huge portion of posts made across social media. Reflecting the violence, absurdity and overwhelming nature of the timeline. The timeline which is comprised of real time posts, curated narratives, reactions, memes, shitposting, news, lives, short form videos, graphic violence and now, increasingly, AI images. So, while new images are being generated in theory, nothing really *new* can be made. It reflects our collective fears and uncertainty that now often exist online as much as they do offline. AI memes are simulacra of simulacra—copies of internet culture that itself copies older media, endlessly recursive, embodying the feeling of the TikTok timeline (where war, memes, and AI slop coexist), mirroring Campagna's “*field of indistinction*”—a space where nothing is real, but everything feels real.

In many of the videos that feature the images the audio only says the name of the creature, listing them out one after another. However, the full audio regarding Bombardiro Crocodilo, when translated, states: “*Bombardino Crocodilo, an alligator that bombs kids in Gaza and Palestine and doesn't believe in Allah and loves bombs.*” The earliest found video about it was posted on February 20th, 2025, by TikTok user @armenjiharhanyan. The post amassed over 5 million plays and 543,000 likes in a month. Are the people who engage with the video co-signing this message? It is possible users would have liked and swiped away before the violent part of the audio was said. Or the meaning was lost through a language barrier. The silly-ness of the rhyming names paired with surreal “*weird-core*” AI imagery is disarmingly absurd, enabling thoughtless consumption and rapid spread. The idea of “*co-signing*” assumes users consciously endorse the message—but on

TikTok, engagement is often aesthetic or algorithmic, not ideological. The explicit violence of the voiceover is clouded, weaponising the nonsense and absurd violence of the imagery to appeal to the algorithm. The meme's exaggerated violence mirrors AI's detachment from reality, turning war into a surreal game.

As Phillips and Milner (2017) summarise in *The Ambivalent Internet*: “Online, what something ‘really’ is, what it ‘really’ means, are often the first certainties to go.” This principle must be taken into account when looking at the Italian brain rot memes. The complacency of the consumer shouldn't overshadow the fact that TikTok's engagement metrics prioritize shock and absurdity, detaching content from intent. When meaning is dictated by metrics, folklore becomes unmoored from reality. In Lewis Hyde's “*Trickster Makes This World*” he states that tricksters “*expose deception through deception.*” On TikTok, Bombardiro's violent message hides in plain sight, leveraging the platform's reward for ambiguity to evade scrutiny. Platforms, not users, are the primary “*co-signers*”—they reward violence wrapped in absurdity. Just as medieval tricksters mocked kings, *Bombardiro* mocks the banality of online war discourse.

If the Jersey Devil was a folk monster birthed by colonial trauma, “*Bombardiro Crocodilo*” is one born of algorithmic trauma—a trickster for the age of viral ambiguity. Existing only on the ephemeral timeline, will Bombardiro endure as a folkloric archetype, like the Jersey Devil? Or is it doomed to the obsolescence Lorusso predicts—a fleeting glitch in the AI zeitgeist? What's certain is that as long as the world and the internet feels like a collective bad trip, we'll keep conjuring monsters to make sense of it. As AI-generated content becomes more integrated into our timelines, these memes will only grow more surreal, more violent, and more disassociated from reality. The monsters we conjure are no longer just expressions of fear—they are engineered for virality, stripped of context, and optimised for repetition. *Bombardiro* stands at the edge of this shift: a folkloric figure of the feed, born from nonsense, cloaked in charm, carrying the echo of real-world horrors. In this way, he is not just a joke or a glitch—he is a glimpse into the future of collective storytelling in a time when truth, entertainment, and terror are indistinguishable.

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