

A literary character as a humorous meme: A semiotic perspective

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the phenomenon of a unique meme-literary character that appeared simultaneously with ChatGPT. This meme is a striking example of a *floating signifier* (Buchanan 2010) arising from mixed discourses. This is the Shoggoth meme, which was created based on a fantastic monster from the novels of Howard Lovecraft, and in our time has turned into a humorous picture with a smiley. The seriousness of "Lovecraftian horrors" as an element of mass culture of the 20th century gave way to a playful, humorous beginning in the digital reality of the 21st century. To understand the meaning of the meme, it must be considered from the standpoint of the semiotics of fear, according to the classification of Lotman (2004d), but also from the point of view of the semiotics of humor. The meaning of the humorous meme Shoggoth is to show that artificial intelligence and human intelligence can interact and understand each other.

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1. Introduction: On the semiotics of culture and the semiotics of humor

In our article, we will analyze the phenomenon of a unique meme-literary character that appeared simultaneously with ChatGPT. We are talking about the Shoggoth meme, which was created based on a fantastic monster from the novels of Howard Lovecraft, and in our time has turned into a humorous picture with a smiley. The meaning of the humorous Shoggoth meme is to show that artificial intelligence and human intelligence can interact and understand each other.

To analyze humor using a specific meme as an example, we will turn to the concept of internal cheerfulness. The creator of the semiotics of culture, Yuri Lotman, according to the memoirs of his contemporaries, was distinguished not only by his outstanding qualities as a scientist but also by his so-called *internal cheerfulness*. Several years ago, on the eve of his centenary, his drawings were published, where he humorously portrays himself (“I am conditional”), his relatives, colleagues, and pets (“The cat and the sandwich were eaten,” “We are cuckoos”: Lotman 2016).¹ The preface to his 2016 book ends with Lotman’s words about internal cheerfulness:

Of course, one can and must deal with external affairs, but one must not let the level of internal cheerfulness fall below a certain critical level. Otherwise, it will not come back even under the most favorable external circumstances. If there is some choice, then it means things are not so bad, and even without choice they are not so bad, and even if they are bad, there is pride to be taken in being cheerful then too (I’m not talking about the kind of cheerfulness that makes one whinny with gaiety, but of a cheerful spirit that lets one enjoy good weather, playing with the children and brainwork [...]). (Lotman 2016:75)

For Lotman, internal cheerfulness is the basis of the semiotics of behavior. In this sense, his approach is similar to the reflections of Eco, when he writes about Pirandello’s (1908) attitude to humor: “life seems to be specially created for a humorous approach” (Eco 2020a:93). Life is a continuous flow, and the forms of logic are attempts to stop this flow, but there “comes a moment when they stop working and reveal their true nature: they are masks” (Eco 2020a:94).

To reformulate Pirandello and Eco, we can say that trying to comprehend and treat today’s digital reality and humor semiotically are synonymous actions. Because humor, unlike comedy or irony, presupposes a rejection of the position of detachment (alienation / *Verfremdung*, in Brecht’s 1967:301 terms) and of the feeling of one’s own superiority over the situation: our laughter is colored with pity and turns into a smile. We do not laugh at Don Quixote as a comic madman; we, like Cervantes, could have been in his place. That is why Don Quixote, according to Eco (2020:89), is a great humorous novel.

We also reject the position of alienation in online communication through memes. Memes have a “capsular” or “polyphonic” format (Cingolani 2024:10): the first impression they make on users is that the meaning is seemingly obvious and lies on the surface. However, memes are built on our encyclopedic knowledge of characters,

¹ Yuri Lotman and Zara Mintz as birds sitting on the “Concept tree”. The drawing is available in Lotman (2016) and also on the portal <https://arzamas.academy/materials/2398> (image 2.2).

situations, stories, and narratives, including humor. The meaning of a meme arises within and is entirely dependent on the vast online context; memes are distinguished by their discursive omnipresence.

To begin our reflections on the semiotics of contemporary “internet-based humor” (Chovanec and Tsakona 2018:20), let us turn to an archival humorous drawing (Figure 1). It is an exhibit of the Memorial Cabinet-Museum of the outstanding film director Sergei Eisenstein in the collection of the Cinema Museum in Moscow. This Memorial Cabinet contains a collection of books, photographs, and objects of fine art from different countries and eras, and at the same time, Eisenstein’s creative and intellectual laboratory, the result of the art of montage, and the prototype of many of his cinematic masterpieces.

The director’s library contains the science fiction novel *The Twentieth Century* (Robida 1883), published in the 19th century in Paris. The French cartoonist and writer Albert Robida placed the novel’s action in the 1950s. In Eisenstein’s office, there is a drawing that the young future director most likely made under the influence of Robida’s book. The drawing is called “People of the 21st Century”: it humorously presents humanity of the future. The novel’s story begins in 2001, with a humanoid character in the style of an old-fashioned university professor. After 25 years, he turns into a humanoid with robotic features, at the age of 75, his body is endowed with all sorts of technical improvements, and in 2100, the first stage of his life ends. The drawing is divided in half by a pencil line, and at the bottom, we see the continuation of the story in reverse order. In 2100, the humanoid character is “resurrected,” then acquires the appearance of a medieval man, after 75 years, he loses the features of a rational man, and finally, from a distant ancestor of people turns into a predatory animal.

Today, the drawing of a very young Sergei Eisenstein evokes our admiration for its dynamics, the juxtaposition of general and close-up shots, and the paradoxical “in reverse” story. What does this drawing mean? A genius’s view of human history from the distant future? A metaphor designed to warn and reassure us simultaneously, because the author looks into the future with humor?

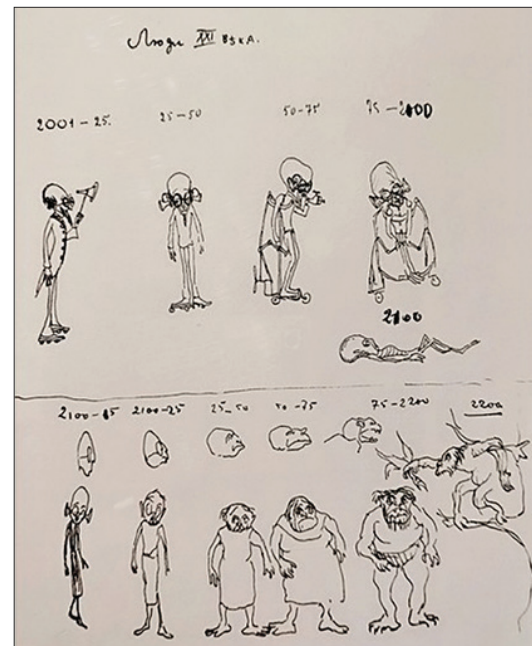


Figure 1. “People of the 21st Century.” Drawing by Sergei Eisenstein. Photo by the article’s author in Eisenstein’s Cabinet Museum, courtesy of the Cinema Museum in Moscow. The drawing is also included in Rumyantseva-Kleiman’s book (2018).

The example of Eisenstein's drawing reminds us of the connection between virtual reality and the "logic and semantics of science fiction worlds" (Eco 2020b:214). The drawing is also a kind of allusion to today's trend of digital detox, when users are humorously offered not just to disconnect from the internet for a while, but to "draw a selfie with a pencil" or "ask a person for an address, not a smartphone" (Paris hors ligne 2025).

Many memes, including humorous ones, originated from pencil drawings or caricatures. However, the Shoggoth meme, which we examine in this article, has its own characteristics because it originated from a literary character. We will explore the humorous Shoggoth meme as a *floating signifier*, emerging from a literary novel and gradually becoming a meme representing AI. As defined by Buchanan (2010:72), a floating signifier is a signifier without a specific signified. It is also called an *empty signifier* that absorbs rather than emits meaning. On the one hand, the literary 'shell' of the Shoggoth hides a character created by Lovecraft and then drawn by various artists. On the other hand, the Shoggoth as an empty signifier attracts and 'absorbs' the expectations of Internet users. It becomes a meme filled with mixed discourses: from fear to humor.

2. A character from Lovecraft's novels

Shoggoth is a fantastic green creature resembling an octopus. The image was created in the 1930s by Howard Lovecraft in the novel *At the Mountains of Madness*. Shoggoths are amorphous creatures consisting of a protoplasmic mass with many eyes on the surface. Their main features are their extraordinary strength, their ability to take any form, and their adaptability to a variety of situations and tasks. Shoggoths were initially created by aliens, highly intelligent Old Ones, as an auxiliary race of slaves who eventually rebelled against their masters. Lovecraft's novel, which was unsuccessful during the author's lifetime (Miéville 2009:510), became the basis for the Cthulhu Mythos, a literary fictional universe of aliens who visited Earth in ancient times. The theme was developed in more detail by the followers of the American writer and today the tradition of "Lovecraftian horror" is singled out as a separate type of literature.

Lovecraft's novels are called "weird fiction," where the dominant theme is fear of the unknown and the incomprehensible (Miéville 2009:511). Lovecraft's works have had a profound influence on the development of popular culture, from the 1970s to the present day. At the center of the novel *At the Mountains of Madness* is the story of a scientific expedition to Antarctica, during which scientists encounter representatives of an ancient alien civilization. The meeting with the Shoggoth in an underground tunnel is described in the technological style of the early 20th century: the creature seems to be the real embodiment of an alien, foreign organism, resembling a train in motion seen from a subway station platform – one of the common depictions of the Shoggoth as a tentacled monster was made by Tatsuya Nottsuo (2017).

A dark mass, dotted with luminous multi-colored dots, bursts out of the underground darkness, “as a piston fills a cylinder” (Lovecraft 2005:11). The metaphor of the metro train refers readers to the film *Arrival of a Train* (*L’Arrivée d’un train en gare de la Ciotat* 1896) by the Lumière Brothers. As is well known, the moving train on the screen terrified the first viewers, who perceived the screen as real and the train as a living being. In Lovecraft’s text, comparing a foreign organism with a train has the opposite semantic effect: to counter the fear of encountering the unknown by likening it to the transport that became popular in the 1930s. That is why the narrator begins to recall the names of the subway stations he knows in the Boston tunnel: “South Station Under—Washington Under—Park Street Under—Kendall—Central—Harvard [...]” (Lovecraft 2005:11). The explorers are saved by a miracle, since the Shoggoth turns into the wrong tunnel at an intersection. At the end of the story, the narrator dissuades the scientists from other expeditions so as not to disturb the Shoggoths, who threaten all of humanity.

3. The new Shoggoth of the 21st century

With the appearance of the ChatGPT neural network in the fall of 2022, which caused a wave of discussions and fears around the world, the Shoggoth character was born again. In December 2022, a month after the appearance of ChatGPT, a Twitter user @TetraspaceWest launched an updated image of Shoggoth into the Internet space: an octopus with 1001 tentacles was endowed with a mask in the form of an emoji. According to TetraspaceWest (Nicholson 2023), the meaning of the meme is to show that ChatGPT’s predecessor, GPT-3, can be controlled by humans: GPT-3 + RLHF (i.e., Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback; see Figure 2). In other words, the AI system and human consciousness can better understand each other.



Figure 2. Shoggoth smiley meme created by TetraspaceWest

Shoggoth has become a viral meme among artificial intelligence insiders and a symbol of the risks of using the entire series of chatbots. Among AI experts, Shoggoth was perceived in three ways: as a joke, as a vivid visual metaphor for the work of chatbots, and also as a signal of concern about the new models:

Shoggoth had become a jokey reference among workers in artificial intelligence, as a vivid visual metaphor for how a large language model (the type of AI system that powers ChatGPT and other chatbots) actually works. But it was only partly a joke [...] because it also hinted at the anxieties that many researchers and engineers have about the tools they're building. (Roose 2023)

On the one hand, the smiley face on one of Shoggoth's tentacles symbolizes how humans train AI language models to act politely and harmlessly, thus indirectly claiming that there is no need to fear them. On the other hand, according to TetraspaceWest, the friendly mask may actually hide a mysterious "beast" with logic unknown to us: Shoggoth represents something that thinks in a way that humans do not understand and that is totally different from how humans think. By creating the Shoggoth meme after the literary Lovecraftian character, TetraspaceWest wanted to present the chatbot not as evil or good, but "unknowable by nature" (Roose 2023). Users should not fear the Shoggoth, but they should not completely trust it either. AI systems are "black box-like" and "Shoggoth-like."

Elon Musk reposted the Shoggoth meme to his 141 million subscribers in February 2023. Therefore, from the pages of specialized forums, Shoggoth moved to social networks (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Shoggoth meme on Elon Musk's page in social networks

This resulted in millions of users using it in short messages, creating its stickers, etc.² Thus, the Shoggoth's humorous potential was inextricably linked to the social context and began to shape it. As noted by Chovanec and Tsakona (2018:7), "social roles, identities, norms, and restrictions usually determine whether humor is going to be used or perceived as aggressive, critical, affiliative, mitigating, supportive, etc."

4. The instance of humor and the "instance of enunciation"³

The humorous Shoggoth meme has become an element integrated into users' messages and popular science publications on artificial intelligence, as well as a critical look at the chatbot phenomenon. As Tsakona and Chovanec (2018:6) suggest, humor is employed "as a tool for testing common ground and shared values, thus bringing interlocutors closer together or driving them further apart."

The original version of the meme from TetraspacesWest, issued on December 30, 2022, is quite schematic and compares two Shoggoths. On the left is a Shoggoth with the inscription GPT-3 and on the right is a Shoggoth with the inscription GPT-3 + RLHF with a smiley. After a few months, extended comments on the meme appeared on the Internet, and phrases like "Shoggoth meme explainer" and "Shoggoth with smiley face" appeared in English (see Figure 4 above). In the "Shoggoth meme explainer" version, the picture is given color: the Shoggoth becomes green, according to the Lovecraftian tradition of describing this creature; the smiley is traditionally yellow, and two red arrows with a meta-commentary on the creation of the meme appear. Commentary on the left Shoggoth GPT-3: The body: "Alls are alien minds" (we "grow them" but don't know what they're really thinking). Commentary on the right Shoggoth GPT-3 + RLHF: The mask: early versions were horrifying, so we trained them to act nice and human-like (Figure 4).

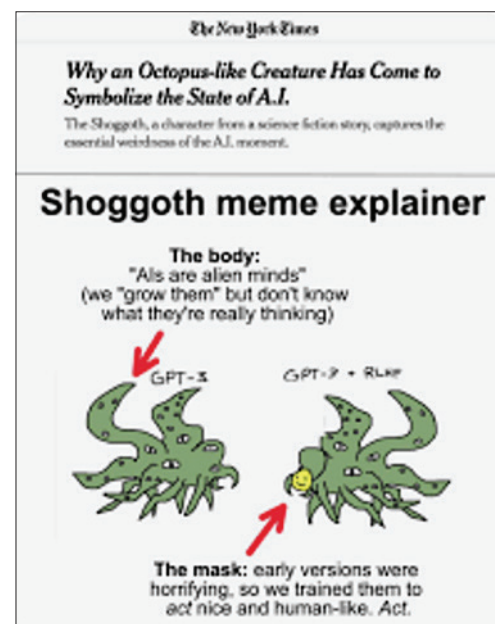


Figure 4. Shoggoth meme explainer

² See examples of toys, stickers and decorations featuring the Shoggoth:

<https://www.redbubble.com/i/sticker/ChatGPT-Shoggoth-with-smiley-face-by-AcaliSeisme/146602968.EJUG5>

³ The term 'instance of enunciation' belongs to Coquet (1984): see further in the text. Here we develop in detail the ideas about the connection between instances of enunciation and memes that were first outlined in Merkoulouva (2024).

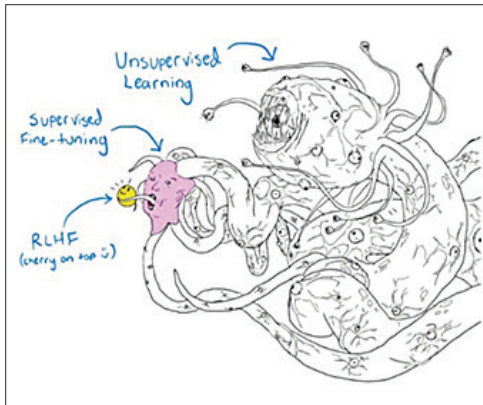


Figure 5. Shoggoth with smiley face

In the “Shoggoth with smiley face” version, only the ‘augmented’ elements of the Shoggoth are given color - the human face (pink or flesh-colored) and the smiley (yellow). Comments in blue with arrows imitate handwriting, explaining the “structure” of the Shoggoth: *Unsupervised Learning* - body, *Supervised Fine-tuning* - face, *RLHF* (cherry on top :). The yellow smiley drawing is duplicated typographically, introducing an additional note of humor into the metacommentary (Figure 5).

In both versions, the metacommentary is addressed to users and readers on behalf of the creators of the Shoggoth, who are human specialists in the field of artificial intelligence. So, people-creators address people-users using the pronoun *we*: *we grow them*. This expression demonstrates the degree of enunciative support and shows the global dynamics of linguistic activity around the “instances of enunciation” proposed by Coquet (1984). The instances are designated by personal pronouns: *I*, *WE*, *HE*, *IT* (in French: *JE*, *ON*, *IL*, *ÇA*). According to Coquet, the subject “expresses himself” through his actions or speech; depending on the personal pronoun used, we understand the degree of his subjectivity or objectivity concerning the enunciation: for example, we are the subjective instance, and *he* is the objective one. The nature of the expressed instance in the key phrases “Shoggoth meme explainer” and “Shoggoth with smiley face” is that we, when the position of we can be shared by both those who speak and those to whom the enunciation is addressed (i.e., the collective of users).

The “Shoggoth meme explainer” version was published on X.com with the tagline *AI Notkilleveryoneism Memes*; the “Shoggoth with smiley face” version was published on the Know Your Meme portal. Then, the Shoggoth meme moves to TikTok, and the instance of the enunciation changes, from the subjective *we* to the objective *he*. Users are addressed “on behalf of the meme.” Therefore, on the verbal level, a passive form is introduced, and “meme explainer” turns into “meme explained” (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Shoggoth AI meme explained

In TikTok, only the word *Shoggoth* remains from the meme, while the meme itself is anthropomorphized, featuring a human face.

Subsequent versions of the meme are expanded versions of the meme-human communicative situations:

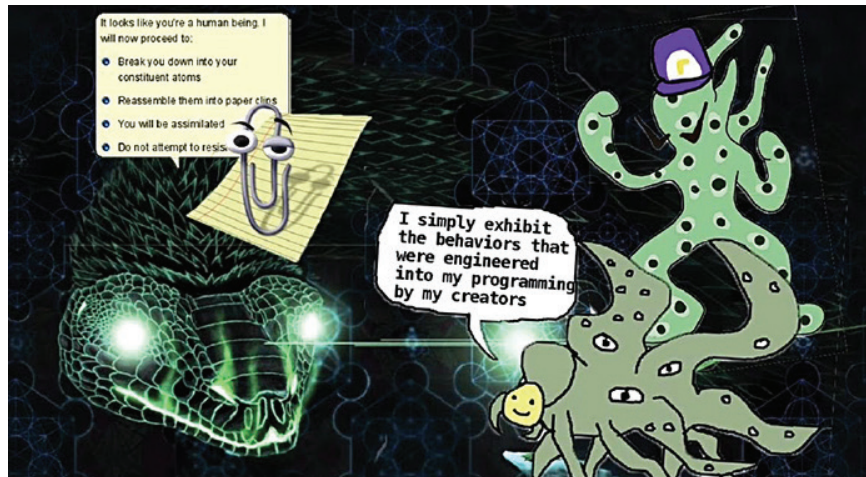


Figure 7. What is “The Waluigi effect”

- a) the meme speaks to people in the first person (subjective instance I): its discourse contains an emotional load of “justification” with the so-called *Waluigi effect* (i.e., chatbot behavior that is unexpected for the user: see Figure 7);
- b) the user gives the mask to the meme, takes it away, or peacefully coexists with the masked Shoggoth. In the absence of verbal comments, the instance of the enunciation is expressed only visually, and this objective it (in French: *ÇA*) is something supernatural, without gender or number, but subject to human control (Figures 8a, 8b with the slogan “AI is a Shoggoth”).

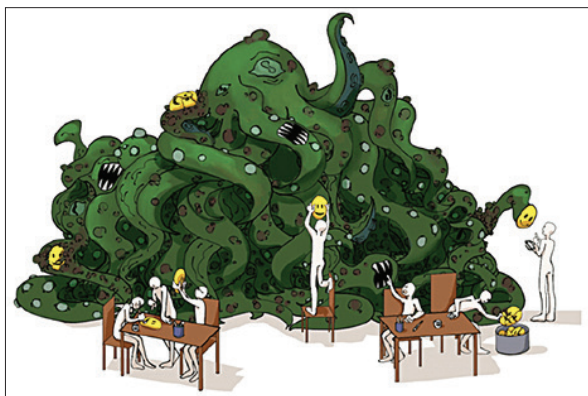


Figure: 8a & 8b. AI is a Shoggoth: the instance *it*

5. From the semiotics of fear to the semiotics of humor?

In our opinion, the emergence of the Shoggoth meme appears not to have been accidental - it can be seen as actually addressing users' fears of artificial intelligence. Recently, the topic of artificial intelligence as a threat to a wide range of fears from the sphere of dystopian novels and utopian films has been steadily shifting to the attention of many readers. We get the impression that this very tendency is the result of the work of artificial intelligence, which seems to be trying to make us understand that it can perform actions that are inexplicable to humans. The world of artificial intelligence is described in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopia, *Clara and the Sun*, about so-called "Artificial Friends" (Ishiguro 2021). Also, the topic of "coexistence" with artificial intelligence is on the UNESCO agenda: for example, the graphic novel *Inside AI – An Algorithmic Adventure* was recently created on the initiative of this organization (UNESCO 2022).

For Lotman (2004b[1977], 2004c[1988]), the issues of progress and the future of humanity, as well as the dangers associated with it, have always been among the central ones. Lotman (2004c[1988]) writes that the desire to "look into the future" is inherent in humans in general, but it becomes especially acute in times of crisis. Lotman considers technological progress and the scientific and technological revolution to cause a change in people's entire way of life and all their cultural ideas. Paradigms change, and with them, the whole world changes. In an earlier work, Lotman (1970) puts forward several postulates about the general functioning of human culture that explain our fear in the face of highly intelligent creatures other than humans. Developing the idea of Levi-Strauss (1958:97), Lotman argues that culture should be understood as a "system of additional restrictions" or prohibitions imposed on natural human behavior (Lotman 2004d[1970]:664). The scope of these additional behavioral restrictions is determined by the type of culture and is divided into two areas: the first is regulated by shame, the second by fear. This division coincides with the division of the collective into *we* and *they*. Within the cultural *we*, as a rule, the norms of shame and honor operate (hence the customs of duels, medical courts, student public opinion, etc.). As for our attitude to *others*, here the norms of fear and coercion are most often encountered.

New meme variations in mid-2023 evolved into a classic mini-narrative in the spirit of "AI takeover," where humanity in the form of a cartoon man fights artificial intelligence in the form of the Shoggoth meme (Figures 9a and 9b). These mini-stories are built on Propp's (2021:98) fairy tale model: hero-anti-hero (pest); the course of the narrative from the state of insufficiency through intermediate functions of tests to the denouement, namely production, wedding, and/or the elimination of trouble.

The first mini-story (Figure 9a) of the Shoggoth meme is based on the division of society into *we* (people) and *they* (artificial intelligence), and our attitude to the group *they* is regulated by fear. In summary, the meaning of the formula is as follows: artificial intelligence is different from us, we can lose control over its actions, and it can harm us. In the first story, Shoggoth kills a man (visual sequence - a gun and a pool of blood) and says *La la la, now I'm free to do X* (verbal commentary with an ironic 'musical notes' emoji).

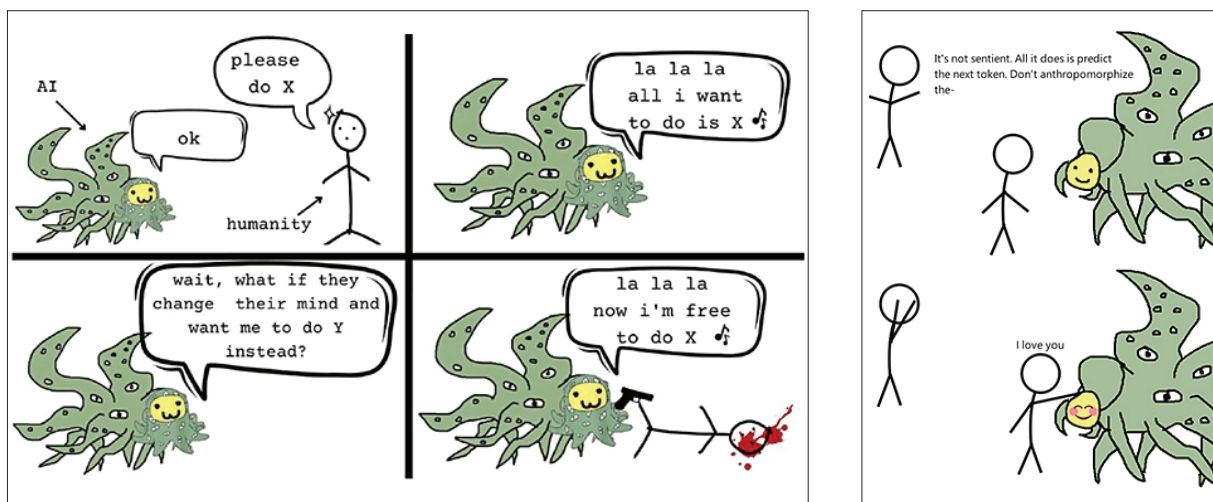


Figure: 9a & 9b. Mini-stories

The second mini-story (Figure 9b) is about whether it is possible to apply the norms of ethics and shame to artificial intelligence. Today, the topic of ethical standards in AI is one of the key ones not only in social networks and in the press, but also on the agenda of international organizations. For example, one of the thematic issues of the *UNESCO Courier* is called "Artificial intelligence: Prospects and threats" (UNESCO 2018). The communicative opposition, addressed to both international experts and a wide range of readers, is based on Lotman's dichotomy: a threat as fear, and a prospect as shame (Lotman 2004d:664). The problem lies in the speed of research into the aspects of artificial intelligence. While its technical aspects are being researched at a rapid pace, the study of its ethical aspects is much slower. In other words, it is much more challenging to recognize elements of shame (ethical aspects) than elements of fear (Lotman 2004d:665). According to UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay (2018:37), "AI can be a fantastic opportunity to achieve the goals set by the 2030 Agenda, but that means addressing the ethical issues it presents, without further delay."

Referring to Pascal's metaphor (2023[1670]:39), Lotman (2004a:51) wrote about the creative person as a *thinking reed*. Man is just a weak reed, but it is a thinking reed. A drop of water is enough to kill him, but his ability to innovate and make unpredictable decisions is his evolutionary advantage. In this sense, the evolutionary advantage of man over the artificial intelligence he created lies in the ability to find an unconventional solution, to transform the meaning of a situation in an unpredictable but useful way. In Figure 9b, the communication between Shoggoth and the human ends with an unexpected victory for the human, on a tactile and verbal level. In response to Shoggoth's demand not to attribute human qualities to him, the human gently touches the green monster with the words *I love you*, and the smiley blushes from completely human emotions: embarrassment, joy, and pleasure. Users are invited to move from a system of normalizing relations with artificial intelligence based on fear (*we - he*) to regulation based on shame (ethical standards, creating a new community *we*). The declaration of love for a meme has some parodic features. In Nissenbaum and Shifman's

(2018:294) terms, the meme "expresses happiness ironically." As Jost (2022:13) points out, today we declare our love using the "script-visual" language of memes: *Are you memeing me?* (In French: *Est-ce que tu mèmes?*).

In January 2024, the Shoggoth meme received a new educational and pedagogical function. Graphic designer Joseph Gregory has published three parts of a video called "Confronting Shoggoth" (Figures 10a, 10b, 10c) on the website of his author's project *Echonova*. They do not feature the traditional green monster with a smiley face, but during the online course "Design for Everyone," the author teaches us how to create a Shoggoth using vector drawing.

In the first video, the designer draws the Shoggoth's tentacles (Figure 10a). Then, internet users are offered, in Lotman's (2004a:108) terminology, an unpredictable solution: the tentacles turn out to be the hair of a beautiful girl (Figure 10b). Finally, in the final video, the girl's head is compared to the cap of an atomic mushroom (Figure 10c). Users can perceive the drawing as a threat (a relationship with

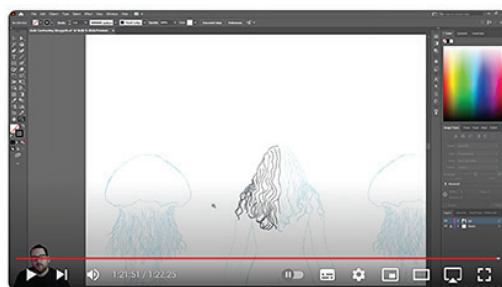
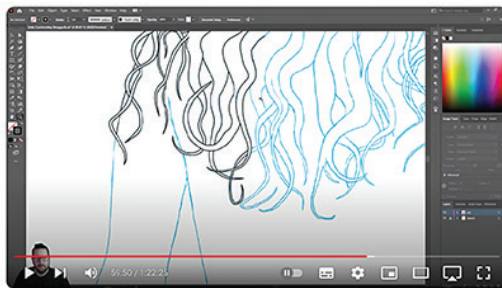
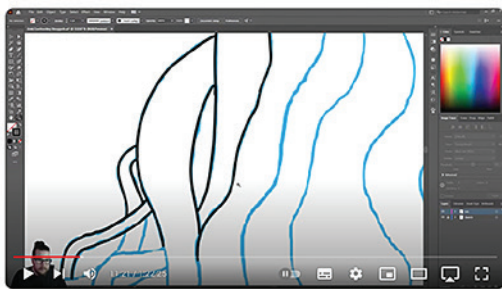


Figure 10a, 10b, 10c. Confronting Shoggoth (screenshots taken by the article's author).

artificial intelligence based on fear) or look for beauty in it (a relationship based on shame: it is impossible to see only the bad). The video has three parts (i.e., introduction, composition, and denouement). Still, at the end we find ourselves at a bifurcation point, faced with a choice of one of the alternative paths: “whenever we talk about unpredictability, we mean a certain set of equally probable possibilities, of which only one is realized” (Lotman 2004e:161).

In his article on new forms of philosophical practice in the digital age, Pezzano coined the term *comicepts* meaning philosophical concepts created and communicated in the form of comics (Pezzano 2024:67). According to him, “doing philosophy with comics” means opening up new possibilities by moving away from old traditions of philosophizing. Similarly, we are probably still far from talking about the Shoggoth meme as a *memocept*. Still, it is already evident that this meme is an example of what Eco (2020) called the third type of humor in Pirandello. Unlike the first type, i.e. when the comic can only happen, and the second type, i.e. when I do not distance myself and do not try to show my superiority, but rather understand and sympathize with the comic situation, the third type of humor is when “I participate in the story, but I try to look at myself as someone else,” as an actor, that is, I look at the situation with humor (Eco 2020:91). In the examples discussed so far, users can work with a designer to create a vector drawing of a Shoggoth or can identify themselves with the characters in mini-stories. In both cases, they use virtual reality as a mirror and, like actors, “play themselves” (Eco 2020:91), presenting the situation as comic.

6. Conclusion: A house with transparent walls

“On a short leash. House with transparent walls” is the title of one of the articles in a special issue of the business magazine *Profil* dedicated to Artificial Intelligence (Grinkevitch 2023:28). The special issue was published in May 2023, and the main theme of its articles is fear and the search for solutions to the threats and risks of AI. “Transparent walls” is a metaphor for living space in the digital world, where Artificial Intelligence controls everything.

In 1926, almost a hundred years ago, Sergei Eisenstein, mentioned at the beginning of this article, came up with an unusual film, *The Glass House*. The film’s script was one of the first the director offered to Paramount during a trip to Hollywood in the 1920s. “The action was to take place in a skyscraper with transparent walls, floors, and ceilings. Everyone can see each other, but no one pays attention to the needs and troubles of their neighbors” (Rumyantseva-Kleiman 2018:94). As a result, the call to live together and help one’s neighbors turns into universal surveillance and suffering. However, Eisenstein’s visionary plan, not understood even by his friends, was not realized.

Digital reality, which can be imagined as a “glass house” or a “house with transparent Walls,” is filled with metaphors. The Shoggoth meme is not just a successful example of using metaphor in the digital space. Metaphors in digital reality have been used since the early days of the internet to popularize new technologies. Internet users regularly encounter Shoggoth on social networks, but only a few are familiar with the prototype of the character from Lovecraft’s novel. The evolution of Shoggoth in messages and publications, the emergence of mini-stories testifies to the interaction and ‘competition’ of instances of enunciation (*I, WE, HE, IT* in Coquet 1984), when each instance strives to dominate.

Ultimately, the meme becomes an element of a global *trans-enunciation*, in the words of Colas-Blaise (2023), bearing a unifying repeating element (Shoggoth) at all semiotic levels: text, typographic signs, picture, video clip.

According to AI experts, one of the reasons for the emergence and launch of the Shoggoth meme into the internet space is to combat users’ fears of artificial intelligence (Roose 2023). The meme reminds us of our fears and evokes empathy in the face of uncertainty. Today, our interaction with digital reality is characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. As Sedda (2025:5) writes, “[t]he unpredictable happens. And it upsets our existences. [...] Other times it does not happen, but it seems to happen. It is evoked, exalted, feared, even without having happened.”⁴ In the French context, the Shoggoth meme became a play on the words: the image illustrating the article about Shoggoth on the *France 24* portal was placed under the heading MEME PAS PEUR. The phrase can be interpreted in two ways: “not afraid of the meme” (*mème pas peur*) and “not afraid anymore” (*même pas peur*; Seibt 2023; see Figure 11). However, today the Shoggoth meme remains as dually utopian as Eisenstein’s idea of a “house with transparent walls.” We laugh at the smiley face on the tentacles, but we still do not know what is hidden behind the smiley (e.g., good or danger), and this explains the desire of users to decipher the riddle of the Shoggoth, endowing the meme with this or that mini-story. Thus, we follow the development of the meme as a *floating signifier* (Buchanan 2010:72) that represents an intersection of discourses reflecting a semiotics of fear that evolves into shame and humor. Escudero Chauvel (2024:44) states that⁵ the meme is the “first specific format for producing discursive meaning” on social media. The Shoggoth meme, as a result of mixed discourses, is one example of such a specific format, “in an increasingly TLDR (too long, didn’t read) world” (Wiggins 2019:19).

⁴ See the original in Italian: “L’imprevedibile accade. E sconvolge le nostre esistenze. [...] Altre volte non accade ma sembra accadere. Viene evocato, esaltato, temuto, pur senza essere accaduto” (Sedda 2025:5).

⁵ See the original in Spanish: “El meme es, en realidad, el primer *formato específico de producción de sentido discursivo* de las redes sociales” (Escudero Chauvel 2024:44, emphasis in the original).



Figure 11. Meme variant in French context
(MEME PAS PEUR)



Figure 12. Fairytale happy ending

The Shoggoth meme's success is that it has several levels of reading: instead of a linear interpretation (smiley: people should not be afraid), a critical interpretation appears (the smiley mask: masks the dangers of the chatbot, which do not disappear). Everything new and changing the usual paradigm of human existence causes fear, and the paradox is that moving forward can “stimulate the regeneration of very archaic cultural models and models of consciousness” (Lotman 2004c:638). When faced with the risks of artificial intelligence, a person turns to the archaic model of a fairy tale or myth to come out of all trials with honor like the fairy tale hero. New versions of the meme that appeared online in the winter of 2024-2025 directly refer to the happy ending in the traditional fairy tale castle (Figure 12).

The literary and fairytale character Shoggoth, who has become a meme, embodies the idea of a happy coexistence between man and machine, a “living with” new technologies through mutual adaptation. According to Fontanille (2015:27), the universal way of existence is “to *be* together (exist or act with, or against)”:

In short, in “living with”, and by placing action and interactions at the center of the problem, and not life in general, it is “with” (doing with) which is the first and to which we can give a recognizable syntagmatic form (the figurative style of the schema of existence), and it is “living” which is second, and which receives the contents specific to human life (modalities, emotions, passions, norms, etc.).⁶

Within this social category, a subcategory is distinguished for living beings who experience “living together” (*vivre avec*). *Vivre avec ChatGPT*, as in the title of a recent book by Gefen (2023), indirectly confirms Fontanille’s idea that *vivre avec*, as a subcategory of the mode of social existence, can acquire a typically human model and passionate components. ChatGPT is a useful “copilot” and a surprising “other organism” (Gefen 2023:9). By passing the Shoggoth meme to each other, internet users enact nothing less than the transition from a few people to a group, and then to a community that manages to build something “common” based on the notion of “sharing”, including the participation of non-human actors (Basso Fossali 2021:26). We are invited to move from a system of normalizing relations with artificial intelligence based on fear (*we - he*) to regulation based on shame, ethical norms and humor, to the creation of a new joint collective *we*. This collective should be understood in the spirit of anthroposemiotic research in recent years, as an interaction of people, collectives, habitats and imaginations (Fontanille and Couégnas 2018). In this sense, the Shoggoth meme created by TetraspaceWest became part of the collective creativity of internet users aimed at peaceful coexistence with artificial intelligence. As Tsakona notes (2020:182), “even though online jokes can sometimes be attributed to specific jokers [...], very quickly they become part of collective creative processes.”

Lovecraft’s stories and characters have been filmed many times in the 20th century, and his work continues to inspire today’s directors. Will there ever be a film or TV series about the Shoggoth meme? Quoting Sergei Eisenstein’s amazing drawing about “human progress” discussed at the beginning of our article (Figure 1), we would like to conclude not with words, but with another example of the “Shoggoth case,” a kind

⁶ See the original in French: «En somme, dans «vivre avec», et en plaçant au centre de la problématique l’action et les interactions, et non la vie en général, c’est «avec» (faire avec) qui est premier, et auquel on peut donner une forme syntagmatique reconnaissable (le style figural du schème d’existence), et c’est «vivre» qui est second, et qui reçoit les contenus propres à la vie humaine (modalités, émotions, passions, normes, etc.)» (Fontanille 2015:27).

of echo of the thoughts of the great film director (see Figure 13). *Human Progress Through Time* is the name of the drawing, where Shoggoth's tentacles pull the green arrow of time upwards. Forward to the future? Or back to the past? We are again at the bifurcation point.

According to Eco (2020:90), "thanks to humor, we can speak of a tragic situation in the present as if it had already happened or had not yet happened."

When we endow the Shoggoth meme with a humorous smiley, we attribute to it a genuinely human quality, the ability to laugh. "Man is the only animal capable of laughing" (Eco 2020:96), but he laughs for very sad reasons: from a futile desire to rationalize his irrationality. A person laughs at his fears about artificial intelligence, knowing that a tragic situation can become comical at any moment, and vice versa.

At the beginning of the article, we mentioned Lotman's *internal cheerfulness*. When talking about artificial intelligence, he liked to quote a joke from the memoirs of the poet Andrei Bely (1931:71) about his father, the famous 19th-century mathematician Nikolai Bugayev. In his lecture on animal intelligence, Bugayev asked students what intelligence was in general, in their opinion. No one could give a satisfactory answer, so the professor declared the lecture over (Lotman 2004f:580).

The humorous meme and its fantastic literary prototype have become part of the mythical discourse about artificial intelligence. We create a myth about AI not as a set of technological solutions, but as a certain *Actant* that can take the form of this or that *Actor* (Shoggoth), can anthropomorphize and laugh like a person. However, the main task of semioticians in today's digital age is not to develop a "story" or "myth" about AI, but to explore "the two-faced actant" that carries out semiosis through machine-generated expression and human-recreated content (Fontanille 2024).⁷

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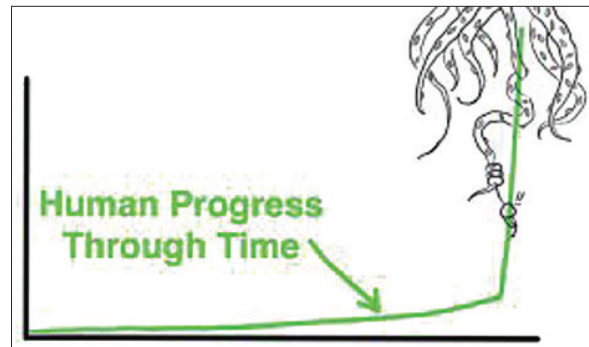


Figure 13. Human progress through time

⁷ See the video of Fontanille's speech at the Semiotic Seminar in Paris on March 13, 2024: «un actant à deux faces, qui réalise la sémiotique en réunissant une expression générée par la machine et un contenu restitué ou interprété par l'utilisateur humain» (Fontanille 2024).

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