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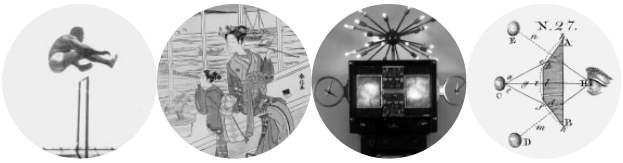

The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres

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Abstract

This article probes the cultural meaning of contemporary meme genres that are based on photographs. The analysis looks into the broad dimensions of truth and temporality, as expressed in three prominent genres: reaction Photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads. Based on patterns shared by these genres, it is argued that photo-based memes function as both *modes of hypersignification*, wherein the code itself becomes the focus of attention, and as *prospective photography*, wherein photos are increasingly perceived as the raw material for future images. Finally, combining the two frames, memes are conceptualized as *operative signs* – textual categories that are designed as invitations for (creative) action. While these three qualities were also evident, in one way or another, in traditional forms of photography, they have emerged as governing logics in an era marked by an amalgamation of digital photography and participatory culture.

Keywords

image macros • internet memes • meme genres • photo fads • Photoshop

At first glance, the title of this article may appear puzzling. Why on earth would someone assume that internet memes – apparently insignificant embodiments of silliness and whimsicality – actually operate according to a cultural logic? And even if they do, why would that be of any importance? In what follows, I claim that meme genres may, in fact, serve as valuable keys for understanding broader dimensions of digital culture. My analysis will focus on a particular category of meme genres – photograph-based memes. Such memes constitute fascinating objects for analysis: while they explicitly build on a technology dating back to the 19th century, they use it

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in new ways, adaptive not only to technological formulations but also to the participatory culture that these technologies have yielded.

After defining memes and meme genres, the article will focus on the analysis of three photo-based genres that, on the surface, seem utterly different from each other: reaction Photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads. Looking into the dimensions of representational truthfulness and temporality, the main argument that I will build is that photo-based memes share some over-arching principles that can be organized in three frames, describing memes as *hypersignification* – the code itself becomes the focus of attention; as *prospective photography* – photos are increasingly perceived as the raw material for their future incarnations; and as *operative signs* – textual categories that are designed as invitations for creative action. These principles are not entirely new to photography – in one way or another, they were always around. Yet, following Jack Balkin's (2004) notion that we should look into salience rather than novelty when examining new media – namely, we need to explore which elements of the social world a new technology makes particularly salient – I will contend that digital photography in general, and photo-based memes in particular, have foregrounded these three principles as central logics.

Meme Genres as Cultural Keys

The term 'meme' was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe small units of cultural transformation that are analogous to genes. While for many years the concept was fiercely debated in academia and beyond, it has recently become an integral part of netizen vernacular, invoked daily by numerous internet users (Davison, 2012; Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013a). This contemporary uptick in popular discourse about memes is not coincidental: the unique features of the internet turned the diffusion of memes into a ubiquitous, highly visible, and global routine. The distinctive characteristics of internet memes (as opposed to pre-digital memes) justify a definition that is specific to this new formulation. I have recently suggested defining an internet meme as a group of digital items that: (a) share common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) are created with awareness of each other; and (c) are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users (Shifman, 2013b). My definition departs from Dawkins' conception in at least one fundamental way: instead of depicting the meme as a single cultural unit that has propagated well, I treat memes as groups of content units. The shift from a singular to a plural account of memes derives from the new ways in which they are experienced in the digital age. If, in the past, individuals were exposed to one meme version at a given time (for instance, heard one version of a joke at a party), nowadays it takes only a couple of mouse clicks to see hundreds of versions of any meme imaginable. Thus, memes are now present in the public sphere not as sporadic entities, but as enormous groups of texts and images.

If memes are collections of texts, meme *genres* are collections of collections. While the study of genres dates back to ancient Greece, the definition of this concept (just like that of the meme) is still debated. Some intrinsic definitions describe genres as clusters of texts with shared form- and content-related attributes, whereas other classifications refer to them as forms of social action that are always culture- and context-specific (Kwasnik and Crowston, 2005). A third thread of definitions attempts to combine genres' textual and performative dimensions. Orlikowski and Yates (1994: 299), for instance, described genres as 'socially recognized types of communicative action' that share not only structures and themes, but also expectations and intended audiences. According to this more holistic perception, genres come into being only once people recognize and construct them as such: 'Texts cannot interact on their own; they come together only through cultural practices such as production and reception' (Mittell, 2001). Since genres function as 'horizons of expectations' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors (Todorov, 1976: 163), their formation involves constant interaction between texts, readers, and authors. This nuanced negotiation turns genres into important keys for understanding social and cultural processes.

Yet genres never stay still. They are in a constant state of flux, changing in response to social, political, and technological ecologies. The study of genres in digital environments is particularly intriguing since these arenas often blur the line between the production and consumption of content: the communities that produce digital content are also often the ones that consume and interpret it (Hartley, 2004; Jenkins, 2006). In this sense, digital culture seems to represent a new amalgamation between top-down mass-mediated genres and bottom-up mundane types of rhetorical actions. Thus if, previously, acts of 'vernacular creativity' – everyday innovative and artistic practices that can be carried out by simple means of production – were 'hidden' in domestic settings, in the digital era they were re-formulated as highly visible public culture (Burgess, 2007).

Meme genres may be regarded as prominent examples of vernacular creativity. While one might expect that in the absence of formal gatekeeping people would create an endless array of meme types, in reality, participants tend to mold their memetic contributions according to a surprisingly small number of formulations (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013b). These include, for instance, Rage Comics and LolCats, re-cut trailers and lip-dubs. The apparent rigidity of users who work within a few generic boxes may in fact have an important social function: following shared pathways for meme production is vital for creating a sense of community in a fragmented world. Internet meme genres may also serve as valuable resources for researchers – as crystalized outcomes of multi-participant negotiations, they enable us to trace the social and cultural logics underpinning the ostensibly chaotic world of meme creation.

As mentioned above, the focal point of this article will be on a particular category of meme genres – memes based on photography. While playing with photos has been an inseparable part of digital culture since the early 2000s

(Kuipers, 2002), in the past decades these playful instances have emerged as distinct types. From this small group of genres, I choose to focus on three that are not only immensely popular, but also represent divergent approaches towards photography: reaction Photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads. *Reaction Photoshops* are collections of edited images created in response to a small set of prominent photographs, which may be labeled *memetic photos* (Shifman, 2013b). Such photos feature politicians (e.g. 'The Situation Room', 'Floating Chinese Government Officials'), celebrities ('Sad Keanu', 'Strutting Leo'), and 'ordinary people' ('Disaster Girl', 'Frowning Flower Girl'). *Stock character macros* are image macros (images superimposed with text) that refer to a set of stock characters representing stereotypical behaviors (Knuttila, 2012; Milner, 2013). For example, 'Sheltering Suburban Mom' is a conservative hypocrite who preaches one thing and practices another, and 'High Expectations Asian Father' over-pushes his children to succeed academically (see Figure 3). *Photo fads* are staged photos of people who imitate specific positions in various settings. For instance, 'Planking' involves lying face down with one's arms by one's side in unusual settings, and 'Heads in Freezers' involves sticking one's head in a freezer, alongside the tag 241543903, which enables search optimization (see Figure 5).

While reaction Photoshops, stock character macros, and photo fads are all photo-based collections of internet memes, they differ in many respects. In terms of content, the genres range from political and social issues external to the self (reaction Photoshops and stock character macros), to completely whimsical themes that are associated with self performance (photo fads). Their forms are also divergent, varying from Photoshopped juxtapositions (reaction Photoshops), to photos with captions (stock character macros), to straightforward, often unedited photos (photo fads). Finally, these genres invite an array of user behaviors: in reaction Photoshops, users mainly edit and combine existing images; in stock character macros, their main role is writing-oriented (as they are required to add captions); and in photo fads they are primarily performers, actors in the grand theatre of digital culture. Yet beyond this divergence, these genres share three basic qualities, which may be framed as hypersignification, prospective orientation, and operability.

Memes as Hypersignification

While photography has always incorporated many layers of selection and manipulation (and thus never represented 'the truth'), a *rhetoric* of truthfulness played a crucial part in its cultural success. The idea that this medium's indexical relation to the world is unique meant that 'even for cynical observers, a photograph of something has long been held as a proof of "its being", even if not of "its truth"' (Batchen, 1994: 48). With the advent of digital photography, this fragile bond between photography and 'truthfulness' (which, in the course of the history of photography, has been problematized at many points),[1] was further eroded. The simplicity with which any image can be created and transformed through digital technologies in a way that leaves no visible traces of manipulation has led to anxieties (not to say panic) about 'the death of photography' as a

medium that incorporates a unique ontological position (see Lister, 2013; Osborne, 2010, for a critical reflection). Resenting this dichotomous view, scholars such as WJT Mitchell (1994: 7) have suggested looking at digital photography as a welcome opportunity to 'deconstruct the very ideas of photographic objectivity and closure'.

In a sense, photo-based meme genres do exactly that. As outlined below, their de-construction of photography's 'truthfulness' is multifaceted, and not always intended. This deconstructive aspect is linked with a quality that overarches the three genres at hand – hypersignification. I borrow this term from Goldman and Papson (1996), who use it to describe contemporary advertising. Responding to growing cynicism of consumers regarding the advertisements congesting their lives, advertisers began to create sophisticated ads that revealed the 'backstage' of their own industry. Advertising thus entered a stage of hypersignification, in which the *code itself* was no longer concealed, but was turned into a sign. Similarly, photo-based meme genres tell us something about the mechanisms of signification: they are more about the *process* of meaning-making than about meaning itself. While hypersignification features prominently in the three genres discussed in this article, it assumes various manifestations, as elaborated below.

Reaction Photoshops

In reaction Photoshops, hypersignification often takes the form of highlighting the *constructed*, or even staged, nature of mediated realities. This feature was strongly demonstrated in one of the earliest examples of a reaction Photoshop: 'The Tourist Guy' (see Figure 1a). Shortly after 9/11, a photograph of a young man with sunglasses and a backpack, standing on the World Trade Center observation deck with a plane heading toward him, was widely circulated over the internet. The photo was framed, at first, as a rare capture of a tragic moment, featuring a man totally oblivious to his impending death (Frank, 2004). However, very soon the authenticity of this image was questioned: too many details seemed to be misplaced, fuzzy, or dubious. These doubts gave rise to numerous reaction Photoshops, in which the digital manipulation was re-manipulated (Hickman, 2001). The mysterious tourist was placed in various iconic sceneries featuring historical and fictional tragedies: he shared the limo with JFK in Dallas, materialized in front of the burning Hindenburg zeppelin and popped up in front of the burning White House in the film *Independence Day*. Figure 1 features the tourist's 'guest performance' in another disastrous setting: the sinking Titanic. As in the other 'tourist performances', audiences' familiarity with the depicted iconic moments (in this case the tragic story and image of the sinking ship), facilitated a strong comic juxtaposition between the familiar and the invented. After a short while, the true story behind the mysterious tourist was revealed: a young Hungarian named Peter Guzli had edited a photo of himself – taken in 1997 – and sent it to a couple of friends as a private joke. Instead of writing back to him, his friends continued the hoax on a much larger scale (Hickman, 2001). After a short while, the true story was revealed: a young Hungarian named Peter Guzli had edited a photo of himself

Figure 1 The 'Tourist Guy' (the 'memetic photo' and a reaction Photoshop). www.knowyourmeme.com

– taken in 1997 – and sent it to a couple of friends as a private joke. Instead of writing back to him, his friends continued the hoax, on a much larger scale.

The 'Tourist Guy' is a particularly telling example for understanding the relationship between memetic photos and truthfulness. People did not alter the photo as long as they thought it was a genuine image of a person in his last moments: they started creating their own versions only once suspicion about its authenticity emerged. Thus, internet users participated in the revelation of this photo as constructed. A similar process seems to govern other, non-manipulated, photos of ordinary people that became memetic

('Disaster Girl', or 'Cigar Guy', for instance). Such photos often incorporate a sharp incongruity between two elements in the frame, which make them appear as if they were Photoshopped in the first place. This authenticity-related puzzle invites a stream of derivatives, in which participants playfully re-locate the main actors in other settings (Shifman, 2013b).

In memetic photos that refer to political actors, the process of exposing the contructedness of photos turns into a critical comment about politics at large. Many of these photos present carefully articulated frames of politicians in their apparently authentic 'backstage', which are then exposed by internet users as inauthentic, flawed, and manipulated (Shifman, 2013b). Memes such as 'Sarkozy Was There', 'Floating Chinese Government Officials' and 'Bibi

Figure 2 'The Situation Room' (the 'memetic photo' and a reaction Photoshop); (a) photo by Pete Souza/flickr.com; (b) www. knowyourmeme.com

Gump' exemplify this mode of critique in a variety of national settings. A well-known example of this pattern that derives from the American context is the 'Situation Room' meme (Figure 2). The photo released after Osama Bin-Laden's death – featuring the 'backstage' briefing of the members of the National Security Council about the ongoing operation – has spurred many derivatives which highlighted its constructed nature. In some of them, such as the one depicted in Figure 2, the senior officials were framed as fictional characters, further blurring the line between 'truth' and 'fiction' in political storytelling. Users' memetic responses to such manipulations of political images can be seen as the bottom-up, digital manifestations of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's agendas on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. These television shows constantly reveal the backstage strategies that politicians and reporters use in order to build favorable images (Baym, 2007; Gray et al., 2009), 'training' citizens to look out for signs of manipulation and fabrication (Jenkins, 2006).

Interestingly, photos that invite memetic responses include both images that apparently did *not* incorporate computer-based manipulation (such as the Netanyahu–Shalit photo) and images that were clearly Photoshopped to begin with ('Floating Chinese Government Officials'). Yet both photo-types invoke a similar type of criticism: In their memetic responses, users frame politicians' behaviors as 'staged authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973), or as strategic 'authenticity-from-below' (Coupland, 2001) aimed at creating solidarity between politicians and their audiences.[2] By their serial re-editing, meme creators signal that they are well aware of the constructed nature of these photos, and that they can produce competing images. The fact that users apply the same type of criticism to technologically altered and non-altered images seems to level digital and traditional photography; it suggests that any photo is merely, as Batchen (1994: 48) notes, a 'representation of a reality that is itself already nothing but a play of representations'.

Memes' focus on revealing the constructedness of mediated images becomes more evident when we compare memetic photos with images that can be seen as their pre-digital incarnations – iconic photos. According to Hariman and Lucaites' (2002: 366) comprehensive definition, these photographic images 'are widely recognized, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional response, and are reproduced across a range of media, genres, or topics'. Images such as the Iwo Jima flag raising, the sailor kissing the nurse on VJ Day, or the 'Tank man' at Tiananmen Square have served, over the years, as powerful anchors in the construction of collective memories and identities (Kampf, 2006; Sonnevend, 2012; Zelizer, 2010).

Like memetic images, iconic photos are both rare and widely known. Yet unlike memetic ones, the power of iconic photos stems from their perception as capturing deep truths. Iconic photos extend the truth values associated in the popular consciousness with news photography (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2008; Zelizer and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014), since their truthfulness encompasses both indexical and symbolic representations. Iconic photos

freeze concrete historical moments, with a single frame serving as an index of a series of happenings unfolding before and after it. At the same time, these images symbolize values and sentiments that transcend the specific event, as they are perceived as channels for greater truths about societies' fundamental structures, norms and paradoxes. While iconic photos emerged as a cultural category in an era in which a rhetoric of truthfulness was strongly associated with photography, in contemporary participatory culture, wherein individuals are expected to create personal versions of popular images, the 'iconization' of single photos may be challenged.

Stock character macros

If, in reaction Photoshops, hypersignification relates to the constructed nature of photographic images, in the genre labeled 'stock character macros', hypersignification is located in the overt construction of stereotypes. This explicitness is embodied in memes' naming structures, which often associate a certain (negative) feature with a specific social category ('Annoying Facebook Girl' and 'Sheltering Suburban Mom', for example). Hypersignification is also embodied in taking stereotypes to their extreme: the constant flow of derogatory texts that relate to one specific photo of a group representative forefronts the very idea (and print-based etymology) of stereotyping as molding perceptions about groups into readymade 'templates'. Since these memes tend to reflect the socio-demographic background of meme creators (typically white, privileged young men), they commonly replicate well-entrenched hegemonic stereotypes (Milner, 2012). This is particularly relevant to images of women and ethnic minorities, demonstrated in Figure 3: the framing of the 'Sheltering Suburban Mom' relates to gender as much as it is anchored in class and ideology, and the construction of 'High Expectations Asian Father' draws on well-entrenched stereotypes about Asian Americans. Thus, if the ethnicity of the white

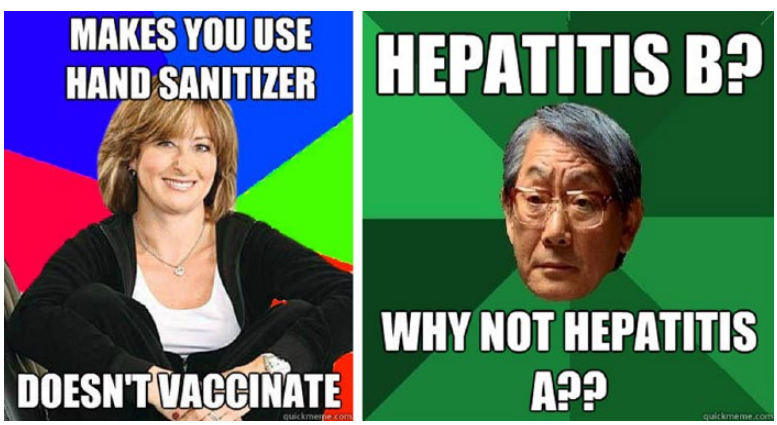

Figure 3 Stock character macros ('Sheltering Suburban Mom' and 'High Expectations Asian Father'). www.quickmeme.com

Figure 4 'Successful Black Man' (the original stock photo and a stock character macro): (a) photo by Jaimie Duplass/Shutterstock.com; (b) www.memegenerator.net

'Success Kid' is unmarked, the 'blackness' of 'Successful Black Man', and the '*Asianness*' of 'High Expectations Asian Father' are part of the joke (see Figure 3).

The meme 'Successful Black Man' (see Figure 4) may shed further light on the ways in which this genre employs hypersignification. The origin of this meme is a photo taken as part of the long-standing genre of stock photography. At the core of this global industry is an effort to create standardized images of basic human emotions and activities, which can then be used in a variety of contexts and outlets: magazines, billboards, websites, and catalogs. Images such as the 'smiling parents and children frolicking in the surf of a beach' constitute, according to Paul Frosh (2013: 132), a ubiquitous yet often invisible part of our visual environment. Similarly to stock character macros, stock photographs are used not as indexes of specific people or historic events, but as visual manifestations *of stereotypes*. But when we look into the *ways* stereotypes are formed in these two genres, some deep differences surface. Stock photography is all about the mystification of stereotypes. While stereotypes constitute the bread and butter of this industry, they operate in its deep background (Frosh, 2003, 2013). Thus, the title 'Handsome African American business man dressed in a black suit' is part of the catalogue used by the industry,[3]

but it *does not* accompany the actual photo when it appears as an illustration in advertisements or news stories. When the stock photo turns into a meme – in this case a stock image macro – the process of stereotypical signification is foregrounded. The meme's explicit theme is racism: the top line hints at a stereotype associated with being black, while the bottom one reverses it to display a middle-class, responsible family man. In this process, readers' racist assumptions are mocked and challenged (Milner, 2012).

Whereas this particular example contains subversive elements, it is important to note that hypersignification does not necessarily equal progressiveness, or critical thinking: in many cases, the opposite is true. Ryan Milner (2013) discusses the multifaceted relationships of such images with stereotyping. He claims that the combination of texts that are anchored in blunt and derogatory social tagging and what he calls 'the logic of lulz' might bear problematic outcomes. Since this logic involves an ironic and distancing discursive mode, it may result in 'whitewashing' racism and misogyny by framing them as 'only joking'. The foregrounding of stereotyping in stock character macros may thus be evaluated as inherently polysemic: the 'stereotypical overload' that these memes embody could be interpreted as mocking the process of stereotyping by taking it to its extreme (Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, forthcoming), but it could also be evaluated as a path to mocking marginalized groups without being punished.

Photo fads

Hypersignification is also a prevalent feature of the third genre I explore in this article – Photo fads (see Figure 5). Here, hypersignificant qualities may be associated with composition, and more specifically, with 'the pose'. Posing has always been an integral part of photography, particularly in 'vernacular photography', or 'everyday photography' (Burgess, 2007; Harrison, 1999). Once people are placed in front of a camera, they often change their bodily gestures to create culturally coded signs of intimacy, politeness, attractiveness, or the like. For example, through the 'arms around shoulders' pose, family is performed as one, unified, social body (Larsen, 2005). Of course, posing has also been used throughout the history of photography in a playful and reflexive way, a tendency that has been amplified with the advent of digital media and social networking sights. Looking into students' uses of Facebook in 2006, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) show that students are very much aware of the camera and posing for it, demonstrating exaggerated gestures in a playful manner. At the same time, they still use the pose to demonstrate attractiveness and social bonding, particularly with their college peers. Inspired by the notion of 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al., 2003), Papacharissi (2010) analyzed these uses of photography as building blocks of the 'networked self', who attempts to connect with others through self-expression in the digital sphere.

Photo fads take these previous reflections on the 'pose' one step further. By repeating a specific (weird) pose time and again in various settings,

Figure 5 The photo fad 'Heads in Freezers'.
www. knowyourmeme.com

as depicted by the individuals leaning into open freezers (Figure 5) participants highlight *the pose itself* as their explicit subject. Similar to the stock character macros genre, their main subject is reflected in the memes' names ('Owling', 'Put Shoe on Head', etc.). Yet, in contrast to previous uses of posing in photography, this subject appears, at first, to be a signifier without a signified: poses in photo fads do not convey a message about the relationships, desirability, or intimacy between the people featured in the frame. In fact, in most cases they feature only one protagonist, in a bizarre situation. What is their message, then?

Perhaps it is the medium itself: the similarity between poses denotes individuals' belonging not to a small and familiar social unit, but to a larger, more fluid digital community of LOL lovers. This argument builds on Olga Goriunova's (2013) conceptualization of 'idiocy' as a core characteristic of contemporary participatory culture. In contrast to stupidity – which is an innate, uncontrolled mode of thinking – idiocy in the digital sphere constitutes a performative mode that is acted out on purpose, as an expression of creativity. Since this is a simple, easily accessible mode of creation, it allows many people to express themselves in public, thus bearing an individuating or subjectivating function. Whereas Goriunova emphasizes the role of idiocy in the construction of individuation, photo fads also exhibit a communal element, thus

demonstrating the strong duality embedded in the *networked self*. Such photos simultaneously put the individual in the center of the frame (as each photo portrays the face and/or body of a specific person) and depict him or her as part of a playful collective that shares the same code. The photo fad genre thus co-constructs individuals and the networks that they create as inseparable.

While the process of networking through shared images may be relevant to many web-based communities, its structure becomes apparent (or hypersignificant) through the explicit repetition with variation that characterizes memes. This hypersignification is particularly noticeable in the photo-fad genre, as it is utterly nonsensical. Devoid of any clear meaning beyond posing itself, photo fads expose the skeleton of meme-based network creation. So, perhaps, while this genre's hypersignificant qualities may initially seem related to the pose, they actually reveal a larger story about memes as social connectors.

The analysis so far demonstrates that hypersignification assumes different forms in the three genres discussed: reaction Photoshops highlight the constructed nature of images and users' ability to (re)manipulate them; stock character macros move the hidden process of stereotyping to the discursive forefront; and photo fads reveal the scaffolding of meme-based community building. The normative and social implications of these acts of hypersignification are multifaceted: in some cases, hypersignification is used as a tool for collective criticism, in others it is utilized to whitewash racism and misogyny. Yet across the board, hypersignification seems to play a role in the creation of communities of networked individuals, who, as elaborated in the final section of this article, formulate their unique contribution with heightened awareness of a shared template.

Memes as Prospective Photography

The notion that photos arrest the flow of time by capturing dead moments is fundamental to many theories of photography (Barthes, 1981; Berger and Mohr, 1982; Sontag, 1979). In these works, photography is conceived as a technology with an orientation to the past: it is the medium through which histories are narrated, both individually and collectively. This temporal bias is reflected in two of the genres discussed in this article: vernacular photographs (which preserve personal memories) and iconic photos (which perform a similar work, but on a national scale). At the very same time, the scholars referenced above, as well as others, emphasize that photographs have always been taken with deep awareness of the present and future, as they embody a prospection of retrospection: it is 'me' in the present who takes a snapshot for the 'will be' me, who is expected to use it as a mnemonic for earlier periods (Jacobs, 1981). The complex association between photography and temporality was further problematized with the

advent of digital photography and social media. In her analysis of Flickr, Susan Murray (2013) claims that while people still use such websites as domains of photo storage and presentation of personal histories, the constant photo stream underscoring them – in which old photos are pushed aside in favor of new ones – turns photo-sharing applications into lively, present-oriented hubs of self-presentation. Photography, as experienced in these new arenas, is a live, conversational, medium, used not only for memorializing the past, but mostly for connectivity in the present.

Photo-based meme genres deepen these temporal transitions from the past to the present. Moreover, as outlined below, they also embody a strong orientation to the future, as they are designed to elicit further versions. The three genres analyzed in this article are, to a large extent, present oriented, with this presentism manifested most strongly in photo fads. In contrast to the use of photographs as memory enhancers that enable people to unfold the narrative constituting them, photo fads are markedly a-historic: no relevant happening occurred before or after the moment the photo was taken. Someone puts a shoe on her head, or sticks her head in the freezer, and then moves on to do something else. In this sense, photo fads are not part of a larger story that is waiting to be told: they are the story itself. This orientation towards the present can be tied to the ways in which photos are compiled: if 'traditional' vernacular photos are accumulated in time-line based family or personal albums, the 'albums' in which photo fads are exhibited are websites such as Flickr or Tumblr, wherein people are connected horizontally rather than vertically. Innis' (1951) conceptualization of the time/space bias of communication seems of relevance here: if traditional albums are time-biased (binding generations of the same family), new digital albums represent a bias of space by connecting numerous people from divergent geographic spheres.

A similar bias towards the contemporary is evident in stock character macros and in reaction Photoshops. Since the former genre treats stereotypes not as an uncontested *given* but as a marked *process*, it hooks our attention to the ongoing collective construction of old and new stereotypes – a procedure unfolding in the present. The contemporary orientation of the latter genre – reaction Photoshops – relates, to a large extent, to their inclination towards the mundane. Even when such images feature major events – the death of a terrorist, a soldier coming back home from years of captivity, a royal wedding – they veer away from the main happening. They focus on officials sitting in a room, staring at a screen ('Situation Room'); a politician who positions himself at the center of a family reunion ('Bibi Gump'); and a little girl who just longs for some silence ('Frowning Flower Girl'). The playful reactions to these photos – in which they are juxtaposed with a wide array of pop culture images – further stress their casual, mundane, essence. This inclination towards the mundane rather than the sacred may be related to temporality: while

sacredness is strongly anchored in a shared past, the mundane circulation of shifting images stresses the present.

So far, I have demonstrated that the content of the three meme genres is anchored in the present. Yet in a broader sense they are also inherently oriented towards the future, as they are designed to elicit further versions. Since this summoning is based on the acknowledgment of versions created in the past, memes are not merely future-oriented but *prospective*: anticipating a future behavior based on past promises (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). The prospective nature of memes is strongly manifested in the prevalent phenomenon of 'meme-generators': user-friendly websites, in which image templates awaiting witty captioning or visual manipulation are presented alongside banks of 'exemplary' existing meme versions.

This prospective orientation may have broader implications for the ways photographs are perceived in a meme-based participatory sphere. Since memes are all about mutation, or change, the memetic photo is essentially a living object. Thus, photos seem increasingly to become the raw material of future images: once a photo is shot, numerous offspring are waiting in its imagined womb. The question hovering above this process, therefore, does not relate to the past, but to the future – not, 'What does this photo represent?', but 'What will its next version be?' Instead of looking backwards, we are in a constant state of anticipation of the sequel.

Concluding Thoughts: Meme Genres as Operative Signs

The two qualities of *hypersignification* and *prospective-orientation* were presented so far as distinct. By way of conclusion, I wish to highlight the link between them, which is embedded in a third framing. Drawing on Sybille Kramer's (2003) discussion of 'operative writing', Frosh and Pinchevski (2014: 7) use the term *operative sign* to refer to a signifying unit 'that does not only work semantically but performs an autonomous function related to techniques of symbolic manipulation, dissemination, and storage'. Operative signs may be text parts, images, or videos that become transformable through simple, almost automatic, actions (such as moving a cursor and clicking it once turned into an icon of a pointing hand). This series of transactions – in which still images activate videos, texts are linked with images, and one image is replaced by another – goes far beyond images' referential content. It forefronts the technical and communicative potentialities embedded in the web, highlighting functionalities such as linking, windows, and interactive surfaces.

Meme genres work in a similar way. Just like a pointing hand icon waiting to be clicked, they are operative signs: textual categories that are designed as invitations for (creative) action. Memes' operability stems from a combination of digital technologies and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). While digitization has set a technological basis for an almost effortless play with images, as well as for their quick diffusion, it has also given rise to a participatory environment in which such personal contributions have become

highly valued cultural pillars. Operative signs such as meme genres thus serve as valuable compasses, guiding participants who strive to find their way in a signifying regime wherein they are increasingly asked to produce new content.

Memes' invitation to further action is intrinsically reflexive, or hypersignificant: in order to create a new instance of a meme (a particular stock character macro, for example), one must acknowledge the textual category in which s/he operates, and must also publicly signify this acknowledgment by adhering to specific generic rules (in this case, inserting a short caption relevant to a specific stereotypical frame). Since the process of imitation relates to a coded template – and not only to semantic meanings – the code is always there, foregrounded. Moreover, the volume of images created using the same technique highlights the functionalities and affordances of digital media, formulating an additional dimension of hypersignification. The 'operability' of photo-based meme genres can thus be seen as an amalgamation of hypersignification and prospective orientation.

In this article, I have highlighted the hypersignificant, prospectively-oriented and operative qualities of photo-based meme genres. While I have demonstrated the applicability of these frames to three genres that draw on photography, future research could ask to what extent these qualities are unique to photo-based memes, and to what extent they constitute governing logics of digital meme genres at large. Such studies may look more closely into the divergent manifestations of operability in memes, further exploring the ways in which genres constitute active intermediators between individuals and the communal worlds that they build.

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Notes

1. A notable example of problematizing the association between photography and 'truthfulness' was the development of conceptual photography in the 60s and 70s (for elaboration, see Costello and Margaret, 2011; Soutter, 1999; and Wall, 1995).
2. For an account of the ways in which similar strategies for creating authenticity are used in contemporary newsrooms, see Hamo (2010) and Kampf and Liebes (2013).
3. Available at http://www.shutterstock.com/pic-1005241/stock-photo-handsome-african-american-business-man-dressed-in-a-black-suit.html

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