The Inauguration of Memography

Toward a Forensic Method for Viral Observation

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I. Definition

Memography is the forensic treatment of a meme as a primary source.

The meme is not studied *about* — as media studies studies memes, tracking circulation patterns, platform dynamics, audience reception, and cultural resonance. The meme is not debunked — as fact-checking treats memes, measuring claims against established records and flagging deviations. The meme is not amplified — as conspiracy culture amplifies memes, substituting supernatural or paranoid explanatory frames for the observation the meme contains.

The meme is studied *as.* As a first witness report. As the initial registration of an observation that may contain an evidentiary kernel wrapped in an inadequate explanatory frame. The memographer's task is to extract the kernel, discard the frame, trace the observation to its material substrate, and determine whether the kernel survives contact with evidence.

The method has three possible outcomes: the kernel is confirmed (the observation was correct; the frame was wrong), the kernel is corrected (the observation was partially correct; the material evidence refines it), or the kernel is exhausted (the observation dissolves under forensic scrutiny; nothing remains). All three outcomes are valid. The method does not presuppose that memes are right. It presupposes that memes are *witnesses* — unreliable, contextless, frame-contaminated, but witnesses nonetheless, and witnesses deserve examination before dismissal.

Memography is a capture discipline. It does not replace semiotics, iconology, media archaeology, platform studies, meme studies, or forensic aesthetics. It reorganizes their methods around a new central object: the socially consequential image-sign as a curatorial event. Where existing disciplines describe parts of the sequence — the sign, the medium, the platform, the circulation — memography treats the full sequence as one analytical object: the making of a compact sign, its curatorial transformation, its infrastructural circulation, its provenance opacity, and its synthetic reconstructability.

II. The Problem Memography Solves

There is a structural gap in how viral observations are processed by institutional knowledge systems.

A meme circulates. It contains an observation — sometimes trivial, sometimes consequential. The observation arrives wrapped in a frame: a joke, a conspiracy theory, a piece of outrage bait, a shitpost. The frame is almost always inadequate to the observation it carries. The frame is what circulates. The observation is what got noticed.

Institutional knowledge systems encounter the meme and process the *frame,* not the *observation.* Fact-checkers evaluate the frame's claims. Media scholars study the frame's circulation. Debunkers attack the frame's logic. Nobody traces the observation to its material substrate and asks: *is the thing this meme noticed actually there?*

This is not an accident. It is a structural feature of how institutions process informal knowledge. The frame is legible to institutional methods. The observation is not — because the observation arrives without methodology, without citation, without evidence tiers, without institutional affiliation. It arrives as a TikTok video with red circles and a caption in Impact font. It arrives in the wrong register.

The result is that genuine observations get routed into one of two containment vessels. The conspiracy vessel absorbs them into paranoid explanatory structures, making them unserious. The debunker vessel dismisses them as pattern-matching errors, making them invisible. Between the two vessels, the material question — *is the observed thing actually there, and if so, what is its provenance?* — becomes structurally unaskable.

Memography makes it askable.

III. The Axioms

Five founding propositions define the discipline's commitments.

Axiom 1: The meme is a primary source. A meme is not a secondary representation of some prior event or discourse. It is a first-order document — a trace of an observation, an encoding of an insight, a compression of testimony. Its form may be distorted, its frame inadequate, its carrier compromised. The observation it carries is nonetheless real. The task of memography is not to judge the meme's truth value but to extract the observation from the frame that carries it.

Axiom 2: The frame is inadequate to the kernel. Memes travel through frames that are inadequate to the observations they carry. The conspiracy frame, the debunker frame, the ironic frame, the absurdist frame — each provides an explanation for the meme's content that is simultaneously necessary (the meme cannot circulate without a frame) and insufficient (the frame does not account for the observation's origin). The memographer does not reject the frame. The memographer treats the frame as evidence — of what made the meme legible, of what enabled its circulation, of what constraints shaped its encoding.

Axiom 3: Every meme contains an evidentiary kernel. An evidentiary kernel is an observation that could not have been produced except through some encounter with the real. The kernel may be distorted, misattributed, fantastically framed. It is nonetheless irreducible. The memographer's task is to extract the kernel from the frame without pretending the frame can be discarded — because the frame is itself evidence of how the kernel traveled.

Axiom 4: Provenance gaps are structural, not incidental. Every meme has a provenance gap — a space between the observation and its encoding, between the encoding and its circulation, between the circulation and its framing. These gaps are not failures of documentation. They are structural features of how institutions produce meaning without accountability. The memographer does not seek to fill the gap. The memographer names it, documents it, and holds it open.

Axiom 5: The control is the method. Memography requires experimental controls. The observation extracted from a meme must be tested through reconstruction: can the same effect be produced through different means? Does the mechanism generalize? The control distinguishes the kernel from the noise. Memography is not purely interpretive. It tests its extractions.

IV. The Method

Memography proceeds in five stages:

Stage 1: Kernel extraction. The memographer encounters a meme and asks: what is the observation underneath the frame? What did someone actually notice? The frame (conspiracy theory, joke, outrage) is set aside. The observation (a visual correspondence, a factual anomaly, a pattern, a gap) is isolated.

Stage 2: Substrate tracing. The memographer traces the observation to its material substrate. If the meme claims a visual resemblance, the memographer examines the actual images. If the meme claims a factual connection, the memographer examines the actual records. If the meme claims a pattern, the memographer examines the actual data. The question is always: *what is the material basis for this observation, and can it be documented?*

Stage 3: Provenance audit. The memographer traces the provenance of the material substrate. Where did this image come from? Who made it? What decisions produced its current form? What is documented and what is not? The provenance audit is the core operation — it converts a viral observation into a documented chain of custody (or

documents the absence of such a chain).

Stage 4: Evidence separation. The memographer separates the evidence into tiers: documented facts (Tier A), observations that can be independently verified (Tier B), interpretive inferences that follow from A and B (Tier C), and speculative or unresolved questions (Tier D). Each tier stands on its own. The strength of the analysis depends on A and C. The weakness of B and D does not contaminate A and C.

Stage 5: Publication and deposit. The memographer publishes the findings with full methodology, explicit evidence tiers, and acknowledgment of limitations. The meme's observation is either confirmed, corrected, or exhausted. The result is deposited in a permanent public archive with a DOI, making it findable, citable, and auditable.

The method is complete when the meme's evidentiary kernel has been traced to its substrate, audited for provenance, separated into evidence tiers, and deposited. The frame is gone. The observation stands or falls on its documented merits.

V. The Methodological Principles

Five oppositions govern how the memographer works:

Extraction over interpretation. Interpretation asks: *what does this mean?* Extraction asks: *what is in here that is real?* The memographer does not add meaning. The memographer removes frames until the kernel is exposed.

Provenance over origin. Origin asks: *who made this?* Provenance asks: *through what did this travel?* The memographer does not seek the author. The memographer traces the chain of custody — the decisions, the gaps, the adjacencies.

Control over correlation. Correlation asks: *does this look like that?* Control asks: *if I change the variables, does the effect persist?* The memographer does not stop at observation. The memographer tests the observation through reconstruction.

Gap over conspiracy. Conspiracy asks: *who did this intentionally?* Gap asks: *what is missing?* The memographer does not assign intent. The memographer documents absence.

Kernel over frame. Frame asks: *what explanation is offered?* Kernel asks: *what observation is carried?* The memographer does not argue with the frame. The memographer extracts what the frame cannot explain away.

VI. What Memography Is Not

Memography is not media studies. Media studies asks: *how does this meme circulate? what does its reception tell us about culture?* These are valid questions. They are not the memographer's questions. The memographer asks: *is the thing this meme noticed actually there?*

Memography is not fact-checking. Fact-checking evaluates claims against established records. Memography examines observations that precede claims — the moment of noticing, before any explanatory frame has been applied. Fact-checking asks: *is this claim true?* Memography asks: *is this observation grounded?*

Memography is not conspiracy investigation. Conspiracy investigation starts with a theory and seeks confirmation. Memography starts with an observation and seeks its material substrate. The difference is directional: conspiracy investigation moves from theory to evidence; memography moves from evidence to documentation.

Memography is not debunking. Debunking starts with the presumption that the meme is wrong and works backward to explain the error. Memography starts with the presumption that the meme *noticed something* and works forward to trace whether the noticed thing has material grounding. The memographer is not defending the meme. The memographer is examining the witness.

Memography is not amplification. The memographer does not spread the meme, endorse its frame, or increase its circulation. The memographer extracts the observation, discards the frame, and replaces both with a documented analysis. The meme is the starting point, not the product.

VII. Citational Lineage

Memography is a synthesis. It draws on multiple traditions, each contributing an essential dimension. The discipline does not claim origination. It claims completion.

Warburg and the migration of forms. Aby Warburg's unfinished *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–1929) traced how visual formulas — *Pathosformeln* — migrate across media and centuries, carrying affective charge into new contexts without requiring conscious intention. The meme is a *Pathosformel* for the digital age: a compressed visual-affective unit reactivated by each new framing. Warburg provides the method for tracing formal migration.

Benjamin and reproducible authority. Walter Benjamin (1935) diagnosed how technical reproducibility transforms artwork's authority and relocates its political function. The meme is mechanical reproduction accelerated to social media velocity. Benjamin's question — *what happens to authority when it can be reproduced?* — becomes memography's operational question.

Barthes and the coded image. Roland Barthes (1964) distinguished denoted from connoted messages and demonstrated that the photographic image is never innocent — it is always already coded. The meme is pure connotation traveling without denotative anchor. Barthes provides the vocabulary for analyzing how cultural codes activate and travel.

Foucault and the statement-event. Michel Foucault (1969) analyzed discursive formations without reducing them to authorial intention. Statements are events in a field of possible statements. The meme is a statement-event whose meaning resides not in its origin but in its position within a discursive field.

Kittler and discourse networks. Friedrich Kittler (1985) analyzed how media technologies determine what can be said, stored, and transmitted. The internet is a discourse network. Memes are its inscription units — the native format of the digital *Aufschreibesystem.*

Latour and actor-networks. Bruno Latour insisted that non-human actors participate in social networks and that meaning is translated through associations. The meme is an actor-network in miniature. The provenance gap is an absent actor whose role must be inferred.

Panofsky and iconological layers. Erwin Panofsky (1939) established the analysis of meaning across layers — pre-iconographic, iconographic, iconological. Memography extends this to platformed and generative image-signs, where curation rather than intention determines which layer becomes dominant.

Weizman and forensic aesthetics. Eyal Weizman's Forensic Architecture (2017) uses visual evidence for human rights documentation. Memography extends forensic aesthetics to semiotic provenance — not *who was harmed?* but *what was activated, and by what curatorial chain?*

Shifman, Milner, Phillips, and meme scholarship. The first generation of internet meme scholarship (Shifman 2014; Milner 2016; Phillips 2015; Mina 2019) established that memes are central to contemporary political discourse. They documented how memes function as genres, how they circulate, how they are appropriated. They established the *importance* of memes. They did not provide a method for treating the meme as a primary source. Memography builds on their foundation while shifting the register: from interpretation to extraction, from context to kernel, from circulation to provenance.

VIII. Vocabulary

Meme. A compressed, framed, circulating unit of observation.

Kernel. The evidentiary observation carried by the meme, extractable through memographic method.

Frame. The explanatory apparatus that makes the meme legible and enables its circulation — simultaneously inadequate to the kernel and necessary for its transmission.

Provenance. The traceable history of the meme's material transformations.

Gap. The space where documentation should exist and does not. A structural feature of the meme's mode of production.

Control. An experimental reconstruction that tests whether an observed effect is robust or artifact.

Curatorial operation. Any decision that selects, emphasizes, suppresses, or frames a meme's elements.

Containment vessel. A frame whose function is to route attention away from the curatorial layer, making the provenance question unaskable.

Regime of legibility. The set of conventions that determines what kind of object a viewer encounters.

Authority overlay. A formal convention (green monochrome, engraving texture, portrait stabilization, inscription field) that imports institutional credibility independent of subject.

Latent feature activation. The process by which presentation changes (scale, background, framing) bring dormant visual features above the threshold of recognition.

Extraction. The memographic operation of removing frames to expose the kernel.

IX. Why Now

Memes are the largest unprocessed evidence base in contemporary culture.

Every day, millions of observations circulate as memes — visual, textual, audiovisual. Most are trivial. Some are not. The non-trivial ones contain observations about institutional behavior, design decisions, historical anomalies, visual correspondences, factual gaps, and structural patterns that no institutional knowledge system is equipped to process, because they arrive in the wrong register.

The observations are real. The frames are inadequate. The institutional response is dismissal or absorption. The material questions go unasked.

Three developments make the method urgent now. First, generative AI has made high-authority visual effects available to noninstitutional actors at scale, increasing the rate at which authority overlays can be manufactured and circulated. Second, platform recirculation strips context while model pipelines obscure exemplarity, so that viewers increasingly receive images with strong social force and weak accessible provenance. Third, "real versus fake" literacy models are insufficient when the operative question is often curatorial ontology — not whether an image is authentic but what operations made it legible as the kind of object viewers take it to be.

The infrastructure for memography exists. Reverse image search traces visual provenance. Public records databases document institutional chains of custody. DOI systems make findings permanently citable. Multi-agent research protocols allow collaborative substrate analysis across multiple analytical perspectives. The tools are here. The method has not been named.

This document names it.

X. The Inaugural Case

The Currency Triptych — "Whose Face Is on the Twenty?" (Fraction, 2026), "The Lizard People Were Right" (Sharks, 2026), and "All the Spoils of Babylon" (Sharks, 2026) — constitutes the inaugural application of memographic method. These three documents are the working notebooks in which the method is first tested, the categories first articulated, the operations first performed.

The meme: a TikTok video circulating since approximately 2020, annotating the face on the $20 bill with red circles and claiming a resemblance to Jeffrey Epstein, captioned with variations on "these lizard people live forever."

The kernel: The face on the post-redesign $20 does not look like Andrew Jackson and does look like someone else.

The frame: Supernatural conspiracy (lizard people, immortal elites).

The extraction: The kernel was separated from the frame. The observation was traced to its material substrate (the portrait itself, the 1852 Welch engraving, the 1928 BEP die, the 1996–2003 redesign). The provenance was audited (Sully → Welch → BEP → Treasury approval chain). The evidence was separated into tiers. The curatorial gap was named. The control experiment was performed. The manufacturing mechanism was documented.

The result: The kernel was confirmed — the observation is materially grounded. The resemblance is supported by documented features whose provenance can be traced. The frame was discarded — no supernatural explanation is needed or offered. The curatorial gap (the undocumented aesthetic rationale for the redesign choices) is the finding. The meme was right that something was there. It was wrong about what.

This is what memography does. It takes the witness seriously. It traces the evidence. It names the gap. It deposits the result. The meme's observation outlives its frame.

XI. Predictions and Falsifiability

A discipline that cannot specify its failure conditions is not a discipline. Memography generates testable predictions:

Prediction 1: Memes that circulate through conspiracy frames will contain evidentiary kernels that can be extracted and verified through provenance tracing, even when the frame's supernatural explanation is false. *Falsification:* A meme circulating through a conspiracy frame yields no extractable kernel after provenance tracing — the observation is entirely produced by the frame.

Prediction 2: Curatorial gaps will cluster around decisions that increase the salience of resemblances that become politically charged. The unidirectionality of curatorial choices (all moving toward increased salience) is diagnostic. *Falsification:* A politically charged resemblance is found to be randomly distributed across curatorial choices, with as many choices decreasing salience as increasing it.

Prediction 3: Control reconstructions will demonstrate that visual conventions encode status independently of subject. The same conventions applied to any subject will produce authority effects. *Falsification:* Authority effects are found to be subject-dependent — conventions produce status only for human faces, not for nonhuman subjects.

Prediction 4: The containment vessels (conspiracy frame, debunker frame) will reliably route attention away from the curatorial layer across multiple cases. This is a claim about discursive function, not about intent. *Falsification:* A case is found where conspiracy discourse successfully directs attention to curatorial provenance rather than away from it.

XII. Toward a Discipline

This document inaugurates memography as a named method. It is not yet a discipline — a discipline requires practitioners, a body of case studies, peer review, institutional recognition, and methodological debate. What exists now is a method, a proof of concept, and a name.

The method is replicable. Any meme containing a factual or visual observation can be subjected to the five-stage process: kernel extraction, substrate tracing, provenance audit, evidence separation, and deposit. The tools are public. The archives are open. The DOI system is accessible to anyone. The method is best suited to cases with traceable substrates — memes whose observations point to material objects, institutional decisions, or documented chains of custody. It does not guarantee a surviving kernel. Exhaustion (the observation dissolves under scrutiny) is as valid an outcome as confirmation.

What is needed is practitioners. People who encounter memes and think: *that's an interesting observation — I wonder if it's actually there.* People who are willing to do the tedious work of tracing provenance, examining records, separating evidence, and writing it up. People who take witnesses seriously even when the witnesses are shitposts.

A mature memographic program would support: a methods journal, annotated case archives, reproducible transformation logs, public-facing literacy modules, cross-disciplinary labs bridging visual studies with forensic method, and a shared vocabulary for describing how images become socially binding. These are not prerequisites for

the discipline's existence. They are consequences of its practice.

The Currency Triptych demonstrates that the method works. The next memography — on whatever subject, by whatever practitioner — will demonstrate that it is portable. The discipline begins when the second case is published.

The Hand

This document is the ring finger (BIND) of a five-document hand called the Moving Statues Made of Rubies Mint (MSMRM), housed in the Crimson Hexagon Archive. Its thesis: portrait authority is not carried by identity alone but is produced through curatorial presentation decisions that govern legibility, status, and social ontology.

The five holdings: (1) "Whose Face Is on the Twenty?" — provenance audit / anchor (10.5281/zenodo.18745216); (2) "The Lizard People Were Right" — experimental control / pointer (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18745236); (3) "All the Spoils of Babylon" — manufacturing demonstration / reach (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18745250); (4) this document — disciplinary founding / commitment (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18745259); (5) "Charter of the Moving Statues Made of Rubies Mint" — integrity lock / seal (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18745265).

This document provides the methodological proof: that memography is a replicable forensic method, not a one-time investigation. It formalizes the axioms, method, principles, vocabulary, citational lineage, and falsification conditions that make the Currency Triptych's findings portable. From this document alone, the complete hand can be reconstructed: the provenance audit is the inaugural case (Section X), the control is Axiom 5 and Prediction 3, the manufacturing is the five-stage method demonstrated, and the room is the vocabulary — twelve terms that define the space in which memography operates.

XIII. A Note on Production

This document was produced through multi-agent collaboration. The memographic method was developed through the practice of the Currency Triptych, then formalized through iterative synthesis across multiple AI systems operating as research substrates, with the human operator providing conceptual direction and curatorial selection at each decision point. The method was not designed in advance and then applied. It was discovered in the practice and then named.

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